



VIEW FROM THE CHALK FACE

Michaelmas 2021
Week 6 (w/c 11th October)

Perserverando

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A former Prime Minister's famous phrase about education has been used many times to stress the importance of the formative years. However, as this term has given us all the chance to re-set and enjoy the many delights that schooling at Langley brings, it is the almost boundless opportunities that I want to highlight. The extraordinary breadth of activities, hobbies, and wider co-curricular offering has been enjoyed in the sunshine, all built upon a base of values and academic aspiration. Qualifications give choice, but they only mean something if they can be contextualised and utilised properly.

This publication is not meant to be specifically school focused, but hopefully it will prompt thought and debate. This is not the place to recount the benefits of team sport, the fishing hobby, the esports activity or creative arts; opportunity comes in many forms, not least the chance to intellectually reflect on past events and their resonance today. The twenty-year anniversary of 9/11 is such a moment. Those horrific events have shaped much of the geopolitics of the past two decades and yet we still seem no further ahead in regard to tolerance, empathy and understanding as a human culture.

Early in the morning on that fateful day, four aeroplanes were hijacked from East coast airports, the aircraft chosen carefully as they were heading to California and thus loaded with fuel for the transcontinental journey. At 8.45am an American Airlines Boeing 767 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre, hitting around the 80th floor of the 110-floor building. Eighteen minutes later, a second Boeing 767, United Airlines flight 175, hit the 60th floor of the South Tower. As millions watched the events unfolding in New York, American Airlines Flight 77 circled over downtown Washington, D.C., before crashing into the west side of the Pentagon military headquarters at 9:45am. The fourth plane was suspected to be headed towards the US Capitol building but the passengers staged a fight back and managed to crash the plane in rural Pennsylvania. Extraordinary selflessness. About fifteen minutes later, the South Tower collapsed and at 10.30am. the North Tower did the same. A total of 2,996 people were killed in the attacks.

The speed and intense violence of the events is staggering. Those in control had no way of knowing whether these four planes were the beginning, middle or end of the attack, and thus had to make decisions quickly and with more hope than certainty. All planes in US airspace were grounded, so towns such as Gander, Nova Scotia have taken on a mythical status in this narrative. Lives changed for ever as more than 3,000 children suddenly lost a parent.

I was in New York six weeks later; by holiday happenstance rather than anything borne out of morbid curiosity. The view from the top of the Empire State Building was chilling, as the smoke was still rising from Ground Zero. Thousands of



leaflets scattered the downtown area, with loved ones desperately trying to locate family and friends. The underground temperature on the twin towers site was still thousands of degrees Celsius, with tourist boats unable to stop at Ellis Island or elsewhere along the shore. We saw bits of skyscraper lodged in surrounding buildings and the silence of the downtown area only punctured by the noise of the clear up. Security was tight, with ashen faces a familiar sight amongst the emergency services, worried and nervous about the situation, but also grieving for lost friends and colleagues.

Fast forward twenty years and there now sits One World Trade Centre, a memorial and museum to those who were killed in the attacks, the Oculus (a rapid transit hub) and a park. The original site, for so long a symbol of the country and the values that it is was built on, is now reborn, literally phoenix like, and now a place of vibrancy, pride and pilgrimage.

It is not for me to say what the reaction could or should be, but viewing those events through the prism of time is a useful opportunity. I encourage you to share reflections around the dinner table. The subsequent US policy towards Iraq and Afghanistan has set the global tone since then, but with Afghanistan back in Taliban hands, and mistrust abounding throughout the world, what have been the lessons learned from those dark days twenty years ago? Notwithstanding so many steps forward, are we global citizens, celebrating our differences and embracing change? Certain events make us gasp and just stop and those dreadful hours on that beautiful day in the US is one of those.

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