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A small country's journey from chains to freedom

Britain is a confident country. We know who we are; we have the history to prove it. This, however, is the story of a small country that's struggled to understand its history and prevent the past from disfiguring the present.

It was 1988 when I first visited Tallinn – the capital of Estonia. There were no direct flights, only three hotels that took Western visitors and all trade was conducted in roubles or hard currency.

Tallinn back then was a silent city; no cafés, no pubs or restaurants, no tourists. The atmosphere was fearful and at the same time feverish. No one trusted their neighbour; nothing happened without party membership. A backhander to an official was the best way to get things done.

We arrived by boat from Helsinki to visit relatives we'd never met before. Just another family divided after World War Two by what was casually called the Iron Curtain.

The next time I went to Estonia was in 1994. The Berlin Wall was down; the Baltic States had declared independence and reverted to their pre-war currencies.

My cousins were running a company selling computers and they owned a Volvo.

My strongest memory of that visit was the smell of fresh paint and the sound of sawing and hammering drifting out of doorways.

Everyone was obliterating the past. They were building hotels and refurbishing their homes.

They were also opening up KGB files and finding out what had happened to relatives deported and lost in Stalin's purges decades earlier.

My own grandfather, sent to Siberia in 1941, was eliminated from the history books until after independence. Now a statue of him has been put up in the town where he served as mayor for 20 years.

As far as we know he died in a Siberian labour camp. His crime? He was a social democrat and on



Picture: PA

HOW TIMES CHANGE: Tallinn, Estonia, is a very different place today compared to two decades ago, when it was a silent city with no cafés, bars or restaurants.

opponent of communism.

Last week, I was in Estonia again for the 70th birthday of one of my relatives. Nowadays there's an Easyjet flight several times a week and a Marks and Spencer's in downtown Tallinn. Estonian athletes were all over the TV celebrating their Olympic medals and we watched the

Estonian football team getting a solid thrashing from Turkey – both events would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago when the only flag was the Soviet one.

In two decades, while the UK moved sedately from Mrs Thatcher to Mr Cameron, Estonia has been forced to transform itself.

HAVE YOUR SAY

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PETER TRUDGILL



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This summer, my wife and I spent the 4th of July in the USA, celebrating American independence with her family (well, I wasn't actually celebrating, of course). As usual, I had a series of pleasant experiences over there which I never have here. In America I always get complimented on the way I speak.

"I just love your accent!" shop assistants exclaim. "You sound so authoritative when you speak," say academic colleagues. "That's a beautiful voice you have," students tell me. This is, sadly, not something which happens very much to those of us with a Norfolk accent in this country. On the contrary, there are people here who find our accent so unpleasant that they write to the EDP asserting that it's ugly and makes us sound stupid.

Why do we get these totally different reactions on the two sides of the Atlantic? Beauty is in the eye the beholder. So is ugliness. And this is particularly true of accents – although here it's the ear that's involved, of course! Linguists have carried out research into American, Canadian, and Irish listeners' reactions to English accents which shows this very clearly.

If people in this country find a Birmingham accent "ugly", or a Highland Scottish accent "attractive", these are not aesthetic judgements about speech sounds as such. A Cockney saying "paint" ('ugly') sounds just like a toff saying "pint" ('nice'). British people are responding to the associations accents have.

If you take away the knowledge about where an accent is from, you also take away the associations, and you don't get the same reactions. Can you imagine finding different dialects of Vietnamese especially ugly or beautiful? We don't react like that to Vietnamese because we have no idea what we're listening to. All we are hearing is sounds. That's the position Americans are in when they listen to British accents.

Mostly Americans just identify our accents as "British" – and they have favourable reactions to all of them. It's those associations again. For Americans, Britain is a beautiful country, with Her Majesty the Queen, Shakespeare, and red double-decker buses. It's a place to go on vacation. They have no awareness of the significance of different social accents, and can't tell rural from urban.

So the people who react most negatively to British accents are the British themselves.

If some British people harbour negative feelings about the Norfolk accent, that's because in some important sense they feel negative about us. We are right to be offended by this. But it's their problem, and we shouldn't let it be ours. Those of us who have a Norfolk accent should feel good about using it in all situations, everywhere we go – not just in the USA.

■ Prof Peter Trudgill is president of Friends of Norfolk Dialect.

Surely the proper answer is to build up Stansted?

EFFICIENT: Stansted Airport, right, has under-capacity, so why is the argument still raging about a third runway at Heathrow?



KLM from Norwich Airport has suddenly become unspeakably expensive. For this trip the cost couldn't really be weighed against the convenience. So we flew from Stansted. It's a cattle market of a place but relatively efficient.

And Stansted still has under-capacity. Which seems odd considering the argument raging on about a third runway at Heathrow. In fact, London is already

served by six airports and now Boris is campaigning for a seventh one out in the Thames estuary.

Billions of pounds, lots of planning issues and it means closing Heathrow. Likely to happen? I think not.

The proper answer is surely to build up Stansted. Because in five years' time Crossrail will be finished linking Heathrow with Liverpool Street. Estimates suggest that an

extension of the line out to Stansted would take less time and cost a fraction of a whole new airport in the Thames estuary.

Passengers could shuttle between Heathrow and Stansted in about 40 minutes.

But, in defiance of any logic, the government seems to be favouring an expansion of Heathrow.

Expect planning blight and years of argument!