

Stephen RIP

Published: January 14, 2026, 2:57 am

I went to the funeral of an old friend yesterday. We started school on the same day. We spent eleven of the next thirteen years in the same class. We studied the same undergraduate subject, even if at different universities, and both became chartered accountants. We were best men to each other in our twenties after which, for all sorts of largely geographical reasons we saw much less of each other but always kept in touch.

He died of a stroke on Christmas Eve. It was a sad funeral. A life taken too soon. Opportunity that was left that will now never be fulfilled.

For me my oldest friend, and the person known longest to me beyond my family, is no more. And yes it does make me feel mortal.

As I mourned Stephen's passing I reflected on the fact that I am 58 this year; Stephen had just reached that age. I note the poignancy of the fact that it happened that I was born in 58 (Stephen 57, just). That made me reflect on the passage of time. In particular it occurred to me that a person my age now at the time I was born was from the Victorian era.

That does make me feel old. More relevantly, I gave thanks for the fact that Stephen and I have not lived through world wars. Or the 1930s recession.

But we were brought up in a different era. My mother was a qualified nurse but was expected not to work once she had children. We had to unlearn all we were taught from the world around us as boys and young men to see women as our equals.

The same is true on issues such as race.

And gender equality.

And such issues are ongoing, of course: I make no pretence that equality has been achieved on these issues and others. But the change - and it has been massive - has happened without war.

Communism was the great threat of our childhoods - or so we were told.

Now it is climate change. And the evidence of the threat is stronger.

Not all change then has been beneficial, although a great deal I celebrate and welcome as a social liberal. The loss of some senses of community is real. The social cohesion if the country was stronger without a doubt: the postwar consensus was built upon it. I do not think it was social liberalisation that killed it: greed did.

And we did have some freedoms - especially of movement - the young do not have. We roamed far and wide as teenagers exploring the railway system and learning of much more in the process.

Some things remain. Stephen's Ipswich Town scarf came to his funeral. They were always more important to him than me.

And we differed in politics: from 11 or 12 he was always to the right of me. It never interrupted the friendship.

The technology of life changed. Oddly, Stephen was one of the few people who retained a loyalty to letters. I will miss that.

At the end our paths were very different. That is the way life works out. As evidence there weren't many to mourn his passing. I was pleased one other old school friend made it but we agreed that if we had embraced change then it was not clear that Stephen ultimately did.

I am driven by change. Stephen reminded me that even when that change is beneficial we must accept that this challenges many, even when they understand the need for it. I felt the conversation was ongoing even as we parted.

Maybe that's what friendship is.

Stephen Barnasiuk: 30 November 1957 to 24 December 2015