

1549 – Those who don't know history are condemned to repeat its mistakes

It had started in the West Country, the spark that lit the stubble was the introduction of the new Prayer Book in all churches on the 9th of June 1549, that's 470 years ago almost to the day (allowing for the switch from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar). Uprisings and social unrest went on to affect southern England from the Severn to the Wash.

It culminated at the end of the summer with a major battle being fought at Norwich between the largest rebel force and the Protestant Government of the Protectorate. The Protestants, who wanted the freedom to work out their own salvation rather than be dictated to by Europe, had triumphed with a form of hard Brexit which lasted for 4 years, their triumph was accompanied by the vicious suppression of dissent.

Then Edward 6th died and the Remainers in the form of Queen Mary seized control, we re-joined Europe (aka the Catholic Church) and this time dissent was even more viciously suppressed.

A fragile peace was restored with the ascent of Queen Elizabeth in 1558, her Elizabethan settlement resembled Teresa May's deal, a compromise that nobody particularly liked it but it contained enough for people of goodwill to coalesce around and gradually, after those ten years of vicious infighting, peace was restored and over subsequent decades the country slowly came together.

What was missed in analysing these troubles through the religious lens was what had happened to the common people in the 20 years prior to the rebellion. Henry 8th's dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s had robbed them of health care and social welfare provision. In a process not dissimilar to what happened in financial services after the de-regulation of the early 1990s, the wealth of the monasteries flowed to the aristocracy and city wide-boys like Thomas Cromwell, leaving the poor to feel 'left behind and done to'.

In addition, and to their universal dis-credit, unscrupulous gentry had been enclosing common land using dubious legal means which meant the rural poor couldn't augment their income by grazing a cow, pig or sheep on the common lands.

Then in the 1540s to pay for war - first with the French and then with the Scots – the currency had been debased causing prices to rise by 50% in a decade whilst the incomes of labourers remained fixed. By 1549 the common people were desperate and the tensions erupted in what became the prelude to a decade of bloodshed over our relationship with Europe.

There is nothing new under the sun, *'La plus la change, la plus la même chose'*, but the moral of the story was deftly spelt out by the French economist Thomas Piketty in his 2014 book *'Capital in the 21st Century'* when he showed that countries that allow too great an inequality to develop between rich and poor are destined to suffer from deep and enduring social and political instability. Interestingly, two years before Brexit and Trump, he singled out Britain and the USA as the countries most vulnerable to such instability.

It is a dreadful irony from history that the last vestige of the troubles from the 16th Century - Northern Ireland - should prove the stumbling block in our current impasse over Brexit. But it's a warning and emphasises the perilous nature of choices we face.

Future generations may have to live for decades with the consequences of any mistakes made in the coming months but, unlike the 16th Century with the exception of Northern Ireland, religion is no longer the lens through which most people see the world and themselves.

This means that people of faith can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. It behoves us all to pray for our nation, pray for wisdom in the choice of our next Prime Minister, and pray for those who feel 'left behind and done to' for until we address their concerns, there is little prospect of this country feeling at ease with itself, regardless of whether we leave or remain within the European Union.