

# Guest Editorial

*Editor's note: The following reflections on Europe by Dr John McLean were presented at the graduation ceremony of medical and dental students at Louisiana State University, New Orleans, on May 16, 1987. At the time these remarks were written and spoken, the world was a very different place. In light of the historic changes that have taken place, particularly in Europe, Dr McLean's thoughts and prognostications are interesting and, as it has turned out, far-sighted.*

## European reflections

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My title "European reflections" is mainly based on how I have seen Europe developing in my lifetime. I have grown up in a scientific revolution that has outpaced our ability to cope with it and may have overwhelmed our culture. At school we were shown maps in the late 1930s where most of the world was marked red and labeled "The British Empire." Today, as an Officer of that Order, I think that if I had any jurisdiction it would be confined to

a few off-shore islands over which we occasionally do battle. England has in the past fought with almost every country in Europe except, so I am informed, Monaco. Apparently they do not have a football team! Even in the USA we took tea in Boston harbor.

Our country has been ruled by a hereditary monarchy for almost 1,000 years and only Oliver Cromwell broke the sequence. Strangely the notion of true Republicanism, or government by committee, was alien to his 17th-century mind. "Government," he said, "must be a single person with a Parliament, that is fundamental." However, as one Irish wit remarked, "The problem with Cromwell was not so much that he thought God was on his side but that he thought he was on God's side." Probably he would have made a good president of a university or dean of a school.

Cromwell, in his search for true democracy, eventually finished up destroying all the existing institutions—king, lords, Commons in the traditional form, and the established Church. He had little to replace them. Perhaps it was a lesson that Karl Marx overlooked. Violent change does not seem to work; in the end it impoverishes the fabric of society. The economic debacle in eastern Europe, where a central command economy operates, is one consequence. Elementary consumer goods are precious mainly through absence and it is hardly surprising that General Secretary Gorbachov is coming close to an admission of wholesale econom-

ic failure. Indeed, I predict that the idea of "super powers," which I grew up with, is becoming a myth. The cost of high technology has now overwhelmed any country's ability to pay for it and sustain the necessary research effort. You are indeed living through interesting times.

One of the most significant developments in Europe during the last 30 years has been the creation of the European Common Market, an event not without its pitfalls but nonetheless developed by slow evolution rather than violent change. The Market, for all its deadening bureaucracy, has enabled Europe to develop in peace and allowed its citizens to enjoy an unparalleled prosperity. The abundance of food and consumer goods is a marked contrast from my early days after the last war where, in the UK, we still had both food and clothes rationing, consumer goods were non-existent, and the motorcars were all 1938 models. Surprisingly we were none the worse off, since the post-war period was one of great optimism. It is interesting to note that there was little vandalism, our streets were cleaner, and theft was at a minimum where few of us had to lock our doors or windows. England was a safe place for old people who were treated with due respect, and we all knew the local "bobby," and the police remained unarmed.

However, the restless energy of social engineering drove us onwards and Lord Beveridge produced his famous report on the creation of the National Health Service. The wel-

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fare state had arrived and became a model for Europe and the world. The philosophy of the welfare state touches all of us and therefore bears examination. Lord Beveridge's original concept was that if the old, poor, sick, and less-privileged sectors of the community were given a safety-net against being bankrupted by illness or unemployment, then eventually they would cease to become a charge on the State as their living standards rose. Beveridge really believed that demand for State aid would fall, and his whole concept was probably based on this delightful Panglossian world. I hardly need tell you that an open-ended health service became insatiable in its appetite, and in the UK a political battleground developed where any attempt to rein back expenditure was met with cries of "uncaring," "lack of compassion," and similar expressions of denigration for those who dared to suggest that our industrial production no longer met the revenue demands from the state. The answer—borrow money, incur a few deficits, and pretend that running the State where billions of dollars or pounds are involved—is quite different from financial prudence in the home. It has taken 30 years for the population in the UK to escape from this grand illusion and I venture to suggest that the people in the USA will not be far behind.

