

At peace with our past?

I remember showing a visitor from the recently liberated USSR around Parliament. He remarked that it was a pleasure to see a country "at peace with its past". For he saw in the statues and paintings, the memorabilia and the stories, all the nation's past represented – good and bad, insiders and outcasts, establishment and rebels. They are on display for all to see. We cannot change the facts that they lived, held their own views and made their own impact. In his crumbling superstate the government told you what to think about the past, and threw out the statues and paintings of people and events they disliked.

Few of the figures from our past would have shared our preoccupations or held similar views to our present consensus where it exists. Some will look at the statue of Cromwell and see a tyrant and a butcher. Others will see him as the embodiment of a rebellion to tame the arbitrary power of the monarch and to give the generations to come a say in how they are governed. He is still part of our present as well as our past, as we still react today to both the good and the bad of his legacy.

Some will look at the great merchants and business people of the eighteenth century and see there generous donors of civic improvement at home. They will acknowledge their contribution to the betterment of many in the UK who gained employment and advancement from their enterprise. Others will dwell on those that made money out of the slave trade and rightly condemn that source of wealth.

It is true in a way that the past is a foreign country. Many attitudes and assumptions were different then. It is also true there is considerable continuity. Some of the past is an important part of our being a community. Tradition means enjoying what was best about the past and learning from what success our ancestors had in promoting a better life for many. Just as we celebrate our own landmarks of birthdays and anniversaries, so nationally we celebrate or remember important events in the life of our nation. Our nation above all made great breakthroughs for democracy and freedom at home and abroad.

Living in a great democracy means we all need to show some tolerance to each other and cut some slack to our past relatives who had different views from us. It is best to study them in their full range, and accept we will find things we do not like as well as things that showed they cared about us, the ones who came after. The thinkers of the Enlightenment thought they were "dwarves on the shoulders of giants", who could see further because they could add to the visions of the ancient philosophers and scientists before them. Today too we should accept that we can see further, enjoy greater prosperity and assert superior morality to the past partly thanks to what they achieved and passed on to us.

I have got used in politics to the gross discourtesy and aggressive personal abuse adopted by some on the left. I assume that is because they have such a

bad case. I do not like to see the same style adopted by people who I might otherwise wish to agree with.