

Over the Fence



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This issue of Over the Fence is way overdue but I have had other matters on my mind in recent weeks; a poor excuse, conceded.

ONE MIGHTY NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

Witnessing a nervous breakdown is disturbing enough, but when it is a proud and mighty nation it is thoroughly scary. This is what the United States of America is going through and it's going to take some getting over.

Many emotional crises are caused by a sudden and major decline in ones fortunes – the business goes belly up, you've got the sack, the wife runs off with the single shepherd, whatever – and the inability to come to terms with significantly declining circumstances.



Throughout the 20th Century the United States has been a mighty and prosperous powerhouse and with all its faults and mistakes, a force for global stability and economic progress and innovation. This has been particularly so since World War Two, from which it emerged more powerful than ever and at which time it accounted for 50% of the world's goods and services. It assumed the role of primary defender of western values and territory and a bulwark against Soviet expansionism. If it hadn't been for American power, including nuclear power, in mid 1945 there would have been no way the West could have stopped the Red Army marching to the Atlantic seaboard, and the Red Army probably would have. Think about the consequences of that!

At the turn of this century America elected George W Bush as its president. If ever there was a wrong president at the wrong time it was Bush. Bush inherited a strong economy and a balanced budget from Bill Clinton. But look what he left for Obama eight years later: the American forces bogged down in two disastrous wars from which extraction will be very difficult and painful indeed, and the economy tanked. In short, George W Bush was not prepared or able to provide the great nation he led with leadership to adjust its expectations to new circumstances and challenges.

But American voters, like voters everywhere, have short memories. They may be out of a job, and almost certainly their house values have bombed, if they haven't been foreclosed. They're worried that American economic pre-eminence is threatened, and this, along with the way the wars are going, is wounding national pride. They're hurting real bad. Obama hasn't fixed it – as if he could in a couple of years – and so in goes the boot, as this mid-term election has proved.

There has emerged an extremist underbelly of the Republican Party that goes under the absurd name of The Tea Party. It's made up of angry people, and some incredibly incompetent ones, who are lashing out at Obama and the Democrats. Some of the attacks on Obama have been disgraceful, bigoted and irrational. Some go so far as to talk of impeachment. Can you believe it?

1960

What a contrast this election has been to the one that narrowly elected John F Kennedy against Richard Nixon exactly 50years ago! Undoubtedly the presidential election of 1960 was the most exciting and memorable of the

last century. Well, it was in my estimation anyway. Only Roosevelt's election in 1932 compares as a landmark, but then that was totally one-sided. I remember 1960 well. In fact I made it the subject of the 4th Form speech competition at my Old School – and won!

Kennedy's inaugural and subsequent speeches are remembered for their lofty eloquence and stylish delivery, and this combined with his and his wife's good looks and youthfulness meant that he captured the imagination of not just the American but the global community, especially young people. You can say what you like about him, but we have not seen his likes of him since. Obama bears comparison, but unlike Kennedy, is, as described above, burdened by the landscape he inherited, and for some, the colour of his skin. (Kennedy's silver-tongued eloquence was crafted by an extraordinarily talented aid and personal friend, Ted Sorensen, who died just last week at the age of 82.)

Kennedy had to deal with the Cold War at its most intense and threatening, and he did it with grace, vision and strength, but also with restraint. This was especially so with the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when Kennedy resisted the calls of his military chiefs to launch an attack on the strategic Soviet missiles stationed in Cuba. He gave Khrushchev the room to make a dignified back-down, and both sides stepped back from the brink.

Kennedy was a colossal ram and he is largely remembered for his continuous infidelities, as Clinton is remembered for his dalliance with Monica Lewinski, although in Kennedy's time this was a no-go area by the media. Kennedy once startled the elderly British PM Harold Macmillan by telling him that if he didn't have a woman every few days he got a headache. Given the clear-headedness of his administration could this then be overlooked as a reasonable pay-off for world peace? Still, it must have given the long-suffering Jackie O plenty of headaches.

