

London letter

Cian O'Neill looks for some much needed comfort in a deepening Christmas depression.

As the bells of St. Mary-le-Strand ring, the last sunlight filigrees the spire over the Court of Justice in dull gold and the Thames runs thickly by in its gun-metal colours. It is the close of the year, and a year full of novelty it has been, too, even optimism.

► Optimism is, however, a word little liked in Ireland. Put it down to Famine-echo or Troubles memory, but there's a fear of assuming that things are going to lift, especially when it looks a certainty. With a black man being elected as U.S. President, one could really lose the run of oneself. Thankfully, as Newton informed us with his Third Law of Bodies and Motion, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In this case, for all the new-found optimism about Obama and how America might rejoin the community of nations, there is the counterweight of Strictly Come Dancing. If the mind is a temple, then reality television programmers are the pigeons in the caves.

Notwithstanding that reverse-shit scuttle babbling away in the corner of the lounge, things could be much worse. *The Daily Mail*, that tendentious Cassandra of Fleet Street, is busy urging England into a recession, yet in The City, business goes on. Despite Lehman Brothers and others undergoing a general evacuation of personnel, as well as jobcuts, Canary Wharf is also still standing, with the pilot light atop the HSBC building still blinking amongst the lower cloud. West London, for its part, has shrugged its shoulders stoically and gotten back to thinking about Rupert's school trip to the sinking Maldives and other such questions of great moment. In other words, the falcon can still see the falconer.

Of course, next year could be tough. The Broom' plans to spend his way out of a downturn, whereas Dave OnCamera has finally shown his true colours by ditching the Tory promise of matching Labour on public spending. The Tories suppose that Middle England would prefer to get into its bunker and wait out the global downturn, rather than try and tackle the problem aggressively or spend adequately on public services. With recession often being forged from fear in the minds of banks, consumers and employers about lending, spending or hiring, the conditions are there for a recession because people are nervous. The Broom' seems to be banking on consumers taking his VAT cut to heart and buoying the economy through their spending. In sum: Mr. OnCamera is taking a political risk, while Brown is risking his all. That being the 'all' of U.K. taxpayers, this coming year will be interesting not just for him; for in this game, pennies are the pawns.

The Tories are getting back to basics on the politicking of public spending in general. They slam the government for poor public services in Tones of Great Concern, then say that public spending is excessive, then say that tax cuts are irresponsible, except for important ones such as the inheritance tax as would only come to bear on fairly valuable estates i.e. not those of the poor. Boris Johnson has made a public appeal to the Government to provide a spare £15m to shore up the East London Line rail extension programme which is vital to linking the poor and populous south-eastern half of the city with the north, as well as enabling the 2012 Olympics travel program. Johnson has gone public on the £23m owed by London-based embassies for unpaid congestion charge fines that could plug the hole. What he didn't mention was that when upon securing office he scrapped the higher bracket congestion charge for 4x4s, he denied the city an estimated annual revenue of £30m plus. With Notting Hill friends of the Tories running the capitals newspapers nobody has pointed out how factious this is. So, if Labour don't front the cash which Johnson would have had were he not focussed on saving his suburban and West London constituents' pin-money on Chelsea Tractors, he and his friends in the city newspapers blame Labour for the demise of a Labour scheme vital to ending the public transport apartheid which has kept Tory-hostile South-east London poor and marginalised. Neat trick, and it shows that being snobbish about Scousers doesn't make Boris a cuddly maverick – not when his executive decisions go far to help those who already have, and nowhere to help those who don't.

The Tories are in effect letting slip the nice-guy mask and refocusing on their right-wing core vote. So 2009 should see the battle lines between them and Labour drawn along more traditional lines. The state is back, class is back and the Tories are once more appealing to narrow self-concern. Yet, hark! – that liberty bell is ringing from across the water and the methodical, seeming-sane Obama may bring succour. Or may not. But sometimes one has to allow oneself a little luxury in optimism. It is Christmas, after all. ■

