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The Frescoes of Siena

In the last newsletter, written before the full onslaught of the COVID-19 virus had been felt in the West, I wrote of the divide between the rich and the poor as being an ailment for need of a cure as much as climate change. What the pandemic has exposed in stark terms is just how serious the wealth gap is and what a difference less carbon emissions make to the quality of our lives. Whether COVID-19 becomes the catalyst of real change remains to be seen. We can consider parallels with the earlier, calamitous 14th century which produced the Black Death and killed an estimated one-third of the population living between India and Ireland. Like the First World War, we saw economic chaos, social unrest, depraved morals, maladministration and hysteria.

But there is no doubt that there will be real and permanent changes worldwide in the economic climate and, therefore, in the way we conduct

business. Even such a grotesque dark cloud which has covered the sky can have a silver lining. Unfortunately, in the short term, the current chaos will be seen as an opportunity for a myriad of self-serving excuses across the political and business world and will become the ideal breeding ground for cheats and tricksters who should be wearing masks permanently, with or without COVID-19. Regrettably, no vaccination will be found that will make the public immune from their wiles. Voltaire, ruefully, observed "History never repeats itself, man always does".

Like the virus, charlatans are not obvious. They are usually skilled, well-dressed, persuasive talkers (not the sole domain of the dishonest, it must be said); but there are some indicators to watch out for: the overuse of jargon and pretentious phrases that can lead on to unclear language - probably because they have nothing clear to say. Remember George Orwell's maxim: "Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word,

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or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent”.

That can be equally applied to politicians, besides which there will be, indeed, many political excuses added to the ones already made; some of them will be credible and others expedient. Examples of the latter, and proving that some things never change, can be found in Italy, the seat of ancient Rome’s empire, one which dictators have ever since attempted to emulate. Emperor Constantine, who ruled between AD 306 and 337, ceased idol-worship in favour of Christianity. His sole motive was self-interest and “As far as I was concerned, the holy altars were merely a footstool to the imperial throne”. Expediency, in other words. Popularity through the people is a well-trodden path walked by autocrats and dictators of every stripe.

There is a series of frescoes in the Council Room of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena which was built in the 13th century, known as the Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government. They were commissioned by Siena’s ruling body as a visible warning to avoid hubris and the consequent nemesis that follows. They were an inducement to create a common good through proper government. Right now, we seem to be living through a momentous transition in the way that governments act and the level of co-operation they give to each other. The signs are not encouraging.

Like Florence and Genoa, Siena was a pioneer in the new industry of banking, whilst the two first-named cities were at that time among Europe’s most innovative, technological hubs; a modern-day San Francisco, if you will, a city that is home today of billionaires and also a large population of homeless people whose lot can only become more extreme because of the pandemic that has enveloped the globe. It is a case study (but not the only one, and not confined to the United States of America) of a condition that Plutarch, the Greek philosopher born in 46 AD, and priest at the Temple of Apollo, most feared. Thomas Piketty, in his new book “Capital and Ideology”, says that the average annual income of the

poorer half of Americans had stagnated at about US\$15,000 for 40 years, even before the pandemic.

If it’s true that American president Calvin Coolidge once quipped that the business of America is business, detractors of President Donald Trump are claiming that he is reinforcing that mantra with a vengeance, with or without a deadly virus. They would also point to one of the Sienna frescoes which depicts the result of a tyrant in power and the abject poverty visited upon the populace. That said, President Trump does not mirror the image of a cruel and oppressive ruler, as understood in ancient Greece, but his country –along with some others- has a growing number of citizens suffering from deprivation. T.S. Elliot in *The Waste Land*, his seminal poem of the previous century, said that “April is the cruellest month”. It will not, however, turn out to be so for them. Worse months will follow.

A Place of Slaughter and Writing

Despite growing up in Bulawayo, a name which means “place of slaughter” in Ndebele, after Lobengula, second king of the Northern Ndebele, ascended the throne following an armed struggle, I never feared for my life. Nonetheless, I lived through intermittent spells of cholera, as well as polio and smallpox. I can recall to this day the painful experience, and the after-effects, of cholera injections.

Not unlike the COVID-19, epidemics of cholera have produced some remarkable, positive outcomes. The emphasis during the pandemic has been on books for the not-so-young, as a palliative, but one should not dismiss the power also of poetry to smooth ruffled feathers. Russia’s famous bard, Alexander Pushkin, wrote many of his greatest works in 1830 during his confinement because of a cholera outbreak.

Samuel Johnson reminds us of what an old college tutor once advised: “Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out”. One wonders how many possible drafts there were of the inspirational “*La Peste*” which a young Albert Camus



wrote. What is not in doubt is that it is a particularly fine study of the human condition dissected through a cholera outbreak. It is a much shorter read than Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which provides a more profound analysis of man's suffering in extreme adversity, but it is no less evocative for that.

Alexander McCall-Smith (known to me as "Sandy") and who was in my class at private college, was also an English devotee who shared my interest in essay writing. He went on, however, to write novels, such as "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" which became a British television series, followed by numerous novels on a wide variety of themes. Alas, my only significant, published works have been pieces of legislation on mundane subjects, such as trusts. It is true to say, however, that I do have an unedited manuscript, gathering dust, about financial intrigue in the Caribbean. Perhaps it's more a work in regress rather than progress.

