WE SHALL OVERCOMB! POTUS IN SCOTLAND

For months now – it seems like years! – scarcely a day has passed without the media (news bulletins on television and radio, reports in our ‘quality’ newspapers) here in the United Kingdom broadcasting the latest twist in the Trump saga. At least it provides diversion and a degree of relief from the continuing preoccupation here with Brexit, the prospect of which is increasingly alarming with the flow of reports predicting dire economic consequences: the referendum in June 2016 will go down as one of the worst miscalculations in British political history, and David Cameron deservedly seems to have sunk without trace; meanwhile, with the bulk of business and academic opinion, even the majority of members of parliament, wanting to stay in the European Union, many of us are still hoping that somehow, whether as a result of another referendum, a General Election or whatever, Brexit is not going to happen.

But Britain’s present plight pales almost into insignificance against the situation in the United States. At the time of writing, the course of the Senate’s consideration of Trump’s nomination of Brett Kavanaugh is fully reported day by day. Last week it was his address to the United Nations Assembly; before that his performance at the G7 summit; the North Korea fiasco, and so on.

Trump’s visit to the United Kingdom and in particular to Scotland in July went down like the proverbial ‘lead balloon’. Notwithstanding his Scottish roots on his mother’s side, he has long been regarded here with a certain doubt and suspicion: his hotel and golf course at Turnberry in Ayrshire are something of a monument to exclusive wealth and privilege; his development at Balmedie in Aberdeenshire, for all its alleged, but not yet realised, economic and social benefits, has aroused significant controversy and local opposition. To say Trump’s reception here was luke-warm would be an exaggeration! Initially planned as a full-blown state visit following Theresa May’s ill-advised and unfortunate visit to the White House soon after her election as Prime Minister in June 2017, Trump’s programme was scaled down to a fairly low-key level. Trump had no official engagements in Scotland. Significantly Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s First Minister, declined to meet him, and there were peaceful protests and dignified demonstrations against the visit around the country. People marched in Edinburgh from the Scottish Parliament to the Meadows, waving placards with messages including “Dump Trump” and “Love Trumps Hate,” as part of a so-called “Carnival of Resistance”. Outside Trump’s Turnberry complex in Ayrshire demonstrators shouted: “No Trump, no USA, no KKK, no racist USA!”, and overhead a Greenpeace paraglider flew with a banner carrying the message “Trump well below par”. Hundreds attended the Glasgow event, in the city’s central George Square, a good-humoured occasion with much singing and a range of telling slogans: we picked up one, produced by the Scottish Green Party proclaiming “We shall overcomb!”, which still adorns our hallway at home.

Viewed from the UK, the election of Trump was astonishing. His gaffes and obvious ineptitude, all the stuff about ‘fake news’, the rapid arrivals and departures of White House staff were all initially amusing, had their implications not been so serious. What sort of political system could have allowed a man like this (a narcissist, a womaniser and a liar, as he is consistently described here – in the ‘quality press’! ‘the vengeful tribune of might and injustice’ – The Guardian, 13 July; ‘a rogue president….a one-man threat to international peace and security, a menace to America’s friends and a rare tonic for its enemies’ – The
not only to have emerged out of the mire of dubious wheeling-dealing but
to have been elected as leader of the most powerful nation. With its apparent preoccupation
with American interests alone – to the detriment of any recognition of the importance of our
responsibility for one another and the value of the harmony of nations, what on earth has ‘the
land of the free’ come to? Where is the shining ‘city on a hill’ now”? Is this all just the
shadow-side of the cherished ‘American dream”? And the recent publication of Bob
Woodward’s Fear and other revealingly critical books have further stoked the flames of
incredulity and concern and raised deep questions about what on earth has happened in the
United States and where your great country is going now.

Sad as it is to say, viewed from here, the credibility of the United States, and the respect for it
internationally, has suffered badly. There is no credit in a nation’s leader being a laughing
stock. Even though it seems clear that he still has significant support at grass-roots level, and
the Republican party, however embarrassed some of its leaders may be, still stand by him, his
diplomatic ineptitude and divisive policies (for instance, on immigration, poverty and health
issues), his shameful behaviour around the death of John McCain, the withdrawal of support
for United Nations agencies and the Paris accords on climate change, and the steps he has
taken to increase backing for the Israeli government in its oppression of Palestinians all
betray a value system that flies in the face of the heart of the Gospel.

The current state of politics in the US, as here in Britain, raises questions about the adequacy
of our democratic processes, indeed about the very principle of democracy: the shortcoming
of binary and ‘first-past-the post’ voting arrangements; how widespread is the
disenchantment with the existing way of doing things; the place of referendums (should big
constitutional issues be determined by a simple majority?) and the principle of representative
as against participative democracy; top-down as against bottom-up democracy and the
significance of the emergence of ‘populist’ and grass-roots movements, both left- and right-
wing, within the US, in Britain and elsewhere in Europe - perhaps affording a shred of hope
for those committed to ‘democratic socialism’ and the fulfilment of dreams for a better, fairer
society.

Meanwhile, here in Britain, we remain patient but frustrated around the cliff-hanging
confusion of the Brexit negotiations as they reach a critical stage; we await with interest the
outcome of the US mid-term elections and (finding it hard to understand how impeachment
has not happened before now) the Mueller inquiry; and we assure all our US friends of our
continuing support, sympathy, solidarity and prayerful concern.

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Community and long-standing friend of the Open Door. Inspired by their time at the Open
Door, Norman’s wife Ruth set up two foot clinics in Glasgow - one at the Lodging House
Mission (a day-centre for homeless people and hostel-dwellers; the other at the Glasgow
night shelter for destitute asylum-seekers.)