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The Anglosphere & the future of liberty: an introduction

by Roger Kimball

"The Anglosphere and the Future of Liberty," a symposium organized jointly by The New Criterion and London's Social Affairs Unit, took place on September 24, 2010, in Winchester, England.

If we are together nothing is impossible. If we are divided all will fail.
—Winston Churchill, 1943

The future is unknowable, but the past should give us hope.
—Winston Churchill, A History of the English-Speaking Peoples

Be assured, my young friend, that there's a great deal of ruin in a nation.
—Adam Smith, 1782

"Especially this nation." That's what John O'Sullivan replied when I quoted Smith's line to him a couple of years back. The economy had suddenly turned very interesting, in the dismaying way that your doctor finds your latest symptoms "interesting," and a sentiment of gloomy inertia, a heavy, energy-sapping miasma, lay upon the land. Back in the 1940s, Cyril Connolly announced that "It is closing time in the gardens of the West." Was he right at last? Or was Smith–O'Sullivan closer to the mark? Adam Smith had written to calm a young correspondent who contemplated with alarm British losses in the American War of Independence. As it happened, Britain absorbed the parturition of the United States with aplomb, growing ever stronger for more than a century. Where are we now? There's lots of ruin about: no one disputes that. But how are we—we, the English-speaking peoples of the world—how are we faring?

It was in order to ponder that question that *The New Criterion* and The Social Affairs Unit in London organized a conference on the Anglosphere and the future of liberty.[1] I am not sure who coined the term "Anglosphere," but James Bennett, one of the participants in our conference, gave it currency in his book *The Anglosphere Challenge: Why the English-Speaking Nations Will Lead the Way in the Twenty-first Century.* Bennett's book was published in 2004. A paperback edition, with a new Afterword, appeared in 2007. *The Anglosphere Challenge* endeavored to make good on its optimistic

subtitle. The nineteenth century had been the British century. The twentieth century belonged to America. The twenty-first, Bennett argued, might well be a third, more capacious Anglo century. "If the English-speaking nations grasp the opportunity," he wrote at the end of his book, "the twenty-first century will be the Anglosphere century."

"If." A tiny word that prompts large questions. What were those opportunities that needed grasping? How sure was our grip? And who, by the way, were "we"? What was this Anglosphere that Bennett apostrophized? Churchill's opus on the English-speaking peoples, published in four-volumes in the mid-1950s, principally included Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. He commenced his story in 55 B.C., when Julius Caesar first "turned his gaze" upon Britain, and concluded as Victoria's long reign ended. By the time Andrew Roberts extended Churchill's work in his magisterial *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900* (2006), the Anglosphere had expanded to include Commonwealth Caribbean countries and, more to the point, India with its 1.1 billion people and the burgeoning capitalist dynamo that is its economy. The inclusion of India shows, as Roberts argues, that the defining quality of the Anglosphere is not shared race or ethnicity but shared values. It is a unity, as Madhav Das Nalapat puts it in his essay below, of *ideas*, "the blood of the mind" rather than "the blood of the body." Its force is more intangible than physical—set forth primarily in arguments rather than armies—but no less powerful for that. The ideas in play are so potent, in fact, that they allow India, exotic India, to emerge as an equal partner with Britain and the United States at "the core of a twenty-first-century Anglosphere."

I'll say something about the substance of those ideas in a moment. First, it is worth pausing to register the medium in which the ideas unfold: English. Nalapat remarks that "The English language is . . . a very effective counter-terrorist, counter-insurgency weapon." I think he is right about that, but why? Why English? In a remarkable essay called "What Is Wrong with Our Thoughts?," the Australian philosopher David Stove analyzes several outlandish, yet typical, specimens of philosophical-theological linguistic catastrophe. He draws his examples not from the underside of intellectual life—spiritualism, voodoo, Freudianism, etc.—but from some of the brightest jewels in the diadem of Western thought: from the work of Plotinus, for example, and Hegel, and Michel Foucault. He quoted his examples in translation, he acknowledges, but notes that "it is a very striking fact . . . that I *had* to go to translations. . . . Nothing which was ever expressed originally in the English language resembles, except in the most distant way, the thought of Plotinus, or Hegel, or Foucault. I take this," Stove concludes, "to be enormously to the credit of our language."

