

Slouching toward Bethlehem: A Handy Collaborator's Guide *

None of us likes change. Not at least when it comes to the ways in which we organize our daily lives. And yet there are times when we must shake off our normal lethargy and rise to the challenges that define us. Today, Victory in Europe Day. --or as it is known here in Paris, Fete de la Victoire --is the kind of day that gets one to thinking about how we deal, or not, with the big challenges that will not wait. Let's have a look.

Paris, 8 May 1942

A brilliant Spring day. The French Way of Life is in full swing.

The Germans are here of course, but our government has control of the situation under the conventions of the German Occupation since the public address of Maréchal Pétain on 30 October 1940.

The city is safer than ever, the police are doing their job, the garbage is collected, the opera is alive and all the shops are open for business. For most of us these are tranquil years: better in many ways in fact than the tumultuous years of the thirties with all those strikes, economic problems, and real social stress..



We have adjusted to our new conditions with our German guests: in fact they are for the most part pretty much as they have always been. Each day is one more day to be lived: we have to get up in the morning, make breakfast, prepare the children for school, make our way to work, find food, come home and when we have a moment take a walk with our families in the lively streets of this lively city. It's good to be alive and to be with our families in peace.

It's all a matter of doing what you have to do to live a normal life. To some extent it may look like "collaboration" with the occupying powers, perhaps in a certain sense but not really. Getting along actually, I would call it.

There have been rumors that this peaceful situation may not last forever and that changes may be in store, including a rumor that the Jews are going to have to wear yellow stars at some point. But thus far, nothing definitive on this. It is hard to believe that such a thing could happen in France.

Anyway what could I do? I have a family to feed and I want to keep my job and stay out of trouble. I am a law-abiding citizen and intend to stay that way.

Life goes on.

Above photo taken by André Zucca in 1942 for Signal, a Nazi propaganda magazine. A portfolio of Zucca's photos "Paris during the Occupation" opened at the Paris Historical Library in mid-March 2008, largely without comment.

Three short weeks later a government edict required that all Jews must wear a yellow star in public. The photo to your right depicts the first round up by the French police of more than twelve thousand children, women and men in Paris at the infamous Raffle du Vel' d'Hiv. The date was 16 July 1942.

Who would have ever thought that such a thing could happen, in Paris?



Your city, 8 May 2008

A brilliant Spring day and in towns, cities and the countryside across the nation the American Way of Life is in full swing.

This is not to say that there are not a few clouds on the horizon. And if oil has for the first time just passed the \$120/barrel mark, the real news that shapes our common future is the major menace of this new century.

Our planet is quite literally falling apart – “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” as the poet W. B. Yeats told us long ago-- and we have in stony sleep brought ourselves right to the rim of ecological disaster. Of course it's pretty uncomfortable too to be paying five times more for a gallon of gas than we were just a few years back, and our heating and air-conditioning bills are out of control. But this situation can't last. Can it?

Anyway, now that we have got that one out of the way, let's clear our minds. Not all the news is bad. The vacations are about to kick in and we are already thinking about where to go this year. It will be good to get away from it all. Our plan as always is to pile the kids into our SUV and head for some national parks. They are so peaceful, a great lesson in nature for the kids, and I understand anyway that the vegetation is adjusting well to the changes in temperature and seasons. It's especially good for the flora and wild life in the northern states and Canada. Global warming is not without its advantages.

I hear that in rural areas across the country, there are lots of people who just don't know what to do to deal with this four-dollar gas when everything you need is so far away and your job depends on your car. But there has to be someone in Washington who has been thinking about this for some time and is ready with a backup plan. Isn't there?

And I don't appreciate it at all when you call me a “collaborator”. I know what that word means. There is a lot of hysteria about all of this latest oil crunch and global warming stuff ,and ,as far as I am concerned, the only way to deal with this is to wait and see.

Anyway, what can I do about it?

Life goes on.



A bit of Old Mobility in Los Angeles

The above photo shows traffic at full tilt in Los Angeles. You can make out the towers of Century City in the background

The photo to your right appeared in an article in the New York Times in 2 Feb. 2007 announcing the IPCC Climate Change 2007 report. It shows polar bears trapped on floating ice caps. (Any resemblance or relationship between these two photos is, of course, strictly coincidental.)

Who would have ever thought that such a thing could happen on this planet?



Slouching toward Bethlehem ¹

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the second coming is at hand.
The second coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

- *The Second Coming*, by William Butler Yeats

* By Eric Britton, an American living and working in Paris. Managing Director of EcoPlan International, Founder of The Commons: Open Society Sustainability Initiative, and of the **New Mobility Agenda**.

Britton claims that when it comes to the climate and the \$100++ oil challenges, we really do have choices. One of these is to explore more efficient and fairer ways of getting around in our cities. And as you will see if you check in, the key is not to wait for government to save us all (don't worry, that's not about to happen), but to take individual action. For yourself. For your family. And for the planet.

How to start? Well, one way is to check out the **New Mobility Agenda** for ideas and become part of the solution. You will see there are many options. Check out your **carbon footprint** and see how you can do a lot better. Why not get a public transit pass and use it from time to time? Try to make your way to work at least one day every week leaving your car in the garage. Join your local **carshare operation** and give it a whirl. Encourage your city to look into a **free public bicycle program**. Push transport innovation and the environment to the top of the political platform for your City. Refuse to vote for mayors and local officials who are not regular users of the public transport system and bikes for their work trip. Those are changes you can make and make fast. And they will, one after the other, add up to make a very big difference.

Don't be a collaborator this time around. Courage!

¹ Written by Yeats in 1919 in the aftermath of the terrible First World War