This does not mean that people should be abandoned to their fate. Clearly modern society has advanced beyond the free-for-all of the 19th century; although, even then there was a whole group of enlightened Victorian employers who built workers' homes that are being renovated today and regarded in much esteem. It would be a bold man who could step forward with a true solution to the health and welfare pro-

blem. However, it is becoming clear in the UK that governments have an inescapable duty to balance budgets and provide sound money if a welfare state is not to collapse under deficits. The methods of payment and delivery of care must be left to gradual evolution in the light of experience. Neither the private nor state sectors have a monopoly of wisdom. In Britain we shall see an expansion of private health care, and it need not be at the expense of a state-run health service as many people think. Unless we are prepared to act sensibly and recognize that both sectors have a role to play and can be mutually beneficial, then the less-privileged will not receive the improved care that we all desire. We must still allow the better-off to pay for excellence, since without this freedom we shall soon have a central command economy in health, which dispenses mediocrity to all. Imaginative private practitioners should work in union with the dedicated hospital practitioner or researcher. This is the formula for improving health care.

Despite the remarkable improvement in the standard of living and welfare of the European population during the last 30 years, what is most puzzling to the British, Scandinavians, Spanish, Germans, Italians, Belgians, Dutch, and French is why crime, vandalism, and drug abuse are rising in all their countries. Clearly we have lost our way and the blueprint for social order is flawed. Does a never-ending struggle for material success and its attendant pursuit of leisure provide the key? In the 1930s Lord Birkenhead in his book *2030* envisaged a world where better education, increased productivity, and all the benefits of a scientific revolution would allow mankind to devote attention to cultural enlightenment

and the pursuit of knowledge. A better educated society would then learn to respect and assist each individual. However, as Robert Bolton in a letter to the *London Times* wrote recently, "Human nature may be in need of what education can do for it, but it does not naturally want it." He continued in a challenging and almost sinister vein, "A revival of education therefore cannot be expected without either a major religious revival or the imposition of a totalitarian regime. The latter alternative may become the more probable of the two as a result of what happens when freedom is granted to ever-increasing numbers of people who abuse it."

No doubt all of you present today occasionally become depressed by all the prophets of gloom and doom, but things are never as bad as they seem. In England we have trodden the path of Louisiana—an oil-based economy that is running out. However, in the UK the last 5 years has seen a dramatic change: the power of the Trades Unions has been curbed, and industry has had the biggest shake-out in its history, with the result that at last our production is reviving and unit costs are once again competitive. France, after the last war, was termed, "the sick man of Europe" with an economy staggering under the burden of government ineptitude and a lack of enterprise and will amongst its people. Today France has recovered its industrial base and, despite the vigorous environmental debate, is the only country in Europe where a nuclear energy program is now producing power cheaper than anywhere in Europe, giving the country a significant edge over its competitors. In the aftermath of Chernobyl it is natural that nuclear energy is regarded with great suspicion, but it is equally surprising that the con-

tinued burning of carbon fuels producing a "greenhouse effect" and acid-rain is not also at the forefront of our minds. Environmental scientists are equally alarmed at its consequences.

My reflections on Europe are that we still remain a resilient race capable of rapid adaptation to change. Despite the industrial challenge from the Far East, the Euro-

pean countries are still surviving. A study of European patent applications reveals a continuing innovative streak that was so clearly demonstrated during the Renaissance period long ago. In the long-term it is the intelligence, endeavor, and will of the indigenous people in a country that determine its destiny. The slings and arrows of economic misfortune are transient and, in-

deed, may spur the fat cat into hunting again for his dinner. For all of you setting forth today the educational, cultural, and scientific opportunities have never been greater. You may have to become leaner cats, but remember that the exercise of brain power still remains free to all mankind, no matter at what level the good Lord has bestowed his intellectual gifts.