

School days and other delights
Speech made by Chris Steytler at the Big60 Celebration dinner
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It is great to be back at my old school, although it is a bit of an unreal experience. It is hard to recognise people, and to be recognised by people, that you last saw when you, and they, were still at primary school. It is amazing, and a bit disturbing, how much some people remember. In case any of you feel the need to tell my wife anything about my childhood, I have reminded her of what one of Oscar Wilde's characters said in 'The Importance of Being Earnest': 'Memory is the diary that chronicles things that never have happened and couldn't possibly have happened'. Wilde also said that people with good memories seldom remember anything worth remembering.

Despite this, I thought that I would share with you a few of my recollections of my school days. To bring that period to life, for those of you who are old enough, and even for those who are not, I thought that I would remind you of events that were taking place in the world at the time.

I had just turned 5 when I started school at Somerset House in 1955. I was around 12 years old when I finished there, I think, in 1962. It was a different world in lots of ways. You may remember a few things that happened in that year. On 20 January, some seven days after my fifth birthday, the World Health Organisation had an outbreak of insight (not often since repeated) and reported that atomic waste could be a serious health risk. One month later, Sophiatown was designated a white residential area. In April 1955, Albert Einstein died. Three months after that, Disneyland opened. Then, in September 1955, James Dean was killed in a car crash. All of these things attracted a bit of attention in Somerset West. But the biggest news story of the year in our small, but determinedly Eurocentric village, was that Princess Margaret decided not to marry Group Captain Peter Townsend.

On more important matters, 1955 was the year that I first met our nominal school principal, Dr Haydock, who, so far as I can remember, was a quiet and pleasant man who wandered around the school grounds with a constantly bemused expression on his face. My mother told me why. One day, when she was at the school grounds to collect me, my brother Michael and my sister Vivienne, he took her aside and invited her to stand in the playground for a while and watch the children at play. After a couple of minutes of silence, he turned to her and said, 'They are savages, you know'. When I look back on things, I think he was right. Life in the playground was one long episode of pushing, shoving and yelling. Nothing could tame us, not even the tranquil beauty of our surroundings.

Well, almost nothing could tame us. There was one person who was more than a match for the savages. This was the real principal, Mrs Haydock. She was a formidable woman. She struck terror into my heart from the first moment I met her. She had a descriptive turn of phrase, eyes like a hawk, a nose for any kind of trouble, a swinging right arm and a voice that could freeze water. Her image is burnt into my brain.

She had two children, Barbara and Ralph. Barbara was also a formidable woman, but in a different way. She ran the boarding house with a minimum of fuss but with super efficiency. Ralph would come and go, playing different roles at the school. I was never too sure just what he did there. He was a bit like the parrot in the pet-shop. A man walked into the pet-shop and said that he wanted to buy a parrot. The owner pointed out two of them. He said that the first one cost R 30,000 and the second R 60,000. The startled customer asked why they were so expensive. Well, the owner said, the first one can hum the whole of Beethoven's fifth and the second one can sing everything that Verdi ever wrote. But if you don't want either of them, he said, I have another one out the back that you can have for R 100,000. 'My goodness', said the customer, 'What does he do?'. 'I don't know', said the owner, 'but the other two call him Maestro'.

I don't otherwise have much of a recollection of that year, or of 1956. But the world was beginning to change. Ten days after my sixth birthday, the importation and export of heroin was banned in London. Around the same time, Rosa Parks refused to move from the whites only section of a city bus in Alabama. In September that year, Elvis Presley, a 21-year-old millionaire, performed on the Ed Sullivan show. He was watched by 82% of a potential audience of 54 million people. The British Health Minister lagged a bit behind the rest of the world that year. He refused a campaign against smoking, saying he was not convinced it does harm.

What I can remember about 1956, was learning to swim in what was rather grandly referred to as the school pool. It was more of a large circular dam with whitewashed surrounds that set off the dark murky waters of the pool itself. If you dived into the pool and hit your head on the bottom of the shallow end, which was about 2 foot 6 inches deep, no-one would ever know. The reason why I remember learning to swim is because of the novel approach that was taken to the necessary instruction. We were thrown in a metre or two from the edge and told to do the best we could to make it back to safety. If you made it, you were thrown in a little farther, and so on, until it was adjudged that you could make it back from the centre of the pool. I still have nightmares about that pool.

