It may not have been pure coincidence that in 1893, at the height of imperial fever, Gilbert & Sullivan did an operetta spoofing Britain’s mission to perfect the rest of the world.

And it may not have been coincidence that *Utopia, Limited*, was not one of their successes. Reasons were plentiful as blackberries, of course –

- a weak stick of a leading man
- the frailest wisp of a romantic plot to hold the jokes together
- a few numbers that sounded as if you’d heard them before

But it still has some of the finest songs they ever did, and some of the cleverest ideas. I think the real reason was that English audiences took their empire too seriously to see it kidded.

For, looked at carefully, it’s an unsettling tale.

We begin in the South Seas, in Utopia, a land perfectly contented, lazy, and easy-going.

“England has made herself what she is because, in that favored land, every one has to think for himself. Here we have no need to think...”

Their government is the ideal: Despotism tempered with Dynamite.

A King who can do anything he pleases – but who can be blown up any time if he abuses his powers.
Everything changes, when the King’s daughter appears.

She has been schooled in England, and she has brought back experts
to improve Utopia into a South Seas England.

Before you know it, you wouldn’t know the place.

“'It really is surprising
What a thorough Anglicizing
We have brought about – Utopia’s quite another land.
In her enterprising movements
She is England, with improvements
Which we dutifully offer to our mother land!

Our city we have beautified – we’ve done it willy nilly.
And all that isn’t Belgrave Square is Strand and Piccadilly.
    We haven’t any slummeries in England.

We’ve sold the labor question with discrimination polished;
So poverty is obsolete, and hunger is abolished.
    We’re going to abolish it in England.

The Chamberlain our native stage has purged beyond a question
Of risky situation and indelicate suggestion;
No piece is tolerated, if it’s costumed indiscreetly =-
In short this happy country has been Anglicized completely!

Never has Utopia been better off – or felt worse. Progress has turned all their
cherished habits topsy-turvy.

Furiously, the villains of the play get up a mob to storm the palace, and with
every right:

These boons have brought Utopia to a standstill!
Our pride and boast, the army and the navy,
Have both been reconstructed and remodeled
Upon so irresistible a basis
That all the neighboring nations have disarmed
And war’s impossible! Your county councilor
Has passed such drastic sanitary laws
That all the doctors dwindle, starve and die.
The laws, remodeled by Sir Bailey Barre,
Have quite extinguished crime and litigation;
The lawyers starve, and all the jails are let
As model lodgings for the working classes!
In short, Utopia, swamped by dull Prosperity,
Demands that these detested flowers of Progress
Be sent about their business and affairs
Restored to their original complexion!

Something must have gone wrong. They must have omitted something.

And that is –

“Government by Party!

Introduce that great and glorious element ... and all will be well.
Then there will be sickness in plenty, endless lawsuits, crowded
jails, interminable confusion in the Army and Navy, and, in short,
general and unexampled prosperity.”

And everything ends happily, with a song in honor of England.