

NewStatesman

PJ O'Rourke: "I thought Trump was unstable, dangerous. I still do"

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March 4, 2020

Like all good conservatives, the American satirist PJ O'Rourke is something of an anachronism, a nostalgic leftover from a funnier, if not gentler age – the age of hippies, marijuana, National Lampoon and the Vietnam War.

His peer group, comprising writers such as Tom Wolfe and Hunter S Thompson, is long gone. And today as you turn into his home, March Hare Farm, deep in the backwoods of New Hampshire, you might expect the Cato Institute HL Mencken Research Fellow to be putting up his 72-year-old feet.

He is not. The author of such classic titles as *Parliament of Whores* (1991), *Give War a Chance* (1992) and *Eat the Rich* (1998) has recently started a regular column for the *Washington Post*. There he will gently taunt the liberal establishment with the usual knowing charm that has made him America's most socially acceptable Republican.

In his first column, published on 22 January, O'Rourke started as he means to go on. "What this country needs is fewer people who know what this country needs," he wrote. "We'd be better off, in my opinion, without so many opinions. Especially without so many political opinions. Including my own."

In fact, opinions are what PJ (nobody, not even his wife, Tina, calls him Patrick Jake) thrives on. One hundred yards up the hill from his exquisite white clapboard farm house – all panelling and oak beams – is his writing lair: a huge warehouse of books, neatly ordered by subject on everything from erotic ancient Greek poetry, through sociological histories of the 1960s, to academic political philosophy.

O'Rourke hasn't changed much from his gonzo days. The familiar preppy lick of fringe is a bit more salt-and-pepper now. The hooded, ever-amused eyes sit above a wispy straggle of beard. But the clothes – tweed jacket and corduroy trousers – still evoke the country gentleman that was part of his contrarian 1970s shtick.

Contrarianism remains his product. O'Rourke sprang back into the national spotlight during the 2016 presidential election by announcing that he was going to vote for Hillary Clinton, not Donald Trump.

He puts the decision down to his natural conservatism. "Politics is a matter of least worst," he told me when I recently stayed at his farm. "She was the devil I knew – she was going to be another eight years of Obama, which we had endured. Donald Trump? I knew people who knew him. Nobody liked him. I just thought he was unstable...dangerous. I still do."

O'Rourke's journey from son of a Republican car salesman in Ohio to the US's best-known satirist took the customary adolescent diversion through the left.

As a student at Miami University in Ohio during the mid- to late-1960s, he tried to set up a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society – the go-to hard-left organisation of the day. The university authorities simply said "no".

"We started something called Snick, but I still can't remember what it stood for. Every now and again these more serious Marxist types would wander through – they were bullying and boring." It was a type very reminiscent, he recalled, of Bernie Sanders – the Democratic, self-proclaimed socialist candidate for the presidency.

O'Rourke smoked dope – "I probably knew every marijuana smoker on campus" – and dabbled with hippiedom, noting that beatnik girls were easier with their favours.

Ranting one day to his Republican grandmother against "fascist" Lyndon Johnson, who was president between 1963 and 1969, O'Rourke told her he had become a communist. "Well, at least you are not a Democrat," she snapped back. It was probably the high point of his radicalism.

Escaping the Midwest in 1969, O'Rourke moved to an underground paper in Baltimore, then on to National Lampoon, the satirical start-up he came to edit from 1973, writing articles with titles such as: "How to Drive Fast on Drugs While Getting Your Wing-Wang Squeezed and Not Spill Your Drink."

But he was already moving to the right, irritated by the \$140 in taxes, health insurance and social security taken from his first \$300 pay cheque. He was tiring, too, of what he saw as the bossiness of left-wing ideologues, and nurturing a growing pessimistic belief that both change and government were always bad.

"Giving money and power to government is like giving whisky and car keys to a teenager," he wrote. In a later essay collection entitled *Don't Vote – It Just Encourages the Bastards* (2010), he observed: "I hate all change... Conservatives are opposed to change not because change is bad but because change is... modern and confusing."

