

Prime Minister

John Stewart



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I have known gentlemen who have felt that in becoming members of Parliament they had achieved an object for themselves instead of thinking that they had put themselves in a way of achieving something for others. A member of Parliament should feel himself to be the servant of his country, – and like every other servant, he should serve. If this be distasteful to a man he need not go into Parliament. If the harness gall him he need not wear it. But if he takes the trappings, then he should draw the coach. You are there as the guardian of your fellow-countrymen, – that they may be safe, that they may be prosperous, that they may be well governed and lightly burdened, – above all that they may be free. If you cannot feel this to be your duty, you should not be there at all.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

The Duke's Children, p.99, Penguin Books
(The Duke's advice to his heir)

Prologue

*The Rt Hon Henry Blackstone M.P.,
House of Commons,
London SW1A 0AA*

Dear Mr Blackstone,

The current crisis is long past the stage when it can be blamed on gloomy journalists. Experts we deem wise, apparently stand helpless; meanwhile the debt mountain creeps yet higher.

All this you know and like me you must be deeply worried, for this peril isn't going to disappear tomorrow. Now, if I say there is a way, please don't dismiss my words too readily. I'm not a crank. At least, my friends assure me that's the case!

We need to ease the burden of taxation. I've heard you say as much. Yet the state is desperate for funds, especially at this time of welfare crisis. Can this be resolved? Not instantly, but we could begin to shift the tax impost from earnings and enterprise to community value. That is, the value that accrues to site location by the collective presence of the community. Indeed, the city skyline is a visual image of this value. So what, I hear you say, but you must agree that any reduction in income tax would be more than welcome at this time

I can send you further information should you want, but better by far would be a meeting. This, I know, is a huge presumption on my part, but I wouldn't be proposing it if I didn't think the matter was important, if not vital.

I can only hope that you can find the time.

Yours sincerely

Alexander Collingwood

Chapter One

Henry Blackstone had just been elected Leader of the Opposition at the age of thirty-six. This was unusual, but Blackstone *was* unusual. He was a handsome man, though not over-smooth, and his stature seemed much larger than his actual size. Many remarked on this, being suddenly made aware of his considerable presence. As well as reading philosophy, politics and economics at university, his understanding of the Greco-Roman world was comprehensive. His father had planted much of this, as the biographies of great men had been a teenage diet. Blackstone's world never had been small.

Blackstone didn't have much time for what was called 'the party line.' He had joined the Conservatives for the simple reason that it was his father's preference. Indeed, one of the politicians that he much admired was Philip Snowden, the inter-war years' Labour Chancellor. Tribal politics was not Henry Blackstone's practice.

The usual Monday morning heap of newsprint lay before him, and what a dismal litany. Mounting bankruptcies, soaring unemployment, house repossessions at depressing levels, strikes and threats of further strikes, the all-too-present fear of violence on the streets, and, of course, financial chaos in the city, with banks shored up here, and companies rescued there – laudable perhaps, but where was the borrowing going to end? And the Pound, well, it was heading for the floor, if not beneath the floorboards. Poor old Bill Jones, the PM, was being savaged daily, but what could he do, indeed, what could the so-called Leader of the Opposition do? The answer, precious little, other than some tinkering here and there, but that was it. Of course, they had their grand designs, but to Blackstone's mind this was mostly window dressing. It would take a brave politician to tell the people that they had no answers. To Henry Blackstone, the truth was simple; they were caught amidst a storm, and all that he or anyone could do was wait until it ended.

Blackstone pushed the papers to the side. The research people

would be highlighting the important passages in due time. Now it was the pile of letters. Phone permitting, Blackstone did his best to scan as many as he could before his first appointment. At the very least, all would have to be acknowledged. Even if the letter were nutty, neglecting such basic civility was unwise.

After a period his secretary entered with a welcome cup of coffee. He sat back. The last letter he'd opened was lying on the desk before him. Casually he read it at a distance as he sipped his coffee. Alexander Collingwood, an interesting name, he mused. Why had he thought that? He had no idea. It had simply attracted him. He re-read the letter. 'Another one putting the world to right,' he muttered. Yet, the letter had been written with a certain diffidence. Not the usual self-assertive know-all. Alexander Collingwood, yes, it was distinctive – funny how the mind was drawn to some particular sounds. Should he see him? It was a question he was asking almost hourly as the experts clamoured for his ear, all with their 'must-dos' to halt the current crisis. Crisis! It was a tsunami! Nothing was sacred, and respected trading names were swept aside without a sliver of respect. He was Leader of the Opposition, but what could he oppose? The Government was in freefall and it didn't seem the thing to do to stick the knife in when the PM and his troupe were rushing for the cliff.

He took another sip of coffee and his gaze reverted to the Collingwood letter. Yes, there was something different; it was just a feeling, but he had no inkling what it was. Maybe he should ask around. Who was this guy Collingwood? What made him tick and think that *he* had something significant to offer? An arrogant nutter, determined he was specially sent to save the world! No, dammit, go for it, another thought reacted. Who knows what it might reveal.

He turned to his secretary and handed her the letter.

'Tell him I'll meet him in the lobby by the Gladstone statue – tomorrow or Wednesday at ten-thirty.'

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Collingwood could hardly believe it. He'd thought the letter was a waste of time, a last desperate, but futile shot. Yet it had worked. The gods were on his side. This was only the first hurdle, though; there were many more to come.

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The central lobby wasn't crowded. The sounds were subdued, yet there was a note of busyness as people went about their business. Blackstone scanned the scene and there he was, tall, trim and grey-haired, a figure naturally exuding dignity. Blackstone knew that he had found his man.

'Good morning, Mr Collingwood,' he said, extending his hand

'Good morning, Sir.'

