

Big Brother Watches Britain

The rights of Englishmen make way for litres and ID cards.

By Peter Hitchens

ONE OF THE ODDEST and most eerily prophetic passages in *1984* finds Winston Smith, unwisely searching for a key to the lost past, entering a sordid alehouse in a proletarian quarter. There he sees an old man, a survivor of former times, trying to order a pint of beer, once the standard English measure. The barman either does not understand him or pretends not to do so. "What in hell's name is a pint? Litre and half-litre, that's all we serve," he says.

England, likewise, has ceased to exist, and its sophisticated currency has been replaced by the standardized decimal dollars and cents of Oceania. In *Brave New World*, the dystopia is different in almost every way, but the drug soma is prescribed in metric grams, and England has also disappeared, this time into a globalized Fordist state, governed by ten world controllers. Mass production and advertising have brought into being the borderless, godless world dreamed of by Karl Marx, in which German and French are dead languages and Trotsky a common surname.

Both Orwell and Huxley, perhaps only half-consciously, recognized that national independence is one of the most important components of liberty and that local, particular culture was an obstacle to arbitrary power. And they were quite right. Their books were until very recently read here in Britain as enjoyable fantasies of the unthinkable. We could shiver as we read them, then put them down with a happy feeling that this was what we had avoided through the luck of our geography and the good sense of our forebears. Only

some colossal, unimaginable catastrophe—Orwell talks vaguely of a nuclear surprise attack, Huxley of the Nine Years War—could connect our gentle, reasonable world with either of these howling nightmares.

Yet in the last few years there have been a number of events and developments in Britain that suggest no such cataclysm is necessary, but that James Madison was correct when he said, "There are more instances of the abridgement of the freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachments of those in power than by violent and sudden usurpation."

There is now, for instance, an official campaign in Britain to use the law to abolish traditional English measures—hence the special eeriness of Orwell's alehouse prophecy. A market trader, Steve Thoburn, was filmed secretly by City Hall officials as he sold bananas to his customers in Sunderland, an industrial town in the north of England. They then prosecuted him because he had made the sale in pounds and ounces, rather than in kilograms and grams. There was no question of him giving short measure or of having done anything dishonest. His offense was to continue to use traditional measures, well-known to all his customers, rather than the global ones now preferred by authority. He was quite ready to sell his bananas in kilograms to anyone who asked. But they never did.

Mr. Thoburn was not exporting his bananas to a country that used the metric system, and bananas are not a medicine or a high-technology product whose precise mass might be crucial to a patient's health or an international

space project. His prosecution was part of the forcible imposition of one culture upon another, as is usually done to conquered peoples to remind them of their subjugation or to the people of a revolutionary state who need to be told firmly that there is a new order. The case was taken all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, one of two foreign supreme courts that now outrank the highest tribunals of English law, including Parliament itself. The court, which usually concerns itself with upholding the left-wing liberties of "minorities," unsurprisingly upheld the fine levied on Mr. Thoburn. It is hard to see what the law in a free country should have had to do with such a private transaction. But in an unfree country, that is what the law is for: telling people who is in charge.

Pints of beer, currently spared from this process, will sooner or later suffer the same fate, and the words "litre and half-litre, that's all we serve" will eventually be heard in the proletarian alehouses of England. Those who thought this episode was trivial were like those who do not connect clouds with rain. For in the years that have followed, it has become clear that a deep and worrying change is taking place in the laws and police forces of England.

The difficulty lies in explaining how serious it is without falling into the language of panic. So I shall simply list some developments as dispassionately as I can. We have a Civil Contingencies Act that, once an emergency has been declared, gives the government the power to cancel existing laws, to order citizens to move or to stay where they

are, in short, to act like a dictatorship. We have a succession of Terrorism Acts that give police officers enormous arbitrary authority they never had before, a power they have already begun to abuse. During a recent convention of the governing Labour Party in the seaside town of Brighton, this law was used dozens of times against people doing such dangerous things as wearing T-shirts bearing anti-government slogans. Notoriously, the police gave it as their excuse for helping to eject an elderly protestor from the convention hall after he heckled a member of the government.

Police officers in Britain have, by long tradition, sworn an oath to uphold the law and are servants of the Crown, not of the government. This means that they are legally obliged to refuse an unlawful order from a superior, technically loyal to the law but not to the state or the government of the day. Parliament has also resisted the creation of a national police force, and there has been no direct ministerial control of the police, as exists everywhere on the European continent. But late last year a new Serious and Organised Crimes Agency was created, whose officers are ordinary government servants and who are directly employed by the central state. Meanwhile, there are plans to merge the remaining local police forces into far larger units, which are only one step away from a national organization. The normal police are also being supplemented by large numbers of poorly trained Community Support Officers, as yet with limited powers of arrest, who like the grander SOCA are ordinary government servants, not sworn constables loyal to Crown and law.

While these changes proceed, the government also presses fiercely ahead with a scheme to compel all British citizens to register for identity cards. Officially, this is voluntary, but from 2008 anyone who renews a passport will be placed on the register and compelled to

have his eyeballs scanned, his fingerprints taken, and his personal details compulsorily recorded—a fate hitherto reserved mainly for convicted sexual offenders and cattle. He will then, at great personal expense, be presented with an identity card for which he has not asked, though for an unspecified period the issue of the actual card will be optional. Registration will be increasingly inescapable. In a small country where most people take holidays abroad quite frequently, this will rapidly compel millions to take part in the allegedly non-compulsory scheme. Once this has happened, general compulsion and an obligation to carry this breathing license at all times will probably follow. Challenged to justify this measure, the government has claimed in turn that it will fight crime, terrorism, and identity theft. But these arguments have been repeatedly slashed to pieces in both Houses of Parliament. There is no good evidence that such cards will achieve anything of the kind and much evidence that they will increase official interference in private lives, as well as undermining the fundamental principle of free societies—that the state must justify itself to the citizenry rather than the other way round.