I have three abiding memories from 1957. The first is Mrs Van Rijswyk's pet butcherbird, if that is what it was. Every day, she used to bring it, in a cage, with her to the classroom. This continued until its untimely death when, I think, her cat eventually got it. The second was when Mrs Van Rijswyk broke her leg while stamping her foot so as to defeat one of the cat's attempts at getting the bird. The third is being taken out to observe the night sky, so as to see the twinkling light of Sputnik I, the first man-made satellite to be launched into space and the inauguration, by Russia, of the space-age.

In 1958 I became interested, for the first time, in music. It was an exciting time for music in the rest of the world. A newspaper report on 27 August 1958 recorded that a new phrase had gained currency amongst record buffs; and that the words 'high-fidelity' did not refer to marriage vows, but to the latest advance in technique, stereophonic recording.

My interest in music came at the hands of Mrs Haydock. It was not really an interest that I would have chosen for myself. She tried me out for the school choir. She played the piano and I had to stand next to her, singing 'Three Blind Mice'. I didn't want to do it. She told me that, if I didn't, she would cut off my tail with a carving knife. I sang. It wasn't successful. Mrs Haydock told me, unkindly I still think, that I sounded like a sick cow. Instead, she made me play in the school orchestra. I became very proficient with a triangle and a small metal stick.

1959 began with an air of excitement when rebel leader Fidel Castro proclaimed a new government for Cuba, after being ridiculed as a romantic young adventurer. It was also the year in which President Eisenhower proudly announced, on 8 July 1959, that there was no reason why a Roman Catholic should not be elected as President of the United States. He could have gone further, as Clarence Darrow did before him. Darrow said that, when he was a boy, he was told that anyone could become President. He said that he was beginning to believe it. And he died before George Bush's time.

In 1959, Somerset House encouraged us to take a greater interest in religion, although, so far as I can remember, no-one ever told us in which religion we should be taking a greater interest. I was given particular encouragement when Mrs Reynolds, one of our fiercer teachers, caught me talking during school prayers. I was given even more encouragement when she caught me, and a number of others, singing 'while shepherds wash their socks at night' instead of 'while shepherds watch their flocks by night'. It was the only line of the only hymn that I ever remembered.

Two other things of note happened in 1959. The first was that the House of Lords angrily opposed the introduction of commercial radio in England. The second, of much greater interest in our village, was that Maria Callas, an icon of opera and fashion, admitted to splitting up with her husband, but denied having a liaison with Aristotle Onassis.

Unlike Maria Callas, I was never much interested in fashion, being always made to wear my brother's discarded school uniform, notwithstanding that he had a much bigger frame than me. My principal preoccupation with fashion was keeping my pants from falling down. My wife tells me that not much has changed.

1960 began with an awakening of my political awareness. At the opening of Parliament in January of that year, the newly formed Progressive Party was greeted with uproar when it called upon the government to end apartheid. The quote of the year came from a politician, Nikita Krushchev, the then Russian President, who was greatly admired by Les Webb, Barbara's husband. President Krushchev said, 'Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge, even when there is no river'. Not much has changed. These days, the definition of an honest politician is one who, once bought, stays bought.

But my interest in politics wasn't provoked by Nikita Krushchev. It came from Les Webb, one of the greatest teachers you could ever wish to have. He began to inculcate into me and others a political awareness and a questioning of the morality of so much that went on around us. He was a tolerant man, believing that children should be exposed to a wide range of influences.

Tolerance was not universally practised in those days. I am not speaking only of politics. The first synod ever held in Rome, on 24 January 1960, decided that Catholics should not watch films, TV programs or plays that were considered unsafe by the Vatican. Women with bare arms or dressed in male clothing were to be denied the sacrament. In October of that year, the trial of Penguin Publishers for planning to publish Lady Chatterley's Lover began at the Old Bailey. Penguin's defence was that the book was art, and not pornography. The prosecutors disagreed.

