

Postcard from the Balkans

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, DEC 17 2009

“The road less travelled” – the American poet Robert Frost’s iconic metaphor has been much on my mind these past months as we have celebrated the 20th Anniversary of the fall of Berlin’s famous Wall; this, and the idea that politics, like people, is a great follower of fashion. Difficult as it is to believe, Fascism was as fashionable in the 1930s, as African liberation was three decades later — and as fashionable as over throwing doctoral regimes was twenty years ago.

When the Cold War ended three multi-ethnic, multi-racial and federally-inclined states faced an uncertain future. They were the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and South Africa. History records that the first two broke apart: the latter, of course, didn’t.

The years since have not been easy years for these countries, but my impression after a recent visit to the Balkans was that that the road South Africa travelled “has made all the difference” – to complete Frost’s famous image.

Sitting in the conference room of the Montenegrin Academic of Science, the deep wounds of Yugoslavia’s break-up continuously returned to the conversation. Behind the pleasantries exchanged between the recently-minted citizens of ‘new states’, it was difficult not to detect a certain tension between these cousins who were once, of course, citizens of Yugoslavia.

The proceedings were opened by the country’s tall and handsome Prime Minister. Confident and assertive; he promised that Montenegro would support the free exchange of ideas and help to build a bright future for the country’s 700 000-odd citizens. Not many people, to be sure.

But, today, Montenegro is a fully independent country in one of the most turbulent corners of the world.

As various speakers at the conference spoke about the importance of “Values in the 21st Century” – the topic of the conference – I wonder which values could have been better served in South Africa if the country had broken apart. Would the country have been a better place if it had been broken into little bits? Would corruption have been controlled? Would our schools have been better?

Today, it is easy to forget how close South Africa was to both war and break up, twenty years ago.

In the build up to the 1994 “Freedom” Election, Gatsha Buthelezi – then, as now, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party – held out for a better deal. Long been backed by conservatives in the West, Buthelezi held out for a better deal in the name of “free markets” and, yes, “democracy”. His brinkmanship followed upon months of gruesome conflict in the province the called Natal which, periodically, spilled into the Witwatersrand, South Africa’s industrial and financial hub to which many of his supporters had migrated.

Into this – and often initiating it – was the violence of a third force which, most now believe, was encouraged by remnants and rogue elements of the dying apartheid state. This was, of course, living proof of another famous line, Antonio Gramsci’s, “the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”.

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Next year, 2010, is the centenary of the founding of South Africa by an Act of Union. It drew four political entities together under a constitution which, as history also shows, excluded the majority of the country's citizens.

The greater part of the country's history – political and other – has been the struggle to draw the majority into the mainstream of South African life. It was not an easy journey but its ending has delivered a relatively peaceful transition, delivered an state undivided. For all the trauma and pain, it appears to be a story marked by compromise, constitutionalism and...yes, by compassion, but remains a story as yet incomplete.

In the exquisite beauty of Balkans, I also found a story incomplete, but I found few of the qualities which seem to have marked South Africa's twenty-year journey. This was so, even in the buoyant night life of Potgorica, the shining capital of Montenegro, the one corner of Yugoslavia that was almost untouched by the violence which tore the country apart.

At coffee shop in the ancient Adriatic port city of Kotor, once a city state, I glanced a three youngish men at the next table. One's face was scarred beyond description; another had lost all the fingers of his left hand. Might this trio be an image of the road less travelled – an image for states in times of great change – times like those that have occurred these twenty years past?

If they were, then South Africa was like the third man in the party — completely intact – no obvious sign of injury.

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