



New Year, New Optimism?

by Ian Betts

Yes, yes... we are all aware of the current financial difficulties. Britain's economy is made of mashed potato and the Greeks might as well use yoghurt as currency. It's been a year of riots, strikes, sit-ins and vetoes; assassinations, super-injunctions and celebrity divorce woes, and no-one feels any better for it. At least Prince Philip is still alive... and yet somehow the gloom remains and deepens.

Writing for Spiked last week, Frank Furedi declared that 2011 was the year when the progressive movement of the left 'lost its capacity to believe in the future' because of the 'the utter estrangement of the left from the idea of progress'; he portrays a nation of deficit-obsessed zombies enthralled to camps of politically illiterate anti-capitalism protestors, with neither able to conceive or articulate a manifesto for wider social change. It's depressing stuff.

Though in all fairness, you can see where he's coming from. Since the forming of the Coalition Government, a credible progressive voice of the left has seemed absent in this country. The odd coupling of Liberals with Conservatives enjoys the majority in the House of Commons, and any disagreements are had behind closed doors in the Cabinet Office. At rare intervals, Nick Clegg does pop up, whinnying complaints about Cameron's Euro veto or changes to the NHS, probably to excuse himself to his party and, in effect, somehow excusing these radical decisions to the nation. His robust performances in the pre-election debates reside in a dim and blackly comic past. Meanwhile, Miliband's nasal nay-saying proves ineffective at Prime Minister's Questions, and the austerity machine rolls on.

Steeped in such economic stupor, you may well have missed the announcement by Danny Alexander on 20 December that 'heads of agreement have now been established with most unions' over public sector pension reform to save taxpayers 'tens of billions of pounds in decades to come'. Whatever your political standpoint, it's encouraging to know that this dispute seems to have been settled despite the erroneous letter-writing of Eric Pickles or another pre-emptive announcement of a deal yet to be completed by the current government. There won't be any more days off school for the kiddies or teachers going shopping on a weekday afternoon.

Yet whatever satisfaction this may bring is decidedly ephemeral. The finer details will emerge in due course, as will the fate of police, armed forces, judiciary and fire service pension schemes which are subject to different conditions. In any case, the cutting will continue. So what is there to be happy about at all?

Perhaps the way forward is actually to look back and take a broader view. In a recent Edge Master Class, Steven Pinker argued that "we may be living in the most peaceful time in our species' existence" while exploring the levels of violence in our societies. You'll be pleased to know that they are receding; genocide, murder, execution, rape, child abuse, domestic violence

and racial hate crimes are all in steady decline. In fact, by citing a range of examples from human history, Pinker suggests our increasing civilization through the rise of democracy, international trade, book production and vegetarianism. I wonder if he enjoyed a nut roast over Christmas.

Vegetarian or not, it may help you to adopt Pinker's total perspective when assessing humanity's development. It certainly eases our financial worries. We are reminded that recessions come and go as a feature of any fluctuating market economy. Moreover, the imposition of decreased spending power seems trivial compared to the pain inflicted during one of the crimes Pinker mentions. Thankfully, these are no longer events that society will tolerate and we can enjoy our freedoms by griping about money if we wish; try turning on the TV and not hearing something about the looming double-dip recession.

We consume bad news with such appetite. War, murder and financial instability dominate the headlines cultivating ongoing moral panics, mistrust and fear. Ironically, Pinker's research seems completely at odds with the news that is reported in the media. We are quick to see the worst. Yet the funny thing is that the stock market is a confidence trick; if you can convince people that it's the right time to spend, we all get a boost. What would happen if all the newspapers ran with positive news for a week?

In fact, we have many reasons to be optimistic right now.

December delivered reports of a number of incredible scientific developments. Once again, the OPERA experiment found neutrinos travelling faster than light, directly challenging Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Researchers at the Large Hadron Collider reported that the Higgs Boson particle 'may have been glimpsed' and the Kepler telescope has found an Earth-like planet reported as a 'potentially habitable world'. These discoveries hint at amazing possibilities: the ability to conceive and understand the very fabric of space, and then to travel rapidly through it, perhaps to other worlds. It's the stuff of science-fiction, isn't it?

For me, it heralds the start of a paradigm shift: a change in the way we all think. From Newton to Einstein... and now something else. It's a telling reminder that humanity is constantly in a state of motion, our ideas oscillating and colliding, reforming and shifting to form something new. Whatever fearmongering we may entertain in the short term, we should not lose sight of these long-term possibilities. The Earth will continue for many millions of years, and so will the human race. What is important now is how we adapt and progress in that time.

Even Furedi concludes by saying 'Public life needs to be refocused around the future', and perhaps we should finish by considering our own political destiny. At the time of writing, angry uprisings continue in Syria with reports of government snipers firing into crowds of protestors. We should be appalled by the violence but also encouraged by those who fight for their future. The Arab Spring beckons another paradigm shift in the Middle East towards democracy and freedom of expression – both crucial steps in the continuing development of humanity. How many people in Britain feel that strongly about how we are governed? It's easy to be complacent when you are not faced with violence or torture. However, as Furedi suggests, we need to be concerned with how our society advances, by engaging with our young people and invigorating them with these new developments. We need pioneers of the future, rather than individuals who do not feel part of it.

For me, I want to see a shift in our political vision. We can fixate on small adjustments to pension schemes, stomach budget cuts and tremble about the uncertain fate of the Euro, or we can aspire to something better. Now, more than ever, people would like a vision of where we are going and how we will get there. Energy, ecology and technological advancement should be at the forefront of our politics, and their development is interlinked. We need our young people to care about these issues and take them on; why not give them the chance to vote at 16 so they know that their voice is valued? However we approach the future, this doom and gloom is not the solution.

Some Related Links

The year when the word 'progressive' lost all its meaning: <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/11931/>

History of violence – Steven Pinker: <http://edge.org/conversation/mc2011-history-violence-pinker>

Higgs Boson: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-16158374>

Neutrinos: <http://inspirehep.net/record/928153/files/arXiv:1109.4897.pdf?version=2>

Earth-like planet: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/06/uk-space-planet-idUSLNE7B501D20111206>

Syrian protests: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2011/dec/30/syria-egypt?intcmp=239>