

POEM OF THE WEEK

HIGHER STANDARDS: EXPECTATIONS & REALITY

We All Have Our Standards, don't we?
Those collectively agreed-upon levels of competence
Behaviours, social activities that decree "you're here
You made it; you are accepted". Standards

We all have them, don't we? According to our level
In a society. They measure where we are, how far
we've progressed, and where we want to go. I say "we"
As a collective, the behaviour and desire for social mobility

Is shared. Each journey is a person's journey
The "to" and "from"; for example, a person was born in
The early 1950s. Post-World 2, Food rationing was removed
in June 1950; it was not a time for wealth or surplus

The Class Struggle was alive and well. The Class system
Fully functioning. One was born into a class commensurate
with one's parents' income; the bosses and the workers were at war
With each other. The decade started with Toby Hill and Jock Barnes

Leading officials of the powerful Waterside Workers Union wanted
More militant action against the conservative government, and not
Getting support from the Federation of Labour, set up a rival organisation
The Trade Union Congress. The Waterfront dispute of 1951 was a flashpoint

It lasted 151 days (from February to July); the so-called commies vs the rest
The climate of Cold War suspicion; A National government against "the radicals"
It began quietly enough. In January, the Arbitration Court awarded a 15% wage increase
The waterside workers were offered 9% (their employment being controlled by the

"Waterfront Industry Commission". The Union protested by refusing to work overtime from
13 February. The shipping companies refused to hire them unless they worked extra hours.
Union members were locked out. The wharves went quiet. Enter National's Prime Minister
Holland. He declared a state of emergency on 21st February. Declared New Zealand was

"at war". On the 27th, troops were sent onto the Auckland and Wellington wharves to load
and unload ships. Draconian emergency regulations imposed rigid censorship, gave police
sweeping powers of search and arrest and made it an offence for citizens to assist strikers –
even giving food to their children was outlawed.

History records that the prime minister won, restructured the waterside unions
and won an increased victory on 1 September 1951. This is the world that

our hero was born into; rife with suspicion, conspiracies and propaganda
It was class-based and a class struggle.

What did “Higher standards” mean?
Abandoning what you believed in,
for someone else’s narrative?
Rewriting history?

History, as a collection of tales of events past
Childhood memories have a habit of lingering and intruding
Does New Zealand still have a class-structured society?
It’s not as obvious now. Access to technology has blurred the edges

I suspect it is still as persistent as ever. You might have never heard of the Cold War
The posturing of nations on either side; that’s okay, never mind, to understand
In the present situation, you might have to brush up on it. It’s different now!
You proclaim. Is it? I would be happy if it is. Power up the laptop,

Higher standards? Treat each other with kindness,
tolerance and understanding
It sounds like a high standard to me.
Respect each other for your uniqueness, your humanity

As for our hero, he’s in there somewhere.
Fighting his demons, arguing with his voices.
“Remember 1951?” K’off. I was not yet conceived,
let alone a concept.

This event, along with other
became my history.
Did I want it to?
K’off.

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