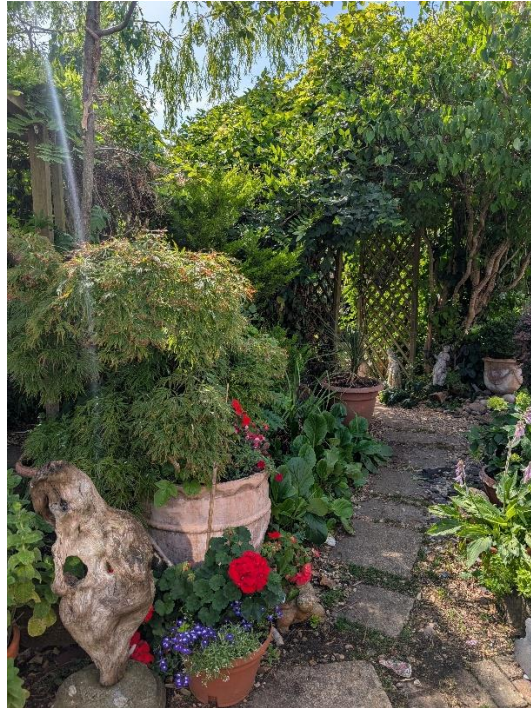


# For Those Who Remain

## — farewell to colleagues and comrades

*Text of a speech made in Brent on 19 December 1990*



Question, why do people sometimes leave Brent? Answer, so that farewell occasions may take place at which it is a custom to make embarrassing speeches for the benefit, it is hoped, of those who remain.

Traditionally, there are only three topics which are intrinsically and universally embarrassing: politics, eroticism, metaphysics.

These three, then, are the topics of this farewell speech. They correspond to three farewell wishes which I shall make, for those who remain.

But before we get on to the embarrassing bits, let's touch on something wholly unembarrassing: I've been sacked.

In at least one respect, being sacked is to be recommended: it's very beneficial for curing you of paranoia. You no longer believe they're out to get you.

Now, you know that they are.

What is the opposite of paranoia? The belief that actually they're not out to get you, but that all these bad things that keep happening to you are simply your own silly damn fault, or one damn cock-up or catastrophe after another?

Or the belief that events, coincidences and synchronicities do have a meaning but that their meaning is benign, and dependent on your own pre-existing worldview?

Or — but it is premature, just here and just now, to speculate thus. Embarrassing references to metaphysics and spirituality belong to the end of this speech, not near the start.

It has been an amazing time here these last five years, hasn't it? We have lived and worked together through a significant period of British social history. There have been real successes and achievements here in the building and defence of equality. But also, in direct consequence, there has been an extraordinary campaign of disinformation and destabilising against us.

Our troubles and tensions are certainly not over yet, for equality's opponents are now active and powerful within Brent as well as outside.

We all of us have our own vivid memories of the fights and furies of the last few years. One of my own is from a national conference which I happened to attend in late 1986. I found myself making conversation with one other person. He was a total stranger, though did look vaguely familiar. He asked where I was from, and I said Brent, and he trembled a bit, either in sympathy or alarm, I couldn't tell which, and said 'Ah'.

Oh, I said, don't believe a word of what you read about Brent in the press. All reporters and journalists, you know, are dishonest and incompetent hacks, they're cowardly lackeys of organised fascism, racism and capitalism. They haven't the slightest understanding of the nature of truth or integrity.

Well, I said words to that effect. After all, don't we all at such times?

'I think,' said my companion. 'I ought to introduce myself.' He gave his name. 'I'm the editor of the *Times Educational Supplement*.'

Three embarrassing topics, three farewell wishes.

First, politics. Question, what is the difference between rottweilers and people who love Brent?

Answer, well let's leave the answer to that till later. First, one or two reflections about this metaphor of rottweilers, much used nowadays to refer to people we don't like.

The metaphor is used in both international and national affairs, and also in the internal politics of organisations and institutions, including Brent.

In all contexts, it refers to macho and aggressive chucking around of weight and power; to thumping first and, if at all, thinking afterwards; to impatient unconcern for details, distinction, artistry, probing and experiment, dreams and fancy; and to cynical and careless attitudes to rule of law, proper procedure, due process, precious conventions and canons of courtesy, established customs of rational debate, deliberation and decision-making.

Both directly and indirectly, the rottweiler tendency constitutes an assault on equality and justice.

We are correct to name our opponents with a metaphor which refers to them as brutal, brutish, mindless, careless. But it is not, perhaps, helpful to choose a term which permits us to be frightened of them, and which dehumanises them.

When a politician in the 1940s searched for a term to describe his opponents he settled famously for 'vermin'. He was in effect proposing the title, or anyway the

theme, for a book to be written about macro and micro politics in Britain in the early 1990s, '*Not Rotts but Rats*'.

My first farewell wish to you, then, is determination: determination to resist the rottweilers and to deal with the vermin.

The second embarrassing topic is eroticism. In a poem entitled *Hunger*, Adrienne Rich refers to her political yearnings ('I, alive to want more than life, want it for others starving and unborn.')

She refers also to love:

*We shrink from touching  
our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves  
and each other, we're scared shitless  
of what it could be to take and use our love,  
hose it on a city, on a world,  
to wield and guide its spray, destroying  
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses.*

Rich's poem was dedicated to her friend Audre Lorde, who had defined eroticism as the bridge between the political and the spiritual, or between politics and metaphysics. To be erotic is to delight in, to quote e.e.cummings, 'everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes.'

It is daily for the sake of Eros in this sense, and daily with the power of Eros, that we dare to confront and withstand the rottweilers, the brutes who have weight and power.

The notion that delight is the bridge between the political and the spiritual is beautifully expressed at one stage in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, set in slavery times in the United States. One of the novel's main characters, Baby Suggs, preaches a sermon to her comrades:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

Here, she said. In this place, we flesh. Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it, Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes, they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them and kiss. Touch others with them.

My second farewell wish for you, then, is delight.

Third, metaphysics and spirituality. Imagery of rats and vermin leads us inevitably now to *La Peste* by Albert Camus. Rats, in *La Peste*, are carriers of the bubonic plague, and the plague is a symbol not only of savage political inequality

and injustice, and not only of careless administration and bureaucracy, but of something that is inside each of us — our capacity to collude with oppression, our capacity to be careless, inattentive, sightless.

To fight against the plague, it follows, is to fight against forces both outside and inside the individual self. It is to confront, amongst other foes, the rottweiler within.

Rieux and Tarrou, the novel's two main characters, do not believe in a god or in conventional religion. But they do have a kind of spiritual strength, a quality which enables them to face and to outface the enemies of equality and justice in the world outside them, and to dare down, inside their own spirit, voices and pressures of apathy, paranoia and despair. Their struggle, they say, is *une interminable défaite*, an unending defeat. But they have the daring to assert that '*ce n'est pas une raison de cesser de lutter*', that's not a reason to stop fighting.

My third farewell wish for you, then, is daring.

Question, what is the difference between rottweilers and people who love Brent?

Answer, determination, delight and daring.

Question, why do people sometimes leave Brent?

Answer, so that farewell occasions may take place at which it is a custom to make embarrassing speeches for the benefit, it is hoped, of those who remain.



## Notes

When delivered this speech referred to many individuals in Brent, including inspectors and secretarial and support staff, and members of the borough's development programme for race equality (DPRE).

Information about the latter is at <https://www.patience-and-passion.org/pdfs/They%20struggled%20here%20revised%204%20September.pdf>