

Kate Smith Blogs from Boston



The Past as Prologue

by Kate Smith

In one of the many clips looping at the JFK Library and Museum, one which sticks out is JFK quoting Churchill: “If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.” When I heard it, I thought of all the arguments and counter-arguments on independence that play out.

Being away from home and at a distance lends a fresh perspective. Of course Kennedy was addressing an America going through great social and political change; the end of segregation, the Cold War and poverty alleviation. Yet the idea holds true for any time of change.

Boston itself is undergoing great change. Many families, particularly in South Boston, are forced out of their communities by gentrification. The traditional three-decker house which had grandparents, parents and children living on each level of the house is becoming a thing of the past as the new young affluent Bostonians buy them up. This prices the property out of reach of many. “The city is becoming a young persons’s city but, on the flipside, at least the food is much better now” is a common refrain with a nod that, as these areas change, they bring in new types of stores, jobs and new ways of living.

The justification for change, for creating one type of future, cannot only be the past. In Scotland we need to accurately and honestly appraise the present and start making plans from where we are now. Similarly, the past is a poor rationale for not changing: ‘This is how things have always been so let’s keep the status quo’. The cultural, political and social realities of Scotland, the U.K. and Europe are changing

rapidly. Whichever way the referendum vote swings, perhaps the goal should be to square the past and present but also, most importantly, to reckon the economic challenges which lie ahead in an inclusive and non-insular way. There are pressing, pressing economic issues. Jobs and affordable housing for Scotland's young adults who, unlike the Bostonian yuppies, are 'generation rent'. An end to the financial exploitation such as price-fixing by finance, food and fuel companies which forces hard-working Scots into the red every month. Real opportunities for success for our children.

Like Kennedy-era America, the past is a useful guide but no proactive mechanism to address the future. Business incubation, regulation for the corporate powers who rack-rent Scotland and judicious social policy innovation are all needed to create the future that Scotland deserves. Time to let the Battle of Bannockburn settle into the past and create a future in which Scots can prosper.

As Kennedy said: "Things do not happen. Things are made to happen."

Kate Smith is Nieman Foundation Fellow 2013 at Harvard University, Boston. She is Programme Leader for the BA Journalism in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University. Prior to joining the University Kate worked at Stirling and Sheffield Hallam Universities and was a freelance journalist and columnist writing regularly for The Scotsman, Scotland on Sunday, the Sunday Herald, the Herald, The Guardian and a wide range of magazines. Before that Kate ran her own international magazine publishing company with offices in Edinburgh and Moscow. Kate was nominated for a British Press award in 2008 for an article on the 2008 Global Food Crisis.