DGH-4
This Other England II

13 Thurloe Place
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366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"Manchester and Liverpool are ugly, but they both have character; Leeds is just ugly." The speaker was an accidentally encountered old acquaintance, a barrister with chambers in the metropolis which he regarded with such distaste. Looking out with him at City Square at the close of a wet winter afternoon one felt no urge to argue with the sour description.

The morning's damp snow had changed to frigid rain pelting the begrimed Victorian structures, the dark skeleton bars of an office building under construction and the hunching shrouded figures in the bus queues. Floodlights aimed at the famous monument to the Black Prince waged a losing battle with the elements, only illuminating the pedestal and leaving the equestrian statue in appropriate shadow (there is a faint recollection of a ribald story about the lighting being deliberately arranged that way -- so many peculiar effects in Britain are explained as achieved "on purpose"). Had Dante needed another circle or at least a second vestibule for the Inferno, and had he known City Square in Leeds on such an evening, the scene would have qualified. This seems gratuitous calumny. Let it be added that sunlight doubtless would have mitigated the impression, though it requires a strong imagination to visualize the sun ever appearing in the area.

My barrister friend underscored his attitude by living well out into the countryside about forty miles to the north. This seemed carrying things a bit far. In fact, most people I met in Leeds resided at some distance from the city in unpretentious establishments usually named with the equivalents of Throstlethwaite Hall or Muckleby Manor. Still, such euphemisms seem rather less odd than the American practice of entitling a single-block street in the suburbs something like Grand Boulevard and giving the handful of houses numbers in the thousands.

Here, as elsewhere, there is considerable precedent for this avoidance of life in the city after working hours by those who can afford country places. Late in the nineteenth century, following the northern industrial boom of its first sixty-odd years, few of the off-spring of the commercial princes who had survived the "Black Friday" collapse were to be found in the region; they had decamped to London and estates in the southern shires. Also taking account of the depression between the two World Wars, it is no wonder that comparatively little effort has been made over the years to raise the architectural quality of the cities. The resurgence of activity and relative prosperity since the nineteen forties, as well as government interest, has led to fresh efforts. However, these so far have largely been confined to slum clearance in the worst areas; a good part of Leeds has been levelled south of the river, adding an air of devastation to the general atmosphere.

But Leeds in its reality had to be an improvement over what new-found friends in Knaresborough prepared me for. Among other warnings, they stated quite positively there was no good place to stay in a city of half a million people -- an obvious canard -- and even suggested that commuting the 32-mile round trip from Harrogate would be preferable. It was hard to believe that only the city's appearance and the normal suspicion of metropolitan ways accounted for the townsmen's advice. Once comfortably lodged in Leeds a third and most important issue came to light; some ten to fifteen shillings more were charged for comparable quarters in the big city. Most foreign visitors cheerfully would ascribe the difference to central heating and pay gladly. Not so the typical Yorkshireman, who ignores the cold and prides himself on his frugality and knowledge of a bargain. Local newspapers often carry reader-flattering accounts of how branch managers of London firms confess that Yorkshire housewives know prices better than the firms' own comparative shoppers. The housewives surely are too shrewd to accept such confessions at face value.

Coming to Leeds fresh from lovely pastoral scenery and handsome towns, unfair and dispiriting contrasts were hard to avoid. These arose not only from the physical shape of the environment, but also from comparative attitudes and reactions among people. Leeds preeminently is a place to work in, and faces and manners reflect the fact. The famed Yorkshire hospitality is not absent by any means. Yet it is commingled with the wariness, intensity and careful regard for time natural to those who either must struggle hard for a living or elect to concentrate wholeheartedly on the acquisition of money, status and power.

It might be objected that these are outward manifestations of life in any large city, but one is much less struck by this feeling in London. In the latter, on the other hand, the innate friendliness and candor of the north -- whether in city, town or village -- is markedly absent. It is interesting how many Londoners, in discussing the threatened rail strike, volunteer the opinion that "at least people will be more pleasant to each other if it happens." This, by the way, does not derive from reading about the New York transport debacle.

If Knaresborough takes a dim view of Leeds, people in the city get their own back. While only one citizen I met actually said it ("Why in the world did you want to know what the people in Knaresborough think?"), the same reaction was apparent on numerous faces. Condescension on the part of the city-dwellers, suspicion among the townsfolk; such mutual lack of regard obviously may be found anywhere in every country. The significant point is that, despite the strong environmental differences, the people of Leeds and Knaresborough appear to have the same opinions on a number of important subjects.

