

How to Panic Quietly

Foreign newspapers and magazines never stop sending correspondents here to investigate the “English disease”, to analyse our decline and our despair and panic as we cower in the economic gutter. They arrive here to find no panic, no despair. With their logical minds they know that they ought to find them; but they don’t. When they discuss the matter with the British, they expect some defence of this lackadaisical attitude, or excuses for certain failures. But what the British say is this: “Yes, I quite agree, aren’t we in an awful mess?” “Oh, we are hopeless,” they say and order another double whisky. Try to discuss the pound tactfully, and they reply jovially, almost proudly: “Yes, I wonder how anything can sink so low,” and they ring up their travel agent to book a skiing holiday in Switzerland. The foreign observer expects the British nation to sink into deep despondency whenever the pound falls two cents and be overjoyed when it gains half a cent. But most Britons have no idea — except on the days of greatest crisis — whether the pound has risen or fallen, and the nation is as calm as it was in 1940 when Hitler was about to cross the Channel but didn’t.

One day you may confront one of these foreign journalists, so I should like to draw attention to a few of their stock questions and offer you the proper, British answers.

Q. Why don’t the British panic?

A. They do, but very quietly. It is impossible for the naked eye to tell their panic from their ecstasy.

Q. Why don’t they work harder?

A. They just don’t like hard work. The Germans have a reputation for hard work, so they like to keep it up. The British find it boring. Then, apart from a tiny and despicable minority, the British dislike the idea of taking part in the rat race. They will give up certain advantages — knowingly and with their eyes open — in order to be able to stick to certain values and a way of life.

Q. But do they stick to their values? Can they stick to their values? Nearly all their traditional virtues — patience, tolerance, cool-headedness, wry humour, courtesy — are the product of richness and power. Isn’t there a real danger that with riches and power these virtues will disappear?

A. Yes, there is a very real danger.

Q. Then why don’t they panic?

A. They do, but very, very quietly.

35 Q. Are Trade Unions a real danger?

A. You bet.

Q. And what do the British do about it?

A. There were periods in British history — indeed in the history of all nations — when one or another layer of society, or group, or individual, grew much too strong. This could be the king, or parliament, or the barons, or the industrialists, or the feudal aristocracy, or the bankers, or the clergy. Their power had to be broken. In Britain it has always been broken. On one occasion a civil war was fought, on another occasion no civil war was fought. The problem with the Trade Unions will be solved, too. Probably without civil war, which is a pity. A civil war would at least enliven the British scene.

Q. How would they fight a civil war?

A. Very, very quietly.

Q. Isn’t there a danger of extremists gaining the upper hand?

A. Hard to tell. Probably not. The British, on the whole, are extreme moderates, passionate pacifists, rabid middle-of-the-roaders. But one cannot be sure.

Q. Isn’t, then, a dictatorship or some other form of authoritarian regime a possibility?

A. Unlikely. The British are too used to solving their problems in committees, in open discussions. They are used to no-confidence motions, to letters to the editor, and just to opening their mouths and speaking up. Besides, they would laugh any would-be dictator off the face of Britain.

George Mikes, *How to Be Decadent*

(London: André Deutsch, 1977; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 60-62.

Worksheet

- Paraphrase the following sentences; do not use the underlined words or words derived from their stems.
 - “One day you may confront one of these foreign journalists” (l. 16)
 - “The British dislike the idea of taking part in the rat race.” (l. 25)
- Pick out three examples of stylistic devices that the author uses to achieve a comic effect, and explain how they work.
- What do we learn about the British character (as Mikes sees it)? Summarize.
- Choose one of the following topics and write about 150 to 200 words.
 - “My peace of mind is more important than anything else.” — Discuss.
 - “If you want to be successful, you must take part in the rat race.” — Discuss.
 - Tea (One-word-essay)