I have decided that I am by nature an essayist, paying closer attention to paragraphs than pages, attempting, I suppose, to get my message across in a concise form. But despite the usual several drafts which I always destroy, I will never be able to compete with the masters, such as Jorge Luis Borges and Somerset Maugham. Nonetheless, I will forge on in a genre that Sandy has described as "tiny tales" and continue to admire those who have followed the higher calling of writing books.

I have to confess that most of my favorite authors now only speak from the grave - to anyone who cares to listen. The names are far too numerous to list here, but some of the prominent headstones would belong to Jonathan Swift, Michel De Montaigne, Marcus Aurelius, Marcel Proust, Stefan Zweig, Voltaire, Graham Greene and Mark Twain. In times of uncertainty, a time which the Swiss historian, J.C.L.S. de Sismondi, when referring to the 14th century (he could have been writing about ours), described as "a period of anguish when there is no sense of an assured future", both modern and old books can be comforting.

After all, we may know that this pandemic, like the Black Death, the plague of Justinian and, more recently, the Spanish Flu, will end, but the uncertainty it has brought with it will linger. It is not just health, but individual and common wealth across the globe, that will ultimately be at greater risk than ever before because economies are no longer just domestic.

We are, at the same time, learning the limits of international bodies and we are watching America walk away from the moral and material leadership of the western world. Worryingly, the cohesion we once had is splintering with the emergence of illiberal, populist demagogues. As this unfolds we are seeing a shift away from a prominently, western democratic leadership of the global system. The pandemic is speeding up the process and it is very possible that we are once more experiencing dramatic events that may be yet another hinge in history.

The Pushkin Moment

Irving Fisher, the famous economist, once said that "The sagacious businessman is constantly forecasting". This is precisely the time to follow suit: companies—especially in the financial services sector—should be using this lull in activity to make themselves more agile, like a hummingbird, diversifying and re-tooling where they can. It calls for fresh thinking, and that worked in the past for Nokia which was established in 1865 by a Finnish-Swede mining engineer as a pulp mill. During the company's lifetime its products have ranged from paper, rubber boots, television and telephones. This global economic implosion, however, has no precedent in over 100 years, so any historical guides to solving it are thin on the ground. But the crisis presents a chance to experiment with new ways of doing things and, at the same time, question the wisdom of old habits.

Any predictions about the future are a minefield, especially because in the last two centuries we have become increasingly reliant on data, in the same way that our bodies have on antibiotics. Intuition,



common sense and instinct have taken a back seat. Irving Fisher, for one, worshipped at the altar of data, convinced of its infallibility. It was the altar upon which he was sacrificed. Shortly before the Wall Street crash of 1929 he declared: “Stocks have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau”. Like much of the nation he died in penury, having previously transformed economics and earned millions as an entrepreneur. Predictions, anyone?

Like many firms, we will streamline operations post-COVID-19. New approaches to communication have been fast-tracked because of the pandemic by most in commerce, and the better use of time will be one important result. Changes there will be – even a new website and name – all of which we are developing and putting into place as we pass through this grimmest of times. This is, you could say, our Pushkin moment.

Speaking of the productive use of time, Cyril Parkinson asserted in 1942 that “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion”. This became known as Parkinson’s law which is as relevant now as it was then. In relation to a company’s internal operations, it has been suggested by one leading business consultant that as far as meetings go, 80 per cent of the time spent is wasted by 80 per cent of the people attending them. Just from my previous spells in government service alone, I can attest to this, having chaired countless committees. It is, however, a myth that true

bureaucracy is only found in council chambers or government ministries.

Meanwhile, I doubt whether my “tiny tales” will achieve the crystal-clear brevity as well as this: “For sale, baby shoes, never worn”. It tells us everything in the shortest of short stories (incorrectly attributed to Ernest Hemingway, famous for his direct and unadorned shorthand style of writing). I will never create a six-word tale, but like Picasso’s paintings, my thoughts will continue to be painted on a broad, abstract canvas.

One final thought. Despite often advocating the past as a guide for the future, there is the danger of over-reliance on history (witness Voltaire’s admonition). It has undisputed value, but we should not be trapped by it, like a hapless mouse in pursuit of cheese until the trap is sprung – after all, it is Aristotle who reminds us that our ability to reason is what makes us different from other animals. The actions of some during this pandemic have brought this distinction into doubt.

We have not, as Abraham Lincoln wished, always displayed the better angels of our nature, but we have, however, confirmed the view of John Dryden (the 17th-century English poet and playwright), also shared by Voltaire: “For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is altered.”



Offshore Pilot Quarterly (independent writing for independent thinkers) has been published since 1997 by Trust Services, S. A. which is the British face of international business in Panama. It is written by Derek Sambrook, our Managing Director, a member of the Society of Trust and Estate Practitioners and a Fellow of the Institute of Bankers in South Africa who was both a member of the former Latin America and Caribbean Banking Commission and an offshore banking, trust company and insurance regulator. He has over 50 years combined private and public sector experience in the financial services industry about which he has written extensively and our website provides a broad range of related essays.

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