

Trying to Learn from the Past, Part 1

Early in the 21st century, we have an unusual opportunity to learn from the tumultuous events of the preceding century and perhaps to avoid the mistakes which were made, and to build on the successes.

Some of the most important political events were:

Ç the pointless World War I into which relatively advanced societies tumbled, and which caused the then worst loss of lives in recorded history;

Ç the first world-wide economic Depression (1929-1941);

Ç the rise of cruel and powerful dictatorships in Russia, Germany and Japan;

Ç the creation of the Gulag camps in the Soviet Union, where political prisoners and members of "unreliable" minorities were sent and where millions of prisoners died due to malnutrition and illnesses (1920s-1990);

Ç the creation of concentration camps in Nazi Germany (1935-1945) specifically designed for the extermination of Jews, Roma and political opponents. The vast majority of those murdered were Jews & civilians devoid of political involvement. The victims exceeded 6 millions;

Ç the substantial collapse of the first world-wide system of collective security, the League of Nations;

Ç World War II and the defeat of the Nazis and Japanese militarists;

Ç The end of British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Belgian colonial empires starting with the end of World War II and ending several decades later;

Ç the emergence of the United States as a superpower and the start of a contest with the Soviet Union (the Cold War).

Ç proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam that cost many lives but ended inconclusively. However, a much worse atomic war was averted;

Ç the formation of the second system of collective security, the United Nations, which appeared stronger than the League of Nations. It performs many important functions through its specialized agencies.

The grim political history did not throttle progress in the sciences and the arts. There were, heretofore, unimaginable technical advances including interplanetary exploration and the landing of human beings on the moon. Entirely new methods of communication were introduced and surprising advances in aviation, physics and chemistry took place. The usefulness of atomic power was, unfortunately, balanced by the threat of its use for military purposes. Medicine, surgery, genetics and pharmacology cured or prevented previously hopeless illnesses and conditions. The arts and architecture flourished and built on the rich traditions of the 19th century or went into new paths. Great books, plays and poetry were produced. "Classical" music was studied, performed and listened to, and was enriched by jazz and folk music. The mechanization and modernization of agriculture greatly increased yields with far fewer workers.

In spite of the poor political record of the West during the 20th century, there were also positive attitudes and policies which became slowly accepted, and some were related to the much earlier industrial revolution. The older revolution produced wealth but also poverty and degradation. The workers, who with their families spent most of their working hours at home earning a meagre living, were displaced by factories where they were under control of the managers, and where demands



on their energy were high. The wages being paid were an important element in the profitability of the new industries, and exploitation of workers,

including women and children, became common. In response, important elements in Great Britain and on the Continent argued for a "Living Wage" geared to the needs of employees and no longer mere elements in the cost of production. The Living Wage became a cornerstone in labour relations as it became known, which included bargaining by unions of employees, arbitration of grievances and also strikes.

In 1900 discrimination against people of colour was so great, that in the United States at least, intermarriage of black and white persons was a statutory crime, and black people were not allowed into most restaurants and hotels. In motion picture theatres they had to sit in the balcony, and most employments were closed to them. But by the end of the 20th century, there were significant numbers of black legislators and judges. In 2008, when Barack Obama ran for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, there was widespread disagreement among political experts as to whether his colour (black) was an advantage or the opposite. Women in Canada and the United States were not entitled to vote and were faced with very severe discrimination in employment. After a long struggle, there are now more women than men enrolled in medical and law schools and a woman is currently running for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States.

During the second half of the 20th century there was a very strong movement in favor of "Human Rights" and this concept was applied not only to the groups mentioned above, but benefitted persons in other categories. such as the handicapped, persons with mental problems, gays, Lesbians, the elderly and prison inmates. Early in the 20th century, it became evident that there was little affordable housing available in cities for people earning the Minimum Wage. As a consequence, municipalities and other levels of government either subsidized housing or owned it outright. There were, and are, income limits, for tenants in these units, in order not to interfere with the normal housing market.

Income taxes were "progressive," meaning that persons who were well off paid at higher rates on their income than those in more modest circumstances. Overarching all of these developments, was the concept of commonwealth, or the "Common Welfare." This meant an approach which rewarded innovators and risk takers without forgetting those who for any legitimate reason were not able to fully pull their weight in the economy. Services such as the mails were a common resource and were not expected to be profitable. This also applied to transportation in thinly populated areas.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and its Communist satellites, many of us believed that a time of peace and prosperity was at hand. Although peace in Europe was quite general, there were wars elsewhere, and it seemed that a deep and abiding love of peace, was not as strong as the tendency to settle disagreements by force. The Middle East was in turmoil, and the United States invaded and then occupied Iraq, allegedly to protect America's allies from Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, at enormous costs in lives and money. Not only was peace spotty around the world, but in the well-to-do Western countries there was also a sharp turn towards unfettered capitalism, with President Reagan claiming that "Government is the Problem" and his friend Lady Thatcher, when she was the British Prime Minister, claiming that there was no such thing as "Society." One by one, progressive measures taken to make life better for all those who were not rich, were weakened or abandoned. And then came "Free Trade" which had worked splendidly in Europe after World War II. This concept provided for the removal of tariffs, considerable specialization by each country, and the resulting greater efficiency and prosperity.

Now it was applied to countries like China and India and caused large transfers of jobs from the U.S.A., Canada and Western Europe. Wages were, in the case of China, less than one tenth of those paid in countries exporting the jobs and importing an ever-increasing number of goods and services. Since the imports from China, for example, caused prices for all kinds of goods to fall here, the general public was quite pleased, except for those losing their jobs or finding themselves in work that paid less and was less secure. Anybody who pointed out that the system of Free Trade was successful among countries which were more or less economically equal, and that the great difference in wages and salaries was leading to insupportable imbalances of trade, was immediately shouted down. The experts told us that all we had to do, was to work better, smarter and more creatively. This was really the answer for a small



minority of working people. There was another group of employees who were "anchored" in the developed countries because they were plumbers, surveyors, carpenters electricians, police officers, teachers, fire fighters, garbage collectors, lawyers,

