

MODERNISING IS A CONSERVATIVE TRADITION

I remember sitting next to the late, great Sir Dennis Thatcher some time after our 1997 landslide defeat, and asking him for his advice on what we should do. His reply was very simple – “*get back to basic Conservative principles. But don't ask me what they are.*” As always, he was immensely shrewd. There is no canonical text, no authoritative list of abstract principles to which a Conservative has to subscribe. Our critics would say this means we can just chop and change in whatever way we like. But that is isn't quite true either. The truth is best caught by T.S. Eliot:

“ ...political thinking, that is, thinking that concerns itself with the permanent principles, if any, underlying a party name, can follow two contrasted lines of development. At the beginning may be a body of doctrine, perhaps a canonical work; and a band of devoted people set out to disseminate and popularize this doctrine...

But political ideas may come into being by an opposite process. A political party may find that it has had a history, before it is fully aware of or agreed upon its own permanent tenets; it may have arrived at its actual formation through a succession of

metamorphoses and adaptations, during which some issues have been superannuated and new issues have arisen. What its fundamental tenets are, will probably be found only by careful examination of its behaviour throughout its history.”

So we can learn a lot about Conservatism by studying our own Party's history. Today I want to focus on one particular episode – the Party's years in the wilderness in the mid-19th century, and its recovery under Benjamin Disraeli. You might just see some relevance to the challenges we face today, set out so well by David Cameron in his speech on Monday. Before taking you through my account of that period let me come clean straight away with two crucial points.

The only reason we have a Conservative Party today is because previous generations of modernisers led the Party to change as society around them changed. Sometimes we made heavy weather of all this – after our landslide defeat in 1906 for example. At other times we have shown extraordinary capacity for intellectual renewal very quickly – after the 1945 defeat. In the mid-nineteenth century we languished in opposition for longer than any other time in our Party's great history, but finally emerged to be a natural governing Party. It was a long hard slog, both for Disraeli and for the Party as a whole. Randolph Churchill

summarised Disraeli's career very crisply: "*Failure, failure, failure, partial success, renewed failure. Ultimate and complete victory.*" It is inescapably part of being a Conservative to be endlessly debating what you have to hold on to and what you can shed as the world around you changes. Or, as Disraeli put it, his task was to clarify "*the real character and nature of Toryism*" and to shed those qualities which had "*become in time obsolete, inconvenient, and by the dextrous misrepresentations of our opponents, even odious.*" We always say we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bath water. But in politics, unlike in childcare, it is not quite so clear where the bath water ends and the baby begins.

There is a second point as well. This isn't a set of political manoeuvres. There are some deep issues of principle. They are rarely explicit but they form a pattern buried beneath the argument. We are wrestling with two rather different principles which every one of us recognises in our own lives. On the one hand we want freedom, mobility and opportunity. This is captured in free market economics but it goes beyond that, deep into our nation's history of enjoying an ordered liberty which Conservatives wish to protect, and extend. And last night in the Commons we scored another victory in that never-ending battle. It means valuing the individual's judgement and respecting their right to shape their own lives. This is what David Cameron is referring to when he

talks about trusting people. But there is a second principle too. It is not just an abstract idea, it is a real psychological pull that we feel in our own lives. It is the desire to belong to something bigger than ourselves. It is the language of roots, community and neighbourhood. Often the sheer dynamism of a modern market economy or personal freedom can look like a real threat to this sense of community. People want to protect a set of values that can't just be reduced to the calculations of autonomous individuals in a market economy. This is David Cameron's other principle – sharing responsibility. The reason why I am a Conservative is that our Party has shown more wisdom and more skill in holding these two principles in a creative tension than any other western political party. Perhaps we can see this more clearly if we escape from the debates of Britain in 2006 and look briefly at British politics 150 years ago. Here goes.

The first compassionate Conservatives

It is typically ironic that Conservatism is at its most harmonious in the period before the word had even been coined. The liberal-conservatism of Burke, Pitt, and Liverpool combined optimism about human progress and respect for established institutions and traditions. It embraced Adam Smith's free-market economics and the reforms necessary for it to work.

But at the same time it was set in a framework of social and constitutional stability. As Lord Liverpool proudly observed in 1819: *“the legislature of no other country whatever has shown so vigilant and constant a solicitude for the welfare of the poorer classes; no other has so generally abstained from interference in the detail and operation of trade.”* This framework breaks down in the 1830s into a battle between, if you like, progress and reaction.

There was an unavoidable choice to be made between putting a foot on the accelerator of political and economic reform or on the brakes of a cautious Conservative aversion to change. John Stuart Mill identified the two half men who represented the contradictory impulses of that age as Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Bentham represented rational economic calculation, apparently immune to feeling for anything that was humane or beautiful. Coleridge represented romantic hatred of everything that was debased and mundane in modern life, leading to a Tory love of the past.