Blackstone hesitated.

'We'll not have coffee here,' he said almost impatiently. 'Let's go outside.'

'As you wish, Sir.'

Blackstone knew he was acting strangely. There was even a touch of alarm. Even so, something told him he was right. Where would they go, he wondered, as they walked down the steps to the St Stephen's entrance? He hailed a taxi.

'The Garrick Club,' he told the cabbie as if he'd long before decided.

'An old friend took me to the Garrick – oh, it must be twenty years ago. This is quite a treat, Mr Blackstone,' Collingwood began as they settled in the cab.

'It's a pity but I rarely get the chance to use the place.' He looked at Collingwood knowingly. 'This job I've got keeps me fairly busy! What's your profession, Mr Collingwood?'

'A small family publishing house: we have a few fairly successful authors on our books, so we manage. My daughter has now joined me, so that's a great help, but as you probably guess, publishing isn't easy.'

'I can imagine. It's good you have your daughter helping.'

'Yes, she's a blessing. She's twenty-five, and very good with publicity. That leaves me free to select the next manuscript from amongst the pile.' He laughed. 'The one, we hope, to make our fortune!'

The conversation continued on a light note, but not a word was said about the content of the letter. That would happen when they sat down with their coffee.

'That was quick,' Blackstone remarked when the taxi drew up at the entrance. As they got out, a cold wind funnelling down the street brought tears to their eyes.

Inside the heat was welcome.

'There's a chill wind out there,' Blackstone acknowledged.

'Yes, you wouldn't think it was mid-April.'

Collingwood was taken to the morning room, where they selected two comfortable leather chairs. Unsurprisingly, there was a portrait of Garrick above the mantelpiece; in fact, the walls were lined with portraits.

‘This is delightful,’ Collingwood reacted.

‘Yes, it invites contentment. That was Lord Byron’s sofa.’ Blackstone pointed.

‘It is a sofa, yes, yet, when you say it was Lord Byron’s, history lends its magic.’

Once they had settled with their coffee there was a pause, and Collingwood knew the moment had arrived. So much could depend on the next few minutes. The major question was: Would Henry Blackstone be receptive?

‘Mr Collingwood, your letter talked about easing the tax burden, but you also suggested shifting the tax to what you called location value. What exactly are you proposing?’

‘At the moment tax is collected from private and corporate earnings or, if you like, enterprise and also trade, of course. But tax discourages, and few if any sing a hymn of joy when they receive their tax assessment. Indeed, it goes without saying that reducing taxes would be very welcome, especially now. The state, however, is hungry for revenue. Present welfare needs are mushrooming, not to mention the debt burden. So how can we ease or reduce taxation? It seems impossible.’

‘It certainly does,’ Blackstone echoed. ‘Go on, Mr Collingwood.’

‘There is a fund that rises naturally in communities. Its value reflects the advantage of location. In the high street, for instance, the location of a shop can reap a huge advantage. Then compare the high street to the side-street corner-shop. Now think of the City of London and the location value there – astronomic! The question is: Who creates location value?’

‘I think I know what you’re saying, but continue.’

‘No one could conclude that the location value of, say a Manhattan or City property, was due to the efforts of a single individual or, indeed a corporation. Clearly the whole community pushes up the value. In the old wild-west town of the movies the saloon and the general store were in the high street, not the middle of the scrub! In other words location is the draw. Why build in the middle of the desert?’

‘So if the community creates the value, to whom does it belong? There can only be one reasonable answer – the community! In

fact, the community creates a natural fund and is therefore self-financing. This is the shift I would propose.'

Collingwood held his peace, and Blackstone sat for some time completely silent.

'I've heard people make fun of this idea, but I've never heard it expounded,' Blackstone said quietly. 'This is a vote killer. Every patch of suburban green will be up in arms, and the property boys, well, they'd go into orbit. It seems self-evident, but, at the same time, a bit too good to be true. For instance, if it's such a good idea, why have all the economic gurus ignored it? To put it bluntly, why should you see the answer when all the experts down the ages seem to have ignored it. I'll have to think about this. It seems right. It doesn't sound like just another theory, another think-tank bubble,' Blackstone continued. 'But, even if we did take it up; how in God's name could we sell it – especially to the party? Mr Collingwood, you'll have to be patient. I need time to digest this, and by the way, I'm Henry!'

'And they call me Alexander.'

'That's that treaty signed! You know, I feel as though I've caught a glimpse of something, but is it a nightmare or enlightenment? There's more to come, I know.'

Collingwood nodded.

'The trouble is I've got another appointment. Could we have dinner tomorrow evening?'

Collingwood hesitated: it was barely noticeable.

'Yes, I can do that...'

'You hesitated, Alexander, is there a problem?'

'I promised to treat my daughter to dinner – a belated birthday celebration.'

'Bring your daughter along.'

Collingwood's face lit up.

Blackstone noted Collingwood's pleasure, but made no comment. Collingwood, though, felt that something needed to be said.

'My daughter Anna and I are close. I know that she'll be thrilled.'

'Alexander, I will have the pleasure of meeting her tomorrow evening. But now, I must be going; otherwise I'll be in my secretary's bad books! She, by the way, will let you know about tomorrow evening's venue.'

They both stood up.

“Thanks for seeing me and thanks for the Garrick. I find these old clubs reassuring!” Collingwood said quietly.

“Father and Grandfather were members; it’s a kind of family thing. When I was young, Father and I used to come here quite a lot. You get attached.” He paused. “Things are bad, Alexander. All these gleaming towers we see, just built: acres of office space, and not a soul inside other than security. And they’re still building them! The skyline’s crowded with tall cranes. How long before the banks pull out the plug? Alexander, I need to know more, much more!”