"I still don't know how to work the remote," he told me.

In conversation later, he added: "Change for the better can be scary enough. People are naturally conservative with a small 'c'."

Those views won him a contract in 1985 with the left-leaning Rolling Stone magazine as the in-house conservative, when publisher Jann Wenner noticed that millions of young Americans had voted for Ronald Reagan in the 1984 presidential election.

Today O'Rourke, something of a hermit in an old farmhouse that feels like it could have witnessed the American Revolution, still espouses the stubborn Yankee attitudes for which New England is known. Unlike so-called moderate Republicans, he is a fervent champion of the Second Amendment – the right to bear arms – along with the right to be left alone.

And he hasn't changed his mind about Trump. "In fairness, his administration has not been as bad as I thought it might be," he reflected. "But there have been moments when one has gone: 'Whoah!'" What he described as Trump's "group hug" with the North Koreans, and "stirring things up with Iran" are just two examples.

O'Rourke believes that the Founding Fathers made the presidency too powerful by giving it control of foreign policy – something he recently discovered Benjamin Franklin had opposed. "He thought it should have been a committee," he said.

"Trump certainly is not a conservative in the sense of conserving the status quo. Arguably Clinton was more so. He is a radical, a populist one, and I don't like populism anyway. Populism is, like, 'The government should give me things I like or get rid of the things I don't like'... The Nazis were populist, Mussolini was populist."

For similar reasons, the perennial sceptic says he would have taken the Remain side in the 2016 referendum on EU membership. "I would have been against Brexit strictly on practical grounds – Britain and Europe had become too thoroughly integrated to do something as radical as Brexit."

Though sympathetic to the Leave cause over European meddling, and happy to give Europe "a kick up the pants", it was his conservatism that said "stay".

"The vote to Remain was the conservative vote – the status quo vote. I understood why people objected to the EU. It had a weight of bureaucracy that was opaque. At best it was meddling and annoying, and there is a surrender of sovereignty, and the Europeans are assholes – they've been assholes for hundreds of years.

"All previous attempts to unite Europe, starting with the Romans and ending with the Nazis, have failed. But what happened to a free-trade zone where we could travel without being pestered by people asking if we were bringing in too much liquorice?"

On globalisation, O'Rourke's laissez-faire philosophy makes him a believer. "The whole pack of them [politicians] – Trump included – seem to be buying into the kind of mercantilist ideas that we thought had been destroyed in 1776 – not by the American Revolution but by Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, which was published that year. We thought that argument was over.

"Of course, globalisation causes distress and inequalities, but these can be addressed piece by piece. You can't blame a country for subsidising farms, for example – but overall, free trade is a net good. Ricardo's principal of comparative advantage rules. And there is proof of this. The

number of people living in abject poverty – \$1 a day – has been cut in half [since 1990], essentially by free trade.”

Which raises the question of how this great cultural schism in US public life has come about. O’Rourke believes it stems from the Reagan presidency, which reversed the drift towards European-style social democracy in the 1980s. This, he feels, hardened the hearts of the progressive left in what was still a religious country.

He takes as an example the abortion battle. Though a Catholic, he is pro-choice, thinking that abortion should be “legal, safe and rare”. But he argues that the Democrats’ dogmatism on the subject is offensive to many decent, ordinary people who should have the right to disagree.

“The progressive Democrats don’t even pay lip-service to things that are central to the lives of many ordinary Americans, like God and country.”

So where does all this leave the libertarian conservative when it comes to the presidential election, now under way in the primaries?

O’Rourke admits he can bring himself to vote for a moderate Democrat. “I can certainly see myself voting for Mike Bloomberg, I might even have voted for Pete Buttigieg. But I am in a quandary if it is Sanders versus Trump – two crazy people. I would pick the less-focused crazy person. Sanders has a very organised form of insanity. Trump is merely narcissistic and impulsive. Trump is a deeply, deeply neurotic person.” But then, he adds, eyes twinkling through his half-moon glasses: “Sociopaths do damage on a smaller scale than socialists.”