Abraham Baldry spent 2017-18 at Harvard Kennedy School as a non-degree student on a Kennedy Scholarship. Here are some reflections on that experience.

When I found out I got into Harvard, I played “I’m Shipping Up to Boston” loud enough to make the windows shake. I was visiting my parents, and cannot describe how proud I was to tell them when they got home.

Several months later, I found myself at the Kennedy School seeking to find out how to get young people more engaged in politics. I sat courses on political campaigns, leadership, public narrative, comparative politics, management, the internet, and Op-Ed writing. I also studied macroeconomics, statistics, and international relations. Professors were often generous with their time, happy to talk outside the classroom about the potential and limits of digital community organising, or my idea that monetary policy could be conducted by an artificial intelligence. They set stimulating essays, asking what would happen if China and the US swapped geographies, or if the EU became a sovereign nation. I had never studied politics prior to this year, and it is difficult to put into words how many new ideas and frameworks I have been exposed to. The research conducted at HKS not only engaged with events in the news cycle, but often led it. I feel much better equipped to make change than I did a year ago. Outside the classroom, the Kennedy School has a cornucopia of extracurricular workshops and seminars; through which I learned about memo writing, community organising, speechwriting and participatory budgeting. Interesting people from all over the world came to speak. We hosted heads of state, TV stars and celebrities, but I never saw the forum as packed as when Thomas Piketty came to deliver a thirty slide, graph heavy tour de force presenting his new book on social class. This is encouraging, as I found that many liberal Americans were acutely aware of visible, physically tangible characteristics of difference such as race and gender, but often blind to invisible ones, most especially class.

Over the last year I have learned a great deal; yet I am worried. I came to Harvard hoping to find solutions to the rising tide of angry, regressive populism, sweeping up the world in its path. Instead, I found behavioural economics and nudge theory. If the solutions that I have heard discussed over the last year are the best the status quo has to offer, I am inclined to agree with Yeats, that *things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.*

The best aspect of my time in Cambridge was the conversations I had, often over tea or beer late into the evening, discussing Britain’s place in the world, the gig economy, the risk of an Artificial Intelligence explosion, automation, ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons, gender politics, China’s rise, America’s decline, North Korea’s continued existence, price theory, whether robots have souls, whether we should abolish universities, and which is most likely to be around in 2500: France, or the Roman Catholic Church. These discussions were generally with friends, but not always. Harvard opened doors to the NYPD’s control room, MIT’s conference on AI and the Future of Work, the UN Security Council, and meetings with everyone from the Chief of Police of Detroit to whichever recently unemployed British politician was passing through Cambridge that week. I became Chair of the Debating Union, took up figure skating and secured a jobette working as a research assistant for a former UK National Security advisor.

HKS is a deeply international environment – the number of passports in any group always exceeds the number of people, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to have made friends from all over the world. Nevertheless, while diverse in some ways, it was remarkably homogeneous in others. I met only one other person at HKS who was the first from their family to graduate from university, and but a handful of other students with disabilities. It was especially homogeneous in terms of political ideology. People to the left or to the right of Hillary Clinton were unusual; and almost always either European or in the military. By repute, there was one Trump supporter at the Kennedy School, but, sadly, I never met him. To find the true faithful we would have to venture beyond the leafy enclaves of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Another Kennedy scholar and I rented a bright red (EcoBoost) Ford Mustang, and drove from Louisiana through the Mississippi delta and up into Birmingham, Nashville, Memphis, Arkansas, and Dallas. We marvelled at the “patriotic ammunition” for sale in Tennessee with lead bullet tips painted red, white and blue, and ate an unhealthy amount of barbeque in Texas. Other highlights included a chopper ride with David, a construction worker from Iowa and a Father’s Day service in a megachurch outside Memphis, complete with a Snickers commercial mid-sermon. From there, we travelled far, far away to San Francisco gay pride. I met a tech startup CEO who excoriated twitter bros for forcing out locals by driving up the rent, later discovering he and his partner had formed a shell company to rent and live in a warehouse space intended for use by artists. We travelled by train to Chicago, spending 2500 miles passing through the Rocky Mountains, various national parks, and a great deal of corn. After Harvard, I swapped the Charles for the Hudson, and spent the summer living with the New Yorker’s foreign correspondent. I also stayed with old money New Yorkers in the Hamptons, with Bon Jovi next door and Martha Stewart across the road, finding out how the other 0.001% live. I thoroughly explored New England, a constituency I did not know existed before my arrival. Highlights included “Leaf-peeping” in New Hampshire, canoe camping and ice fishing in Maine, hiking in Vermont, day tripping to the Mass MoCA, and surveying several gas stations in Connecticut and Rhode Island on an unplanned trip from Washington DC to Boston when our flight was cancelled. Growing up in a house without central heating or double glazing, I had thought that I knew how to dress for the cold, and now I realise I was mistaken. In a rite of passage for Brits at Harvard, I confirmed my utter lack of interest in Baseball at Fenway Park, though I have picked up a love of hiking and of the wilderness that I will struggle to replicate in the UK.

There are many things I will miss about this country besides its natural beauty, amongst them Americans’ emotional literacy, their optimism, and their inclination towards self-reflection and directness. I will also miss my classmates, and the unexpected bonds that arise when people with different worldviews spend a year living together. I was surprised to become close friends with a Republican Captain in the US Army. Watching the bin fire that is American politics has been nothing if not engaging, though I am inclined to think that the fire’s been burning for a long time before The Donald took centre stage. Nixon’s spying on the opposition party, Clinton’s impeachment for sexual relations in the Oval Office, and Reagan’s career as a movie star before becoming Commander-in-Chief make me think that in some ways, the Trump presidency isn’t so unusual. American politics is pandemonium, and endlessly entertaining as long as you’re not on the receiving end. Yet at the same time, I feel sorry for those subject to their nation’s cruel and unusual machinations, and to this end I worked on the campaign aiming to kick the republicans out of the Florida Governor’s mansion.

Throughout the year, I remained acutely aware of the enormous privilege that this has been – most often, when walking through the Yard with the sun on my back. I thought about how my life has taken a different path to many of my schoolmates from Dorset, many of whom did not progress to Higher Education. Returning to my former school to encourage sixth formers to consider university, I was reminded that I could very well have been one of them, for any number of factors beyond my control. Had I been born a few years earlier, I would have remained the kid who was written off as lazy because he couldn’t write properly, rather than the kid with a laptop who was often top of the class and who went to Harvard. The last year has been a hell of a ride, and I am enormously grateful to the trust for making it happen. Thank you.