Meanwhile a measure passed in 1986 in a panicky attempt to curb bad behavior at soccer matches, the Public Order Act, is increasingly being used to prosecute people whose public statements are thought by police officers to be likely to cause offense to others. In several cases, objectors to homosexual equality laws have been prosecuted or threatened, in one case after a broadcaster on the BBC voiced criticisms of laws allowing homosexual couples to adopt children. Even Tony Blair has been investigated over published allegations that he was once rude about the people of Wales in an entirely private context.

Other measures include a law allowing terrorist suspects to be detained for

28 days without charge, a straightforward breach of Magna Carta. This revolting change is a probably what the government always intended when it asked Parliament for a 90-day detention law. Yet Charles Clarke, the home secretary, whose cozy title conceals a would-be minister of the interior, publicly continues to press for 90 days and recently said that he preferred the continental system of justice to the Anglo-American model. No wonder. The only surprise is that he does not prefer the old Soviet system. It has been clear for years that the leaders of both our major parties find jury trial and the presumption of innocence highly inconvenient. The accused man's right to silence was dispensed with some years ago, and the protections against being tried twice on the same charge have been fatally weakened. Should you wish for more to alarm you, then anyone with access to the Web may study the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill, whose jaw-crackingly dull title conceals an astonishing plan to allow government to bypass Parliament altogether and to make and change many laws at will, without even the excuse of an emergency.

Most British citizens assume that liberty grows wild in their country and needs neither cultivation nor protection, and they are unmoved by these events because they think that tyranny cannot happen here. Perhaps they are right, but if a tyranny does arise here, it will find all the weapons it needs conveniently to hand, sharpened, polished, and oiled. As our overstretched, under-equipped soldiers pursue the mirages of freedom and democracy in Iraq, real liberty and law go undefended in the nation where they first saw the light. ■

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The Old College Try

A small evangelical college fights to save itself—and to steel its students for the secular marketplace.

By Peter Wood

ONE BRISK JANUARY evening, seven or eight faculty members and staff from my college met in the lobby of the Empire State Building and walked over to Bryant Park. The park, which lies just behind the New York Public Library, was outfitted this winter with a temporary ice-skating rink. Some skaters glided serenely around the oval; others wormed their way through the bladerunner traffic as though they were taxi drivers on Fifth Avenue. I was among the wobbly neophytes, happy just to stay upright without holding onto the rails.

My more adept colleagues—a professor of business, lately from Citibank, and the college's registrar were particularly at ease slipping around the rink. My Albanian assistant came with her family and gave her five-year old daughter, Njomeza, her first skating lesson.

If you imagine this small company turning, turning, not in a widening gyre but in the crowded white oval in Bryant Park, with the New York Public Library looming and the Empire State Building exclaiming itself in the zenith, you'll have a reasonably good sense of my pleasure at my new job. For I've gone and done one of those profoundly inexplicable things that middle-aged men sometimes do. I resigned from a perfectly good and very secure job in favor of a wild venture on the ice.

In my case, last year I gave up a tenured position in anthropology at a big research university to become provost

of what amounts to a start-up college with no endowment and pretty daunting prospects. Even more to the point, I left the entirely respectable world of a secular university for what some would call the fever swamps of an evangelical college. I don't know that I am the first to make this Magellanic voyage, but having crossed some uncharted seas, I feel bound to report.

American higher education, of course, is a something-for-everybody affair. Among its 4,168 colleges and universities, students can seek out whatever fits, from size XXL to toddler; from whoop-it-up party schools to Gradgrind academies; and from beleafed Arcadias to mean-street urban fortresses. Within this Macy's of educational alternatives, I now speak for the equivalent of the shoelace section. Ah, but once I haberdashed acres of pricey pre-torn jeans.

The university where I spent more than two decades is Boston University (BU), and the little college where I now work is The King's College (TKC). Oddly, the names of both invite a certain amount of confusion. Boston University is perpetually confused with its Jesuit neighbor up Commonwealth Avenue, Boston College. BU is the one that stretches like a crumpled eel along the banks of the Charles River across from MIT. It doesn't have a football team, and it was founded long ago by Methodists who felt excluded from the elite colleges of the day.

The King's College sounds like it might be at Oxford or Cambridge (which has its own King's College), and it happens to be the name by which Columbia University was called before the American Revolution. This King's College, however, is not enamored with George III. Different king. It's a Christian thing.

That hasn't gone down especially well in New York. In January 2005, John Brademas, the retired president of New York University and currently a member of the New York State Board of Regents, got in a lather about the current King's College usurping the name of Columbia University and—sneaky Christians, you know—setting out to decoy unwary students. Brademas, dear old fellow, hadn't a clue. The current King's College started up in 1938 and had been operating in New York for nearly 50 years under the watchful eye of the Regents and with never a peep from the quondam royalists at Morningside Heights.

Brademas's scattershot accusation was my first real introduction to what working for a "Red-State college" in the midst of New York City would be like. It wasn't a battle that I expected or welcomed. I had just decided to part ways with BU, a university renowned for its former president John Silber's ferocious fights with campus radicals, a faculty union, the *Boston Globe*, and anyone else who happened to be standing around. I had spent a long time in the