Most prominent among these shared attitudes is the lack of confidence in the national government, irrespective of whether Labour or Conservative in composition, and the lack of attention to lesser governmental entities. On the infrequent occasions when a conversation could be turned toward the political scene there was a constant refrain about Britain needing a coalition government. In a relatively small town one might loftily and mistakenly ascribe such talk to a supposed ignorance of the political facts of life in the capital. When, however, it comes from people fully conversant with such facts -- not to mention the head of an Oxford college -- it may be seen as a rooted sentiment made no less significant by the admitted unlikelihood of its being given effect.

Behind that feeling is a thought process which goes something like this. Britain, although perhaps not experiencing a full-scale crisis, is suffering from a protracted illness which requires strong medicine seemingly incapable of being administered by the current political combinations. While their ideological premises may be different, the major political parties are in agreement on many basic policies, but -- possibly because of some mysterious parliamentary dictate, as well as the wafer-thin government majority -- they feel it all the more necessary to quarrel,

or quibble, about tactics and to veer between factional interests. Only by creating a "cabinet of all the talents," a notion derived from partly mythological reminiscences about World War II, can Britain take radical measures to modernize the country and determine its proper place in world affairs.

There are those holding this view who deplore the growth of ministerial and civil-service power at the expense of the legislature, and yet see no alternative to a non-party solution to what they consider the present stalemate. Of course, some of those who talk most about dramatic change would probably scream to high heaven if the radical measures were in fact taken.

Again, on the subject of Britain's relations with the Continent there was not much distinction to be drawn between opinions in city and town. Roughly a score of industrialists in the Leeds area were contacted on the question and only five expressed any willingness to talk. This in itself was not surprising, and may have represented a good ratio. What did seem a bit startling at the moment was the reaction of many of those who had no desire, or perhaps no time, to discuss the matter beyond a few sentences on the telephone. This attitude often was expressed succinctly in the words, "The Common Market is dead." At first blush the statement might be thought an echoing of the "dead duck" imagery employed late last year by the Labour Minister of Agriculture, and in the year before by Sir Alec Douglas-Home -- to keep the game non-partisan. What actually seemed meant by the phrase was a good deal less conclusive. There was a feeling that the door had been slammed shut in 1963 and that, no matter how much Britain might wish to join the European Economic Community, it was very unlikely that anything could be done until de Gaulle left the scene. In other words, despite the campaigning of certain national journals and rising government interest, the issue was not a live one to such businessmen. In these circumstances, they confined themselves to crisp talk about getting on with the job at hand; a case of "cultivating our muttons" -- not an inappropriate theme for a center of the wool trade. It should be added that even those who evinced much interest in the topic were skeptical about any progress while de Gaulle was in power.

Very much on the other side of the fence was an official intimately connected with both the Chambers of Commerce and Trade in the city. A convinced and convincing advocate of full-scale British participation in the EEC as soon as possible, he estimated that about ninety percent of the

Chamber of Commerce membership, and a somewhat lesser percentage of the Trade members, would welcome such a development. Both because of his knowledge and his integrity this judgment could not be taken lightly.

How does one draw from these conflicting views any conclusions about the region's attitude toward Britain in Europe? As with that modern Moloch, the public-opinion poll, the answer probably lies in the framing of the question. If those who are reasonably informed were asked if Britain should immediately accept the Rome Treaty and all its implications, with minimal special conditions negotiated on a crash basis, very few Yorkshiremen would be likely to respond favorably -- even after every hypothetical allowance was made. With some justice, many would dismiss the question as being unrealistically phrased in view of current French policies and British domestic concerns. If, on the other hand, they were queried in the most general terms about closer relations between this country and the European six, there probably would be a clear majority for the affirmative, including the above-mentioned ninety percent on the part of manufacturers. Such a formulation would have no time-table and no barrier to wishful thoughts about merely moving the relatively small distance from a free trade area to a customs union. At the moment perhaps all that can be stated positively from personal experience is the very modest degree of regional interest in the subject. In the unlikely event that it became a controversial issue in a national election this year, probably not many votes would be swayed one way or another in Yorkshire.