Conservatives in particular tried to develop a Christian political economy which softened the hard edges of free market economics. This is the Conservatism of great reformers such as Shaftesbury and Wilberforce. Because of their roots in the Church of England they believed in deeper

truths and principles against which market capitalism could be judged.

They were, if you like, the first compassionate Conservatives.

Increasingly Conservatives found themselves facing a tension between the social and constitutional principles they valued and the growing power of a modern market economy.

The Peelite split

It was this tension in 1846 which eventually led to the most catastrophic split in the history of the Conservative Party. Peel, the Conservative Prime Minister, attempted to end agricultural protection. His belief in free trade was truly progressive. The major beneficiaries would have been the new industrial workers in the cities who were paying much more for their food than if it could be imported freely from the American prairies which were being opened up. But free trade was undoubtedly a threat to a traditional rural way of life which Conservatives wanted to protect. Peel split the Party. His formidable young Tory lieutenant Gladstone left and went on to lead the high Victorian Liberal Party as the Party of free trade. The Conservative Party was driven back to its rural heartland. We were for a generation the English country party. In fact, the seats represented by Conservatives in 1850 looked very similar to those to which we retreated 150 years later. For a time the Party discussed

changing its name so as to make more explicit what was obviously the most important single principle on which Conservatism rested – we would have been the Protection Party.

How had the Party got itself into this position? It had a powerful sense of community and understanding that there was more to life than markets. And it had a strong sense of national identity, of the character of the country. This in turn led to a fear of the Industrial Revolution and free market economics as a dangerous threat to this sense of nation. As a result Conservatism looked back to a pastoral age. Sometimes this sense of loss was expressed in the most beautiful and touching prose imbued with a very English melancholy. Conservatives were particularly susceptible to the Victorian taste for medievalism. Conservatives looked back to the days when monasteries provided welfare locally rather than the standardised state systems of the 1834 Poor Law. There was a plangent romanticism to it all, expressed in everything from the novels of Disraeli through to the paintings of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood.

This was an emotionally potent brew. But it was not enough to guide the governing party of a major world economic power. It was a retreat into an historic defence of rural England against outside threats. We had retreated into our comfort zone. I used to worry this fate could overcome

us again. We could have ended up just representing the English shires, as the English National Party in a federal Europe.

This sort of politics was practised on the Continent too as the Industrial Revolution spread there. It found expression in a church-based country party that represented farmers and peasants. There was often a separate pro-business, individualistic, anti-clerical business party. This split is why the Centre Right has been so much weaker on the Continent than in Britain. One of the biggest single projects of the post-war centre right on the Continent of Europe has been to achieve what they called ‘completion’ as these two very different forces fuse into a single Centre-Right party. That fragmentation could easily have occurred in Britain as well after the Peelite split. But British Conservatives avoided this fate because, above all, of the genius of two men – Disraeli and Joe Chamberlain.

Disraeli

Disraeli saw as clearly as any Tory squire what was wrong with the brutal market economics of the Manchester school. And of course he himself flirted with all the medievalist hostility to modernity in the culture around him. But he escaped from mere nostalgia for a rural past: he turned this

into a programme for tackling social conditions in Britain's major cities.

He made the elevation of the condition of the people the great

Conservative battle cry. He meant by this first the inclusion of the

working classes within the pail of the constitution. But he went further to

mean active social reform.

He described in his novel 'Sybil':

“Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.”

‘You speak of-’ said Egremont, hesitatingly.

“THE RICH AND THE POOR”

Education, Education, Education

Disraeli briefly held office in 1868 after passing the second great Reform Act. Then came Gladstone's dominant administration of 1868 to 1874. One politically significant incident in Gladstone's administration perhaps shaped people's perception of Disraeli and his Party. Growing industrial competition from Germany was showing up the gross inadequacies of British education. There were church schools, voluntary schools and commercial schools but no universal provision and no state schools. Forster, the Liberal Minister for Education, thought he understood what Britain required. We should have a straightforward, nationwide network of state-run schools on the Prussian model. That was what the tidy minded progressives were aiming for and which he put into his first draft of his Education Bill. But the trouble was that it threatened the diversity and character of the nation's existing schools. The churches in particular were up in arms at the threat to their schools with their distinctive ethos.

Disraeli and the Conservative Party led the battle to protect the nation's church schools from this state imposed uniformity. A compromise was negotiated between the Government and the Conservative Opposition which protected the character of church schools, gave them Exchequer funding on a scale that they had not had before and ensured that new board schools should only be created as a complement to church schools rather than to replace them. Some Gladstonian Liberal MPs didn't like

this compromise. Eventually Forster's Education Act was passed in 1870 with the support of Conservatives and despite the opposition of a phalanx of Liberal diehards. I am sure that Andrew Adonis knows the story well and I hope he takes heart from it as we look forward to the Government's Education Bill.