Kennedy's assassination was a true disaster of incalculable proportions.



I pay my respects to Kennedy's memory, Arlington National Cemetery, 1994.



President Kennedy with Prime Minister Macmillan, 29 June 1963.

Now, here's a man who's pleased with himself! And what a great lady!



What do an internal combustion engine and a Molotov Cocktail have in common? Nothing other than that they are powered by petrol. The first is utterly essential to the convenience of mankind in a modern world; the other a crude tool for destruction, whether it be used to desperately disable an invading panzer or to fire-bomb a rival gang headquarters.

The difference between a nuclear power plant and a nuclear weapon is fundamentally the same. One is a power unit, the other a weapon of destruction, although it packs grotesquely more punch than a bottle filled with petrol.

Given that US Navy surface vessels no longer carry nuclear weapons, and given

that those ships that are nuclear-powered have had since their introduction in the mid-1950s an outstanding record of safety then what is this country's rationale for banning them from our ports? Is it because nuclear energy is immoral? This really is an insult to those many nations that rely on nuclear power for their electric power generation, including the Mother Country of the United Kingdom. Polluting perhaps? Yes, there are problems here, but no one can say that fossil fuel exploration, extraction and usage does not pollute. Arguably it is far greater. Even the Green Movement is starting to accept nuclear power.

Gone by lunchtime? What's the procrastination? But it won't be of course. This is a political no-go area for the time being – but not forever. What will be our position when merchant vessels are nuclear powered, as one day they will be?

PEKAPEKA – A VISION MIDWAY TO REALISATION

A couple of Fridays ago the Pekapeka Restoration Project was officially opened. This was a landmark day – an historic day – for Hawke's Bay environmentalism, and for Maori, for which this wetland holds much cultural significance. Forty or so years ago this wetland was in reasonable shape, although of course merely a shadow of what it would have been like in pre-European times. But it was neglected and a convenient dump for industrial and household waste. Incredible as it may seem, this was an accepted thing: dump your rubbish in the nearest water body. Further, as is always a threat, wilding willow established itself, and nothing was done. In fact nothing, it was believed, *was needed to be done*.

A dozen years ago the Regional Council determined to rehabilitate it. This was a daunting undertaking given the appalling state of the 'swamp', with the willows totally established and overwhelming most of the area. Now the willows have been knocked down with aerial spraying and largely collapsed and thousands of native plants have been planted. Many individuals, organisations and school children have contributed to this exciting outcome – a rehabilitated wetland alongside which a busy highway passes.

What will it look like a dozen years from now? By then the natives, all going well, will be established and the old willows will have completely disappeared. But the willow, like rust, will never sleep. Its control, as with any other weed, will demand the discipline of constant attention. I believe too that eventually to really bring about its complete indigenous renaissance the few weeping willows and Lombardy poplars, species that are unlikely to spread, should also be removed. But for its ultimate achievable re-establishment we will need to wait at least a hundred years. So be it!



Ngahiwi Tomoana during his speech at Pekapeka.



Looking south over some growing plants and the carpark.

Talking of the wife running off with the single shepherd reminds me of the story of a back-blocks cockie coming into the now defunct Hastings Club, a favourite watering hole for farmers in its day, late on a Friday afternoon.

He's at the bar and obviously distressed, so his drinking companion says, "What's the problem Bill?"

"Oh nothing (sniff, sniff)," he replies.

"Oh come on. What's up?" says his mate.

"Well", says Bill, "Would you believe, last Sunday the wife ran off with the single shepherd. As if I haven't got enough to worry about! The bank manager's on to me, and frankly, I'm struggling to cope. It's the loneliness that's getting to me. There's no one to talk things over with".

"Don't worry," says his friend comfortingly, "One day the right person will come along. You wait and see".

"Well", says Bill, "I certainly hope so. But I tell you, he's going to be damned hard to replace!"

