

The new Conservatism and the old

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The disorderly thrust of political events disturbs the symmetry of political analysis. Before Suez, one would have been tempted to speak of contemporary British Conservatism as a brand-new thing. Fashioned by tough-minded political savants and intellectuals for the new world that is post-Welfare Britain,—thriving, lively, realistic, with its feet firmly planted in the political middle-ground, its fingers on the pulse of the expanding middle classes, its winning smile on the faces of the "new men of power" and future safe behind the glass doors of the giant oligopolies—the "new Conservatism" offered itself as a going concern with a gilt-edged future, a safe investment for the politically uncommitted. Forced to re-examine the "new" Conservatism in the light of recent events, most Socialists would be tempted to say that it is merely the "old Toryism" writ large. They could certainly muster an impressive case. One would have to go back to the hey-day of imperialism—to plunge back several decades, behind two world wars—to discover the sources of (the assumptions which appear to have governed the Conserv-

ative Government's policy in the Middle East. If this is the "new Conservatism" in action, it is not merely "old"—it is prehistoric, dislocated from and insensitive to its environment, ranging abroad like a mastodon in Kensington Park.

But it seems closer to the truth to say that contemporary Conservatism is an unstable blend of the new and the old. The process by which it remained in business—the process of public theft and private accommodation by which the new Tories snatched up the Welfare State and roped in the middle classes—is an unfinished process, and precisely because it is unfinished, it has had a disastrous effect on the Party and its public philosophy. The scope of the Party has expanded, but its character has not radically altered. Within its structure, conflicting tendencies are held together in a state of comparative disequilibrium.

The left and the right of the Party are not two distinct groups, each assuages its prejudices by selecting symbols in the other's camp. The new middle class recruits to the Party are the most aggressively nationalist; the defenders of capital punishment promote defence cuts; the advocates of bipartisanship, turn out, under pressure, to be militantly anti-American. Mr. Angus Maude, whose *English Middle Class* (with Roy Lewis) is one of the classic defences of 'enlightened' Toryism, is discovered as one of the ordering minds behind the Suez Group. The Party is held together, not by a coherent social philosophy, but by an unquestioning allegiance to the most rootless archetypal images. It subscribes to a confused rhetoric: "Britain's prestige abroad" is a phrase which covers the Suez debacle, "the incentives of free enterprise" appear compatible with a widening dollar-gap and shrinking markets, a "property-owning democracy" supports the plea for "realistic rents", our "responsibilities to the Commonwealth" covers our wilful disregard for the imperatives of Commonwealth opinion. Party policy is consequently the pawn of irrational forces and the prey to disguised and muted pressures. Behind the facade of Butskillism and bipartisanship, the old prejudices wax, the old interests play, the old neuroses govern.

"Liberal conservatives", who distrust Mr. Butler's ambivalences, like to think that he was not necessary to them. This view is factually incorrect. Between 1945 and 1954, it was the rhetoric and the persona of Mr. Butler which worked such wonders for the Party. His success was due in large measure to the skill with which he assessed the electoral consequences of Labour's "peaceful revolution". But the Party has, for the moment at least, taken his measure: his 'philosophy' still provides the Party with its public front, but in a moment of crisis, it seeks its leadership elsewhere.

It is necessary to summarise briefly the main trends in that 'peaceful

revolution, in order to comprehend the altering shape of latter-day Conservatism, and the shifts in popular opinion which sustain it.

The period 1945 to 1951 can now be regarded as the focal point in a challenging new-style middle class revolution. It was a revolution with two distinct phases, and the Labour Party was responsible for only one of these, and even there it could not or did not wholly assess its social and political implications.

The limited revolution

The Welfare State—with its three main planks, social security, income redistribution and nationalization—had valid but limited objectives. It sought to redistribute wealth towards the middle, and buttress the structure of "opportunity" from below. It tried to redress the balance of social forces in the community—but not to alter the relationship of one group to another, within the still hierarchical structure of British society. The social pivot of the revolution of "Welfare" was, consequently located somewhere about the middle of the social scale. The consequences of increased assistance were to swell the ranks of the middle classes, and to validate what may be called 'middle' virtues in British society. As Angus Maude and Roy Lewis put it,

"A great part of the strength and of the value of the middle classes in English political life has been their ability to set off, within themselves, intellect against money, common sense against intellect, and a tradition of gentility against all three".
(The English Middle Classes, p. 72)

And later, perhaps, more revealingly,

"They are what they are by virtue not of trade but of organization, not of property but of independence; not by virtue of government; not solely because they wanted to have but because of what they wanted to be". . . . "What shall we do to be received?" the new middle classes have cried, and in every generation the retort has come — from above and below — 'Learn to behave like gentlemen!'"