Indeed. But why? What is it about English? I do not have an answer, but I note the fact that there seems to be some deep connection between the English language and that most uncommon virtue, common sense. I do not mean that English speakers act any less extravagantly than speakers of other tongues, but rather that English generally acts to tether thought to the empirical world. This is something Bishop Thomas Sprat dilated on in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667): "The general

constitution of the minds of the *English*," he wrote, embraces frankness and simplicity of diction, "the middle qualities, between the reserv'd subtle southern, and the rough unhewn Northern people."

English, Bishop Sprat thought, is conspicuously the friend of empirical truth. It is also conspicuously the friend of liberty. Andrew Roberts, reflecting on the pedigree of certain ideas in the lexicon of freedom, notes that such key phrases as "liberty of conscience" (1580), "civil liberty" (1644, a Miltonic coinage), and "liberty of the press" (1769) were first expressed in English. Why is it that English-speaking countries produced Adam Smith and John Locke, David Hume and James Madison, but not Hegel, Marx, or Foucault? "The tongue and the philosophy are not unrelated," the philologist Robert Claiborne writes in *The Life and Times of the English Language.* "Both reflect the ingrained Anglo-American distrust of unlimited authority, whether in language or in life."

Andrew Roberts stresses the element of pragmatic skepticism that speaks English as its native language. "The unimaginative, bourgeois, earth-bound English-speaking peoples," he writes, "refuse to dream dreams, see visions and follow fanatics and demagogues, from whom they are protected by their liberal constitutions, free press, rationalist philosophy, and representative institutions. They are temperamentally less inclined towards fanaticism, high-flown rhetoric and Bonapartism than many other peoples in history. They respect what is tangible and, in politics at least, suspect what is not."

I have nothing by way of an explanation for this filiation between the English language and the habit of liberty. I merely note its existence. Alan Macfarlane, in his classic *Origins of English Individualism* (1978), shows that the habit is far older than we have been taught to believe. According to the Marxist narrative, individualism is a "bourgeois construct" whose motor belongs to the eighteenth-century. Macfarlane shows that, on the contrary, "since at least the thirteenth century England has been a country where the individual has been more important than the group." "Peasant" was a term the English used about others but not themselves. Why? Macfarlane locates the answer in the presence of a market economy, an "individualistic pattern of ownership," and strong recourse to local initiative that were prominent features of English life at least since 1250. "In many respects," he writes, "England had probably long been different from almost every other major agrarian society we know."

Different in origins and different also in outcomes. Consider Britain's record as a colonial power. "Thanks to English law," Keith Windschuttle notes in his essay below, "most British colonial officials delivered good government." And the positive effects are not merely historical artifacts. They are patent everywhere in the world today. "The key regional powers in almost every corner of the globe," Mark Steyn reminds us below, "are British-derived—from Australia to South Africa to India—and, even among the lesser players, as a general rule you're better off for having been exposed to British rule than not: Why is Haiti Haiti and Barbados Barbados?"

"English institutions" you might say, "the rule of law, and all that." Well, yes, but why were the English peculiarly prominent among the bearers of that beneficence? Again, I do not have an explanation. It has something to do, I feel sure, with the habit of liberty, the contagious temperament of freedom. It's a trait that has been widely noticed. The Czech writer Karel Capek visited England in the 1920s. Writing about the country a few years later, he observed that the Englishman "stays in England all the time even when he happens to be somewhere else, say, Naples or Tibet. ... England is not just a certain territory; England is a particular environment habitually surrounding Englishmen." Santayana registered something similar in his essay on "The British Character" in *Soliloquies in England* (1922). "What governs the Englishman is his inner atmosphere, the weather in his soul."

> Instinctively the Englishman is no missionary, no conqueror. He prefers the country to the town, and home to foreign parts. He is rather glad and relieved if only natives will remain natives and strangers strangers, and at a comfortable distance from himself. Yet outwardly he is most hospitable and accepts almost anybody for the time being; he travels and conquers without a settled design, because he has the instinct of exploration. His adventures are all external; they change him so little that he is not afraid of them. He carries his English weather in his heart wherever he goes, and it becomes a cool spot in the desert, and a steady and sane oracle amongst all the deliriums of mankind. Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.

The question is whether these mostly agreeable observations should be filed under the rubric "As We Were," like A. C. Benson's nostalgic look back at a vanished Victorian heyday. The alarming possibility that recent history has presented us with is that the assault of Santayana's "scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics" may come as much from within the Anglosphere as from outside it. "Civilizations," observed the political philosopher James Burnham "die, in truth, only by suicide." What have we been doing to ourselves?

