

politics

of the politics that really make a difference in the U.K. are done at a national level and it is easy, as an outsider, to become engrossed in U.S. presidential races and see them as an equivalent of our national politics—and a reflection of the views throughout America.

In reality, of course, this is a huge country with vastly differing cultures, values and political beliefs from one state to the next and, indeed, different state constitutions and laws.

Portland is a prime example—a progressive, liberal city with an identity and values distinct from anywhere else I have known—even from the rest of Oregon. Maybe that's why I love it so much. I am closely following the Portland mayoral race and I was delighted, but not surprised, to learn that the three main declared contenders are all liberal Democrats who offer unwavering support for LGBTQ equality. In addition, Oregon's state laws are not too dissimilar to Britain's when it comes to rights for minority populations. The

politics of Portland certainly feel more like what I'm used to in Britain than the impression outsiders have of U.S. "national politics."

The Constitution, the separation of the powers and the many checks on executive power that exist over here ensure that, although U.S. politicians—particularly on the right—may sound radical, the system often prevents them from delivering on their more extreme goals. The opposite is true in Britain: It is often difficult to tell the two main parties apart based purely on rhetoric but, in practice, the U.K. Parliamentary system gives a new prime minister both the mandate and the power to introduce a radical program of reforms if they so choose. It is fairly common for a party leader to sound moderate to be elected, then behave more radically after becoming prime minister.

Though other factors—such as the influence of religion—may be important, the size of the U.S. and its political system is, I believe, responsible for what appears to an outside observer a polarized political environ-

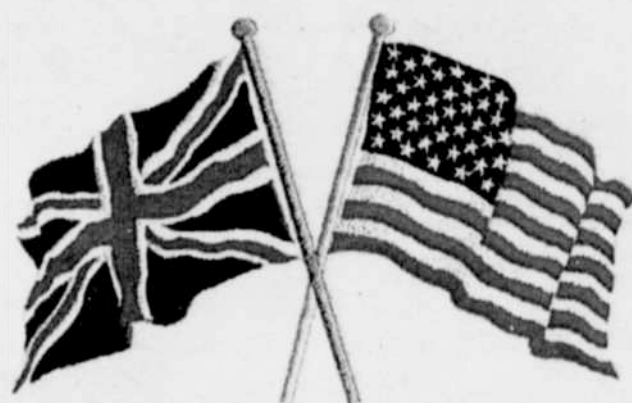
ment and a Republican Party far to the right of its British equivalent. But, as I said, the change in the Conservative Party is a fairly recent phenomenon and came about largely as a response to a shift in the British voting majority's views on LGBTQ equality.

So the real question is, what caused the British public, in general, to warm so quickly to the idea of LGBTQ equal rights? When the Labour Party won a landslide election in 1997, virtually wiping out the Conservatives after they had been in power for 18 years, the public was eager to embrace a positive, progressive politics. Tony Blair, as newly elected prime minister, personified the mood and took full advantage of this hope and optimism—delivering a substantial raft of progressive reform, of which much was targeted at the LGBTQ community.

I am generally cynical about the extent to which politicians ever really alter public opinion. But when it comes to LGBTQ rights, by showing leadership

and unwavering commitment to the cause, Tony Blair and his Labour government won the argument and eventually shaped British attitudes. In doing so, he also forced the Conservative Party to change in order to remain relevant and electable.

Is there a lesson to be learned here for senior Democrats, and particularly the Obama administration, in this country? I believe there is. Liberals and progressives throughout the world cheered Obama into the White House. It would be unfair—and inaccurate—to say that his administration has not achieved anything for the LGBTQ community, but they have done so cautiously and quietly, and Obama himself has failed to speak out as often and as boldly as he could have. Much like Blair, he was elected on a wave of hope and optimism, with the power to bring about radical change, but he has failed to show the leadership necessary to drag forward the debate on LGBTQ equality and shape public opinion that would, in turn, force the Republicans to change. ☐



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