

JANUS

January is named after the Roman God Janus. He was normally shown with two faces, one looking forward and one back. At this time of year the media spend a lot of ink and airtime doing the same, though this year may be different, the horror of the World Trade Centre attack seems to have blinded them to everything that happened before the 11th September. Of course those of us in Devon and in other farming counties remember Foot & Mouth, but who remembers the election in June, or indeed many of the other events of the past year which seemed so interesting at the time? Forgetting the past has dangers, dangers that were illustrated for me a few weeks ago when I mentioned our Civil War to a girl doing A Levels in history. She had never heard of it, she was only studying the 20th Century.

I find this worrying because our Civil war was fought, at least in part, to end the right of the King (the Executive of the day) to take major decisions without consulting Parliament. The Parliamentary victory in that war marked the beginning of democracy in this country. Today we seem to be forgetting what we have won; at home we are facing a Government which has decided it is right to lock people up indefinitely on suspicion alone at home and abroad, supporting the assumption by the United States Government that it is entitled to override other national Governments, indeed to decide even if they deserve to be a government. They have been of course under great provocation, but these actions ignore the lessons of our common past.

But Janus looks forward as well as back, and it is not only the freedoms we may be losing which worry me; our ignorance of our history means that we are also failing to learn from our mistakes. The Victorians found that a publicly owned Post Office was cheaper and more efficient than private mail and that unrestricted competition on the railways was dangerous. Long before then, we had found that having all the power in the hands of one chamber, the Lords or the Commons, led to oppression, so we devised a Parliament with two chambers in which each could restrain the other. Now that the Commons are controlled by Party whips and the Lords are virtually powerless, there seems to be little real debate. Government has become a team game and everyone must support their side.

Is this the world we want to live in? We have a religious duty to care for one another, not just our neighbours, but also those here and abroad who are finding that the power to speak and be heard is subtly, bit by bit being taken from them - and us. Let us pause to look back as this year comes to an end and see what we have achieved and forward to see how we can preserve it.

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