I spotted this in the American *Christian Science Monitor*. But will they taste any better?

Something new for your garden: **Blue Tomatoes**

Want to grow blue tomatoes in your garden? Several new blue tomatoes should hit the market in the next year or two.

Tom Wagner crossed heirloom tomatoes with wild tomatoes that contain blue pigment to create these.



WELL SAID

It's tempting to quote the immortal phrases of John F Kennedy here. You know, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"; "The torch has been passed to a new generation..." etc. But I have just been reading Keith Quinn's book *The A-Z of Meads*. That's Pine Tree of course. Well, Meads played 155 games for the All Blacks over 15 years, a record that has never been beaten. That's enough to make him a distinguished Kiwi, but his post rugby-playing life is something on top of that. Taciturn, working farmer, a happily married family man, beer drinker, story teller, rough around the edges, big, worker for the Intellectually handicapped – all these things go to make this guy the ultimate Kiwi iconic figure. Te Kuiti is a long way from the White House, but it's plenty good enough for Pine Tree. So here are a few examples of the great man's eloquence, made without the benefit of a speech writer. In fact Meads didn't even *write* his speeches.

- "English rugby? Too many sweat bands and not enough sweat."
- "I've never kicked anyone . But okay, I might have marked time on a few blokes a few times."
- "Lower socio-eco systems". (A new term coined by Meads while talking on the Murray Deaker radio show. Several listeners agreed Colin was trying to say 'lower socio-economic systems. But they agreed: "We know what you mean Colin". (Mind you, 'lower socio-eco systems' could indeed be a relevant term where the ecology is the victim of an impoverished society.)
- "What I can't understand about these modern All Black blokes is that they don't shave for four days before a test – then they go out on the field and try to look tough. What I'd like to see is for them to have a shave

on the morning of the game, so that they look good, and then go out on the field and *be tough*.” [This brings to mind the comment of General Sir Howard Kippenberger proudly reflecting on his men of the 20th Battalion leaving the ship after being evacuated from the gruelling and disastrous Battle of Crete: “The men filed down and it was good to see that every one was armed and every one was shaved”.]

- When Welsh rugby strongman Brian Thomas was asked when he came here in 1969 if he was going to “sort out Colin Meads”, he replied “Hell no: I want to die in my own country”.
- A young woman who had been advising the modern All Blacks of correct nutrition was having a conversation with Meads and maintained that they should stop eating meat mid-week before the big game on Saturday and concentrate on lighter foods, such as pasta. Meads couldn’t figure out why, if pasta was so good, Italy wasn’t winning the world cup. He told her that he used to eat copious quantities of meat all week, including steak and eggs for breakfast on Saturday and cold meat and mashed potato with heaps of butter at lunch. But the young lady was more than equal to the Pine Tree. “But Colin”, she said, “Just think how good you *could* have been!”

And Kel Tremain’s Magpies

When King Country challenged the Magpies for the shield – and what a mighty challenge it was – Tremain and Meads were of course the opposing captains. This was in 1969 and Tremain had been passed over by the All Black selectors but Meads was still well and truly a current All Black with a couple more years to go. Meads recalls that in a lineout he heard the distinctive voice of Tremain behind him saying to his team mates: “Just play the game boys. Don’t let the old bloke upset you”. Meads said in 2009: “I’m never much good at quick repartee and that sort of thing, but I was quite proud of myself right then. On hearing Tremain call me an ‘old bloke’ quick as a flash I said, “Hey Bunny, I’ve got three selectors in the stand who still think I’m young enough!”



Good mates – Colin and Verna Meads



There are countless pictures of Pine Tree to choose from, but this is perhaps the least likely... not bad for someone who left school before he was 15.

LAST WORD

If you haven’t already, don’t forget to take a look at my website:

www.overthefence.org.nz

And if you think a friend would like to read Over the Fence then feel free to forward it.

Cheers, Ewan Mac

