

Anything is possible for New Yorkers

Telegraph March 26, 08



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New York

There is nothing like a trip to New York City to put some of the problems facing Britain in perspective – and some of its advantages. High on the list of the latter for many is the \$2 pound. New York is teeming with British tourists. Two British women of a certain age we encountered in the lift in our hotel could barely carry the results of their day's swarm over the counters of New York's emporia. For them, everything here is half-price.

Americans are of two minds as they watch their dollar depreciate in value. It both troubles us by adding to domestic inflation and making overseas trips too expensive to contemplate, and cheers us by bringing bargain-hunting foreigners to snap up everything from jeans to apartments. Britons are not so conflicted: the ones I meet here say it is a relief to come to New York where a decent meal does not require taking out a second mortgage. Which probably isn't available these days, anyway.

On to a meeting with a young man formerly employed in Britain, recently transferred to America and happily stunned by

the openness to change and revelling in the energy of his co-workers. He came to New York in search of the "anything is possible" attitude that Gordon Brown is so eager to import to Britain, and found it.

Then there is the not-so-small matter of sex and government. Britain has not had much to offer lately in the way of sex scandals. New York governor Eliot Spitzer resigned in disgrace after it was discovered that he prosecuted prostitution rings by day, and frequented them by night. In the process, Spitzer proved that British "johns" are tougher bargainers: he paid £2,500 for what the complaint says a British "client" got for £500.

The fallen governor's successor, David Paterson, devoted his first press conference to listing not only his extramarital flings, but those of his wife. His lawyers have been trawling through records so that he can reimburse New York State for any expenses he charged to his campaign or to the state. Britain might catch the occasional MP *in flagrante*, but rarely an official as powerful as the governor of New York.

There is more when it comes to government. Compared to London, New York is a rather placid place. The departure of Rudy Giuliani, whose accomplishments are legion, but who was hardly a soothing force in the city, and his replacement by dull, competent Mike Bloomberg, has brought a kind of calm to life here. No invitations

to anti-Semitic, homosexual-hating, Islamic preachers; no cheap oil from America-hating Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, the benefactor of Ken Livingstone's London and Joe Kennedy's Boston-based oil company; Muslim immigrants seem more or less contentedly integrated into New York and American society, and do not blow up the subway.

But then there are the taxis. Compared with the drivers of

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London's black cabs, New York's are a sorry lot. Careening up the Avenue of Americas in a cab littered with apple cores, driven by a man who had no idea where my hotel was, I longed for the serenity of a London taxi – although not for the speed with which its meter clicked along. And certainly not for the traffic jams that have made life in London so difficult. As one British visitor remarked, the thing he

likes about New York is that traffic moves smartly along. That might be due to the fact that the city government has figured out how to co-ordinate road works to avoid the London phenomenon of digging up streets multiple times to accommodate, sequentially, water companies, electric companies, BT and others.

Most of all, one notices the different pace of life and of economic activity: A tour of the downtown area is especially revealing. Yes, there is squabbling over what to put where the World Trade Centre once stood. But the rest of the area is now festooned with new condominiums, new office buildings, new businesses. It is as if an entire new city has sprung up.

Perhaps some of the differences between New York and London stem from the fact that London is both a great metropolis and home to central government. Londoners therefore, quite naturally, are absorbed with the day-to-day doings of Parliament and Prime Minister, and tend to look to government for solutions, whereas New Yorkers view Washington as some distant place that has less effect on daily life, and a generally malign one.

Being less concerned with the doings of central government, and less likely to look to it to solve their problems, New Yorkers can and do devote more time and energy to making money – and giving it away. Because charities in America do not look first to government; because New York is home to lots of rich people;

because America has a deeper tradition of private philanthropy than does Britain, with its welfare state; and because Americans receive more generous tax treatment for their charitable donations, New York is famous for its ritzy balls and charity-dos to benefit arts organisations and medical research into just about every known disease.

Do-gooders here seem to concentrate more on directly doing good than on trying to persuade government to do it for them. Which is not to denigrate Britons: their hearts are made of just as pure 21-carat gold as are Americans'. But the Government claims a larger portion of their hard-earned income, leaving them less to donate to worthy causes.

Finally, there is politics. Thanks to the battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democrats' presidential nomination, and to Obama's special appeal to young voters, political life has taken on a vitality that has thoughtful observers in Britain wondering whether the American scheme of primaries and debates might not be useful imports. More than a few have even confessed to me, after making certain they cannot be overheard, that they find themselves following US television's coverage of American politics with greater interest than BBC's duller reporting of duller British political affairs.

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