It sounds a little shocking today, but back then many people saw the world in simple terms. It was divided into good and bad people. I like Woody Allen's view of this dichotomy. He said that the good ones slept better, but the bad ones seemed to enjoy the waking hours much more.

The French were a little more liberal than most, even then, and the school decided that we should learn their language. I remember studying the only French I ever learned from another remarkable teacher, Mrs D'Ujfallussy, whose French was of the Hungarian variety. To this day, I can remember her rendition of some of the Hungarian/French 'irregular verbs', as she described them.

My French studies distracted me from my lack of musical skills. My career with the triangle had gone nowhere. Fortunately, this lack of musical success was endemic in 1960. On 30 December, one of three major hits of the year was voted to be 'Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini'.

In 1961, my interest in politics continued under the tutelage of Les Webb, with some encouragement from his wife, Barbara, and their protégé, a student by the name of Michael Huelin, who became a lifelong friend. I learned all about socialism. That was the year in which Castro proclaimed Cuba a socialist nation and abolished elections. He obviously subscribed to Mencken's view of democracy. He said that it was a form of religion, the worship of jackals by jackasses.

On this side of the world, 1961 was the year in which South Africa was declared a Republic. It was also the year in which the Russians erected a 5 foot concrete wall along the border between East and West Berlin.

1961 was even more notable because the school under 13 team won a rugby match. 'Under 13 team' was a bit of a misnomer. We only had one team and you played in it if you were good enough, or not sufficiently bad, no matter whether you were 9 or 14. That victory put our rugby team ahead of our cricket and soccer teams (actually the same team), which never won a game, so far as I can recall.

1962 was the year that Les's favourite, President Krushchev, saw a Benny Goodman concert. He announced that he was 'pleased but puzzled'. Adolf Eichman was hanged for war crimes. The main story of the year, in Somerset West, was that, on 25 June 1962, Sophia Loren and her producer husband Carlo Ponti were charged with bigamy.

1962 was a busy year. Martin Luther King was jailed for leading an illegal march in Georgia. 200 million viewers in 16 European countries watched US TV live by satellite for the first time. Nelson Mandela pleaded not guilty to charges of treason at the start of his trial in October 1962.

It was also the year that I finished my preparatory school career at Somerset House. At the time, I knew that the school had been unlike any other that I was aware of. But I didn't know just how unlike any other school it was. While learning to fear Mrs Haydock, to admire a butcherbird, to play the triangle, to speak French with a Hungarian accent and to be more respectful during school prayers to an unclear deity, I had gained a sound education, finding, when I got to high school, that I was way ahead of kids from other schools in most subjects. I also had an enduring love of sport, having been taught (if that is the right description for it) athletics, swimming, tennis, cricket, rugby, soccer and baseball. I had even been taught judo and boxing. I had been taught a bit of drama, having starred in a school production as half of a donkey. I won't tell you which half. More importantly, Les Webb had instilled in me a lifelong love of history and

English literature and an ability to think for myself. Above all, I was taught values, which I have never forgotten, of racial equality, tolerance of difference, compassion and humility.

These values, and the great gift of a questioning interest in what went on around us, were given to us at a time when they were especially needed. We grew up in a world that was troubled, not only by bad music, but by bigotry, racial and religious intolerance and the scars that had been left by a major world war. It was also a time of dramatic change. In that short period of my preparatory schooling we had seen enormous political upheaval, the beginnings of major social transformation, the start of the space age and a massive, and exponential, advance in technology. If ever there was a time when young people needed a sound moral compass, courage, an enquiring mind that had been stimulated in a variety of ways, and a good start in education, that was it. Somerset House went a long way towards providing all of those things.

I will always be grateful to this school for what it did for me. Primary schools play a critical role in the lives of those who pass through their hands. They have a huge responsibility to be positive and constructive in the values, ethics and learning that they instil. This school did that for me. I am told that it still does this for others. I hope that it always will.