(op. cit., p. 69)

As Alistair Cook observed, at the time of the 1955 General Election, the result would depend on how many working-class men, looking into their mirrors, saw middle-class faces. The Conservative victory was reply enough.

It is difficult to see what else could have been expected. So long as the

general pattern of the society remained inegalitarian, social mobility implied the gradual assumption of middle-class ways of life and middle-class values by the promoted. The economy remained, at base, capitalist in character: and because of the manner in which a capitalist economy functions and grows, an unequal structure of wealth—and hence of social power and position—was a necessary feature. Over and above the cost of social welfare, the imperatives of growth in a capitalist economy had to be obeyed. The Welfare State consequently established its own norms: given the logic of the economic structure, there were 'natural' levels beyond which redistributive taxation could not go, "realistic" costs below which health and housing could not be permitted to fall. These were the unspoken checks and balances of the mixed economy with a massive private sector. And although that two-headed monster was spawned in the no-man's-land between the two Parties, the cumulative pressure from the private sector tailored Mr. Butler rather than Mr. Gaitskell to the job.

It was reasonable to assume, therefore, that the Conservative Party, refurbished from the left, would continue to govern innocuously on the basis of a negative vote of confidence from those whom mobility had dislodged from their natural political allegiance. But the climate of post-War Britain, and the character of the support behind the Conservative Party in the country, was considerably affected by other, deeper changes in the society, with their roots not so much in the Welfare State as in the capitalist sector of the economy.

Logic of social change

The most important of these changes reflect mutations in the capitalist system itself. The growth of management—the proliferation of supervisory jobs in industry—marked the expanding scale of capitalist production itself. It was a witness to the growth in the scope of the service, distributive and supervisory functions in large-scale production, which had been taking place since the turn of the Century. The private sector consequently offered the most attractive opportunities, guaranteeing wealth, power and prestige. The young men of talent, particularly

from the lower-middle class, promoted by the mechanism of the State, found themselves drawn into positions of power, demanding loyalty and responsibility, in private industry. This was another stage in the logic of social change in a mixed economy.

To find the legitimate satisfaction of their ambitions in the upper ranks of management, implied the gradual—if difficult—acceptance of the whole philosophy of a private economy. In a limited sense at least, this assumption of new status undermined their allegiance to several of the cardinal principles of the Welfare State. Taxation became a public enemy: the guarantee of full employment, limited controls, the cost of state assistance,—these were re-interpreted as restraints and hindrances to growth and prosperity. When the authoritative voices of *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* called for "the removal of restraints", for an imaginative release from "the rigid state", for a "modest dash for freedom", they spoke as much for the new as for the old industrial elites.

The pressure for the removal of restraints was buttressed from below by the general sense, pervading the middle classes, that further redistribution of wealth could proceed only at the expense of their own social and economic prospects. These fears found release through a profound sense of irritation against the whole panoply of state assistance, and particularly against the encumbrances of the bureaucracy in government circles. No doubt these attitudes were to be found in their most aggressive form in the small but articulate group which had benefited most. But they had become in a sense the thrusting spearhead of the middle class revolution, and their responses to the conditions of post-War Britain had very soon eaten back into and undermined the whole morale of the society.

These various phases of the 'peaceful revolution' must be seen in the context of the cold war, and in the light of Britain's declining prestige abroad. A world of divided, hostile camps placed intolerable strains on a society undergoing profound social change. While the very fabric of the society was being rewoven, the dictates of foreign policy grew more rigid and insistent. Because of the role which Britain had chosen—as the pivot of the North Atlantic

alliance—she was committed to defence expenditure far beyond her means, and implicated in policies in Asia and the Middle East totally beyond her capacities. Her failures to adjust to the dramatic changes in the world beyond Europe, witnessed, not merely to the disintegration of the 'morality' of the Welfare State, but—more simply—to a failure of nerve and realism. The pursuit of prestige by a second-rate power in a nuclear age is a disturbing phenomenon to observe. Caught up by virtue of her weakness and dependence in the web of American diplomacy, Britain worked consistently against her best interests. She took such steps as the re-armament of Germany calculated to intensify the cold war, ignoring the more difficult but more rewarding path towards a military detente.