The same statement seems applicable to the problem of Rhodesia under current conditions, though it is not difficult to envision that situation undergoing critical change. In view of the findings of opinion polls favorable to the government and the prime minister's apparent confidence that Rhodesia has placed him on a good wicket, it was puzzling to discover so little regional concern with the question. If anything, there appeared a slender majority for compromise rather than a tough sanctions policy among the few people who were willing to express any thoughts on the subject. And these opinions seemed to come from independent or floating voters, not from followers of a political party line. There was an entertaining by-product of such inquiries. When my finding was reported to a local newspaper editor, by no means a Labour Party supporter, his reaction was straightforward: "We'll keep them in line, don't worry" (He assumed rather than knew my personal position). As for Rhodesia being an electoral asset to Mr. Harold Wilson,

one apparently must conclude that it is not the issue itself but the opportunity to appear in a statesman's role which explains what otherwise seems an anomaly.

On other international topics not enough was said to warrant mention, much less the perils of assessment. Vietnam, developments in the Communist countries and even British defense policy east of Suez are examples of subjects which virtually failed to come under discussion; Enoch Powell might never have spoken at Brighton for all the attention paid to his thesis.

If the business and professional people in Leeds were concentrating on their daily affairs, the single-mindedness of the working class naturally was even more apparent. Wages and recreation fully occupied both minds and conversations. A few days partially devoted to purposeful loitering among laboring people could not be expected to bring much knowledge or any insights. Yet certain impressions were quickly and strongly received, and possibly worth recording despite their insubstantial and speculative character.

Leeds is ringed with new factories and offices on its outskirts, unemployment is no problem, and the air almost crackles with commercial activity. There can be no doubt that the general welfare has been greatly raised over the last two decades. One might well expect to feel an atmosphere of confidence and prosperity. Instead, there is an almost tangible climate of scepticism and disquiet; it is as if people refused to believe not merely in the permanence but in the reality of improved conditions of life. It is well known that the northern cities still bear the physical and emotional scars of the depression years, which affected them at least as profoundly as any area in the British Isles. However, the collective memory of that period by itself does not seem a sufficient explanation.

At least equally relevant is the general question of the distribution of wealth after twenty years of experience with the welfare state. Granted that working class wages have greatly increased -- perhaps trebled -- over those years, but everything else appears to the workers to have inflated by roughly comparable amounts. The result is that the gulf between rich and poor and the degrees between most of the intermediate stages seem to them not very different than in the past. Furthermore, as noted in an earlier letter, class lines have only been blurred in recent times, and the longer one stays here the more one

feels their continuing potency. The myriad job classifications deriving from new economic occupations may make it easier for a man to improve his status, but they also seem to add to the stratification of society.

Deliberately generalized and abbreviated though these points are, they may provide some clues to an explanation of the suspicious "them and us" attitude constantly encountered when talking to or overhearing workers in the city. It appeared as if there were agreement on an unspoken proposition that the overall economic pie would always remain the same size, and thus any group getting a larger slice would do so at another group's expense. Belief in expanded productivity and its benefits seemed pretty thin, apparently because of a counter belief that those higher up the ladder would somehow manage to ensure that everyone obtained only the same comparative shares. A grey doctrine to go along with the joyless atmosphere of the city.

The opinion began to form that the drably powerful literature and films about such areas are less exaggerated than is normally the case. Certainly one could appreciate the need for the other half of the "bread and circuses" formula with which the workers seemed absorbed; this function being largely fulfilled by professional football or soccer. A good deal of frustration and anger finds an outlet in these games along with the pleasure derived from a contest of skill. Indeed, during my stay the local papers strongly urged supporters of the Leeds team not to attend a game in a nearby city, recalling violent incidents at the last match and warning that supporters of the other team were uttering dire threats against the Leeds rooters. A far cry from fastidious Flanders and Swann jibes about the English not playing to win, and regarding pre-game practice as somehow unsporting.

And yet, at the journey's end one wondered if Yorkshire really is such a different England, especially since many of the above comments perhaps might apply almost as well to some midland city. In the sense that, say, Kansas differs from Massachusetts the answer is an easy affirmative. But there is something more; something subtle and largely indefinable because it concerns historical patterns of life and thought which have to be experienced for a lengthy period to be even partially understood. It is in this context -- and possibly in it alone -- that a prior mention of Texas has any relevance beyond the factor of comparative size. In both cases there appear self-conscious assertions about uniqueness; at times they may have a defensive or defiant quality, most often they are a source of pride and pleasure.

Believing itself to be so different, Yorkshire somehow manages to turn the belief into cement for the proposition.

Sincerely yours,

D. G. Henderson

Donald G. Henderson

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