Two themes predominant in the essays that follow. One is backward-looking and concerns the tonic relationship between the Anglosphere and political liberty. The second is forward-looking and stresses the extent to which the epicenters of the Anglosphere—Britain, North America, Australia—have abandoned their allegiance to the core values Alan Macfarlane descried in English society three-quarters of a millennium past: individual liberty and its political correlative, limited government. In a melancholy passage in his essay below, Anthony Daniels writes that

> The huge change in British society, from a free and orderly but very unequal society to a highly regulated but disorderly and rather more equal society, came about because the ruling political passions and desiderata, particularly among the ever-more important intelligentsia, changed from freedom and equality before the law to equality of outcome and physical well-being and comfort. If freedom failed to result in the latter, so much the worse for freedom: very few people in Britain now give a fig for it. The loss of their double-glazing would mean more to them than the loss of their right to say what they like.

A sobering contingency. Is it really as bad as that?

A growing influence of elites brings with it an erosion of local initiative as the blandishments of security are dispensed in exchange for a tithe on freedom. Tocqueville noted the perennial tension between the demand for freedom and the demand for equality in democratic regimes. And his great disciple F. A. von Hayek described the process by which "extensive government control" produced "a psychological change, an alteration of the character of the people." "The important point," he wrote, "is that the political ideals of a people and its attitude toward authority are as much the effect as the cause of the political institutions under which it lives. This means, among other things, that even a strong tradition of political liberty is no safeguard if the danger is precisely that new institutions and policies will gradually undermine and destroy that spirit." Evidence for the collapse of the spirit is not far to seek. Steyn cites the deliciously awful spectacle of Gordon Brown endeavoring to come up with a patriotic British equivalent of Independence Day for Americans. What did his government turn up? July 5, the anniversary of the inauguration of National Health Service, a fitting symbol of British surrender of personal freedom for the sake of a spurious security. "They can call it," Steyn writes, "Dependence Day."

The anatomy of servitude, which bulks large in what follows, tells a depressing story. But it is not all of the story. Even the "apocalyptic" Mark Steyn points to the way out. He is quite right that "you cannot wage a sustained ideological assault on your own civilization without profound consequence." We've had the assault and we are living with the consequences. He is also right that "without serious course correction, we will see the end of the Anglo-American era, and the eclipse of the powers that built the modern world." The hopeful part of that prediction comes in the apodosis: the course may still be corrected. As Hayek noted about his own dire diagnosis: "The consequences can of course be averted if that spirit reasserts itself in time." There are, I believe, two main sources of hope. One lies in the past, in the depth and strength of the Anglosphere's traditional commitment to individual freedom and local initiative against the meddlesome intrusion of any central authority. "The future is unknowable," said Churchill, "but the past should give us hope." The Anglosphere, James Bennett writes, "is not a fragile hothouse flower that can be easily uprooted and disappear forever."

The second main ground for hope lies in the present and immediate future. In the United States, anyway, we have lately witnessed a new "revolt of the masses," different from, in fact more or less the opposite of, the socialistic eruption Ortega y Gasset limned in his famous essay on the subject. A specter is haunting America, the specter of freedom. What happened on November 2 was not an instance of business as usual in the world of partisan politics. It was stage one in the rejection of that business as usual: the big-government, top-down, elitist egalitarianism practiced by both major parties in the United States. I recently spoke on a cruise sponsored by *National Review* at which the pollster Scott Rasmussen observed that one thing November's election demonstrated was that Americans do not want to be governed by Democrats or by Republicans: they want to govern themselves. If he is right—there's that little word "if" again—the Anglosphere has a lot more mileage in it. Are things bad? Is it late? Yes, and yes again. But as Lord D'Abernon memorably put it, "An Englishman's mind works best when it is almost too late."

[1] "The Anglosphere and the Future of Liberty," a symposium organized jointly by *The New Criterion* and London's Social Affairs Unit, took place on September 24, 2010, in Winchester, England. Participants were James Bennett, Jeremy Black, Anthony Daniels, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Kenneth Minogue, Michael Mosbacher, Madhav Das Nalapat, John O'Sullivan, James Piereson, David Pryce-Jones, Mark Steyn, and Keith Windschuttle. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays printed in this special section.

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