The logic of cold war politics was rigid, implacable and inhibiting. It forced restraints upon Britain in a period in which she should have been seeking a greater freedom of range and movement. Instead she conspired merely to maintain the polarity of power in the world. Her desire to retain—if not restore—her crumbling imperial heritage, fettered her freedom. And this reckless, half-hearted pursuit of prestige abroad was conducted under the compelling shadow of nuclear weapons, in a world in which fear itself has become the prime factor in stability.

Ethos of discontent

The consequence of these pressures, exerted upon the society from several quarters, was a state of muted but, at times, extreme moral confusion. The Society was an open arena, in which conflicting forces from without and within had free play. The political apathy which characterised the period between 1951 and 1955 had its source, not in disinterest, but in bewilderment. The economy had to reconcile within itself the opposing claims of the Welfare State and a refurbished capitalism: it had to balance off the cost of social security against the driving and persistent pressure for private capital accumulation. The widening dollar-gap, the prospect of shrinking markets, increased international competition, the burden of defence and of 'diplomatic' assistance to the "uncommitted" world, were constant irritants. At home, the

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society tried to accommodate a profound social revolution within the constraining limits of a mixed economy and a hierarchical social structure. It sought to satisfy the stimulated ambitions of the middle classes within the traditional social framework, and to establish an arbitrary community of interests between the groups whose power derived from consumer power and those whose power depended directly or indirectly on increasing profits. The morale of the society was beset by the play of unsatisfied ambitions, unfocused irritation, spurious dissatisfactions and uncertainties. For the 'peaceful revolution' appeared to have brought only the encroachment of bureaucracy, with its distancing effects upon intelligent and spontaneous participation in the life of the community: and the end of the War had brought only a self-perpetuating state of armed peace.

"But the most common reward today for success achieved through the legitimate, taxable channels is to find a boot crunching firmly on one's presumptuous head; and the boot belongs not to a member of the aristocracy, keeping presumption in its place, but to the Socialist state, the revolutionaries' state, the state of blessed opportunity.

And so here we are, with our degrees and our posh education, our prideful positions in the public service, our ambitious names in print, trying to get on with the work brought home in the bulging briefcase, while the baby cries in the next room or even in the same room, or while the mortgage slowly and respectfully strangles the life, the love, the adventure and the talent out of us."

(Time and Place, George Scott, p. 191)

Mr. George Scott's *Time and Place*, from which this passage is taken, is an unpleasant but representative document of this period. It catches in an authentic form the suffocated, thwarted ambition, the explosively inverted class prejudice, the rooted self-interest of the new men of power manque. It is through the 'salon, poujadism' of *Time and Place*, the disabled romanticism of *Look Back In Anger*, or the conspicuously anti-romantic amorality of the Lucky Jim 'archetype', that the temper and tone of the post-Welfare generation found their legitimate expression.

" Democracy v. Liberty "

In the end, it is the informing spirit of the 'peaceful revolution' which,

despite the remarkable achievements of social security, has not been satisfied. It is this spirit, in repressed forms, which is the source of the strange motions that disturb the ordered universe of post-Welfare Britain, and which has urged the Conservative Party into irrational and dangerous paths.

Through its attempt to capture the 'revolution', the Conservative Party made itself the guardian of a state which had preserved only the external forms of stability and ordered growth.

... "this vast and elaborate structure, which has come into existence as the end product of the activities of myriads of men seeking security as well as truth, may produce in single individuals feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, ultimately of revolt and destructiveness".

(The English Middle Classes, p. 66)

It was, surprisingly enough, two "new Conservatives" who glimpsed this prospect: and the same observation was given a more pointedly personal validation, in George Scott's autobiography: "Whether they know it or not, and I fancy they do not, the revolutionaries have bred a generation of counter-revolutionaries". Mr. Butler, it is true, seemed to believe that he was grooming merely a generation of realists. But there was evidence enough of an alien and irrational spirit abroad—not least of all in the ranks of the so-called 'moderates'. It is they, for example, who helped to fashion the ideology of presumption and prescription which assumed the status, during the Party's first term of office, of a new official philosophy. Prof. Oakeshott—the Party's latter-day Bagehot—reminded them that "political activity comes first and a political ideology comes after". And in fact, the new ideology was in no sense a social or moral philosophy: it was a kind of academic mythology. It was hostile to the study of politics by reason and intelligence; it was sceptical of the moral basis of political action: "government by the people" literally interpreted—as a form of "democratic tyranny", because it was "contrary to our political tradition and principles", and part of a dangerous tradition of thought which was purported to run "through the mystical clap-trap of Robespierre, St. Just, Lenin and Stalin!" (The quotations are from Democracy v. Liberty", by Peregrine Worsthorne, in *Encounter* for January, 1956. Mr. Worsthorne is a leader writer for

