

Lessons from England

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Vacations are intended to be times for rest and relaxation. But for me, vacations are great opportunities to get away through new learning experiences. The trip Jane and I recently took to England provided relaxation and a great deal of learning. You will see many references to our trip in this and future columns.

It takes some broad generalizations to compare a nation like England with its rich and long history to an individual state like Virginia that used to be one of its colonies. But I believe we can always learn from the experiences of others.

During the week we were in London we were never in an automobile. Yet we were all over the city. The Underground or “tube” as they refer to their subway system really does work. In the more than 40 trips on the Underground, we never waited more than five minutes for a train, and many of the trains we rode were literally stuffed with people. All trains were well utilized. I could not help but think of the importance that rail will have for our area. It will ease the commute for many, but it will also make the many educational and cultural opportunities in the metropolitan area more accessible for everyone.

Of course I visited Parliament and listened to a couple of hours of debate in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords. The House of Commons displays a golden mace in recognition of royal authority. The Virginia House of Delegates still displays a golden mace in recognition of its history as a royal colony.

The House of Commons is presided over by a Speaker elected by its members. In becoming Speaker, the member gives up his or her membership in a political party. If we adopted that system in our state, we may have prevented some of the abuses that have occurred under the recently resigned Speaker.

We rented a car for our trip through the English countryside of Exmoor, the Lake District, and Yorkshire Dales, although with more time and careful planning we could have done most, if not all, of the trip by rail and bus. Just as in Reston, walking trails abound. Land use controls have prevented suburban sprawl, and the integrity and character of small communities have been closely preserved. In comparison, it is sad to see what is happening in our state as more and more beautiful landscape is being eaten up by development. A recent report indicates that Northern Virginia lost about 160,000 acres of open space from 1982 to 1997.

Of course, as a student of constitutional history, I went to Runnymede – but not because it is a great tourist attraction. It is only an open meadow of a few acres with a modest monument on the side of a nearby hill. But what happened in that meadow in 1215 with the signing of the Magna Carta we know in retrospect was the beginning of constitutional law, the rule of law and not of men.

Standing in the meadow at Runnymede I knew that the historic figures who stood there centuries before me could not see the future they were influencing, but I did feel hopeful about the future I face. Small but meaningful steps can be taken in reforming the House of Delegates, in providing more mass transit alternatives, and in adopting more smart growth alternatives.



Vacation is now over; I am back to work; hopefully a little wiser, but certainly with a greater sense of history.