

Reflections on Arnold Schwarzenegger and the General Synod

Arnold Schwarzenegger's autobiography, "Total Recall: My Unbelievably True Life Story", Simon & Schuster, 2012, had been sitting on my shelf for several years whilst I read more heavy, educational stuff. But during the coronavirus lockdown I needed a bit of a break and so started on Arnie's autobiography.

It is a good read, beginning with his childhood in rural Austria, then his bodybuilding success through which he moved to America, and finally on his political career as Governor of California.

Although he was a Republican, many of his views were more centrist and he tried to work together with Democrats in order to get things done. His stardom helped him to break down the previous barriers that had hamstrung the legislature.

"The governor's offices...occupy...the ground floor of the capitol. The legislator's offices are on the five floors above. Protocol called for the governor to stay put and for lawmakers who wanted to see him to make the trip downstairs. That wasn't my way. I often left my office and took the elevator to the upper floors to call on the legislators myself. Being in movies actually provided a great opening: a lawmaker might not know what to make of me as a governor, but his staff would want to take pictures with me and would ask for autographs to bring home to their kids." (p.517-8).

The Californian legislature was based in Sacramento and had been stuck in in-fighting between Republicans and Democrats for years.

"After assuming office and winning some immediate big victories using the momentum of my election, it was important to show the people that Sacramento can work together to solve California's fiscal problems. So I went back to the capital, called the legislative leaders from both parties, and said, "Let's sit down and try one more time."

My fellow Republicans acted like they'd been punched in the stomach. "You have them on the ropes, go in for the kill!" they said. This was my first real taste of the new Republican ideology that any compromise is a sign of weakness. The Democrats were relieved to avoid a huge fight, but some interpreted my willingness to negotiate as a sign that I'd rather back down from a fight than risk my popularity with voters. That made negotiations more difficult. After so many years of ugly, pointless fighting in Sacramento, both sides had lost touch with the art of negotiation. In fact, the legislative districts were drawn to elect the most partisan, uncompromising members of each party; legislators who were bred to fight, like roosters bred for cockfighting." (p.519).

There is a touch of the General Synod about that. For the most part, those who stand for election to General Synod do so because they feel very strongly for a particular point of view – if they didn't they wouldn't spend all that time and trouble standing for election – and once elected their mission is to advance that point of view with as little compromise as possible. Possibly even more so than in politics, because there is nothing more important than religion, so the feelings and desires are the strongest possible.

Perhaps the only way to loosen things and allow some compromise is a greater appreciation of the sovereignty of God. Yes, God uses us, but ultimately He is in charge and His will will be done, it is not entirely down to us to achieve that victory for Him, and sometimes God's will moves in mysterious ways, so what might seem like a failure turns out not to be so.

The book ends with a short chapter entitled "Arnold's Rules" which is some tips on how he approaches life. One is about not hiding your light under a bushel:

"No matter what you do in life, selling is part of it. [...] People can be great poets, great writers, geniuses in the lab. But you can do the finest work and if people don't know, you have nothing! In politics it's the same: no matter whether you are working on environmental policy or education or economic growth, the most important thing is to make people aware." (page 606).

Another of his tips is to not dwell on your failures:

"Forget plan B. [...] If you're anxious instead of making fall back plans, think about the worst that can happen if you fail. How bad would it be? You quickly find out it's really nothing. If you fail at running for governor, you may be humiliated, but that is the worst than can happen. [...] When I did lose all my ballot initiatives in 2005, it didn't kill me. Life went on and I led a fantastic trade mission to China. And a year later I was reelected. My standard for misery is the guys who worked in the diamond mines in South Africa when I visited in the sixties. The mines were like 1,400 feet down and it was about 110 degrees and the workers were getting paid a dollar a day and were allowed to go home to their family only once a year. That's being in deep shit. Anything better than that and you're in good shape." (page 609).

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