the influential organ of Establishment opinion, *The Daily Telegraph*: indeed, it is fascinating to watch the ideas in Prof. Oakeshott's *Inaugural Lecture* gain wider and wider currency, as they filter through the 'higher'-journalism of the weeklies and monthlies to the 'daily newspaper world'). This ideology was significant precisely because—in its popularised and degenerated forms—it prepared the ground for a disorderly retreat from reason. How the old prejudices must have flared and flourished when Mr. Utley—who is one of the liveliest and most intelligent minds on the Right today—could go so far as to whoop, "Democracy is out" in the first sentence of a *Spectator* leader (January, 1955). This kind of language persistently undermined democratic sentiments in the community: it eroded the foundations for the just and responsible conduct of public affairs: it created the ethos within which irresponsibility could thrive. The image of Britain's prestige abroad was *hoisted* as the unifying factor—and perhaps the only one—in the conflicting amalgam of political forces: and this image was pursued with remarkable 'flair' and 'vigour', quite beyond the reasonable limits by which policy must necessarily be constrained in the contemporary world.

Suez: the moment of truth

It would be wrong to see Suez in isolation. It is part of the pattern of six years of disastrous and misguided government. But it takes an event as traumatic as Suez to strip away the masks of rhetoric, and to expose the repressed sources of Britain's policy and its consequences. It is clear now that we have connived *both* against the welfare of the Arab peoples and the stability of the state of Israel, for the sake of the "national interest": and that we have used the obsolete weapons of power and intrigue to secure it. While the British and French troops remained in Port Said, we were, on an even calculation, about twelve hours away from a third world war. It is clear, too, that Britain has identified herself everywhere with policies calculated to thwart the colonial and national revolutions. It should be clear, for example, that in Cyprus, Britain has been waging what amounts to an imperialist war, and that—through Suez—she came perilously close to involving the British

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people with the hysteria of French reaction. It should be clear—with Hungary and Poland to point the moral—that Britain's cold-war policy represented a dramatic failure of responsibility to Eastern as well as Western Europe: and that nothing can redeem these blunders, except the patient and persistent work towards a military detente and a settlement in Europe. It is clear above all that the future of Britain depends upon the strengthening of a sense of responsibility to international organizations: that the "prestige" of Britain is a phantom, which can only be pursued at the expense of the fate of the world itself.

The Suez debacle mirrors, as well, the moral failure of the Left. The shortcomings of the 'peaceful revolution' on the one hand, the deformations of Socialism in Eastern

Europe on the other, should serve to convince us that the Socialist reconstruction of society demands the imaginative experimentation with forms of democratic control and responsibility hitherto undreamt of in 'Welfare' philosophy. The events of recent months should be enough to persuade the Left that the whole *raison d'être* of British foreign policy—and particularly the role of Britain between East and West—deserves complete re-examination. The whole philosophy of 'strategic containment and military allignment'—which are the keystones of American diplomacy—is bankrupt and dangerous to continue. The problem of a European settlement is pressing and immediate, but it must be solved on other moral and political grounds than these.

When we take recent trends in domestic politics into consideration,

it is clear that the Labour Party should see itself not merely as the passive agent of the parliamentary system, but—in a genuine sense—as the bulwark of democratic practice and the defenders of the tradition of reason, responsibility and patience in politics. It is the tradition of reason which has suffered extreme pressure during the past decade, from the reactionary Right and the reactionary Left alike. There is, when all is said and done, too much, rather than too little left for the Labour Party to do. The fact is that Britain can no longer afford the irresponsibility and instability which has become a characteristic feature of contemporary Conservatism. The whole ideology is obsolete and dangerous. Conservatism has disappeared into the wilderness of unreason, and it should be left there to sing among the nightingales.