Disraeli's Permissiveness

After a generation in the wilderness, Disraeli finally led the Conservatives back into office in 1874. It is hard nowadays to get excited about his Public Health Act or the Artisans' Dwelling-house Act. We are used to the idea that social progress is measured by the spread of conventional public provision. But Disraeli did not see it like that. He wanted legislation that empowered local authorities to tackle social problems and permitted rather than compelled them to do more. As he said "Permissive legislation is the characteristic of a free people". Some critics thought that the legislation was too permissive. There was legislation requiring a Plimsoll Line as a safety measure around merchant shipping but some critics mocked that the Government was so concerned not to over-regulate business that it didn't specify where the Plimsoll Line could be drawn - it could be a neat little circle round the funnel if the owners wished.

Disraeli's objective which was to 'gain and retain for the Conservatives the lasting affection of the working classes'. He recognised that the old Tory language of noblesse oblige would not work any longer – *'the principle of association replaced that of dependence as the foundation of the community.'*

One of the local mayors who was most energetic in using the new powers that Disraeli gave him was Joseph Chamberlain, the formidable boss of the Liberal caucus in Birmingham. His ambitious programme of civic renewal was made possible by the legal powers Disraeli's legislation gave him. I believe giving new pride and purpose to our great cities is going to be an important part of the renewal of Conservatism today.

The Conservative Coalition

These ideas of social obligation at home and national pride abroad came together in what became known as the One-Nation tradition of Conservatism. But Disraeli's achievement was only really completed after his death. It was in 1886 that the Liberal Party split over Ireland. Gladstone led the more radical Liberals to press for home rule in Ireland. Joseph Chamberlain led Liberal Unionists out of the Party and into

alliance with Conservatives. It was this event which secured the political dominance of the Conservative Party for a century. The Liberal Unionists changed the character of the Conservative Party profoundly - for a start it became British rather than English. Until that date Conservatism had essentially been a political force for the English shires. The Liberal Unionists also brought big business – the City of London had not returned a Conservative Member of Parliament: it had always returned Liberals. The Liberal Unionists also brought us seats in other big cities like Birmingham and Manchester. If you want a single measure of the scale of the Conservative landslide defeats in 1997 and 2001 you should just think of it as the loss of Liberal Unionist constituencies and a retreat to the English Conservatism of the mid-nineteenth century. The recovery of London seats in 2005 was the first crucial evidence of the Party emerging from its rural heartland.

For the next 100 years we extended the Conservative coalition. We did it above all by taking successive waves of disillusioned Liberals away from their decaying Party. From the Liberal split of 1886 through to the arrival of some of the most talented supporters of the SDP almost 100 years later, the Conservative Party regularly benefited from an infusion of Liberal support. Indeed, there are surprising parallels between David Owen's SDP and Jo chamberlain's Liberal Unionists. Both represented a

certain sort of non-conformist social conscience, that grew uncomfortable with Whig complacency. And of course the best and brightest of the SDP, such as Danny Finkelstein and Rick Nye, came over to the Conservatives in 1992.

Lord Woolton, the Party Chairman, and Winston Churchill nearly succeeded after 1945 in achieving their goal of a final merger with the remnants of the Liberal Party. They didn't quite achieve that. Nevertheless, when Churchill sent out his official letter of endorsement to his Party candidates in the 1951 election, there had been so many different groups joining the Conservative Party over the previous half-century that candidates were fighting with no fewer than 9 different titles. Since the SDPers joined us in 1992 the trend has been in the other direction. Now we just see the glimmering of a return to a process in which we once more win back Liberals who find us their natural home once more.

Civil Society

Conservatism is not a thin little doctrine into which we all have to fit our lives. Conservatism is not some sort of political code that we have to crack. It really is the distilled wisdom of the British political tradition

over the past two centuries. It is an organic growth and that is why its truths are not to be found in any single canonical text. How better to convey it than in narrative? Some critics are wary of narrative – far too trivial and post-modern they think. But Disraeli was the master of it. After all, he did actually set out his political ideas in his novels and you can't have more narrative than that.

Central to our sense of national identity is personal freedom. It is why Britain is the home of the classical liberal tradition. Since the war, the expansion of personal freedom, and of course market economics has given Conservatism its dynamism and its cutting edge. But there has always been something else too, a recognition that free British men and women are not atomistic individuals floating in a moral and cultural vacuum. They are not just consumers whose only moral obligations are ones they have freely chosen, we have inescapable obligations to members of our family and to all of our fellow citizens. That is why a strong civil society is so important. And indeed the state itself is one very important way of discharging those obligations. That is why Conservatives have never been mere libertarians. Personal freedom has always been rooted in a strong society.

There is a very significant pattern behind all this. Be it working with Forster to protect church schools, enabling local authorities to clear their slums, or supporting working class Friendly Societies, Conservatives were always on the side of enriching civil society. We have always understood and valued those institutions that stand between the individual and the state. They are bigger than any individual. They are a very powerful form of collection action. But they certainly aren't creatures of the state.

The trouble is that people think that for a Tory to value an institution it has to be several hundred years old, covered in ivy, with a special tie and a secret handshake before you can join it. If we want to see just how unfair a caricature of Conservatism this is then we just have to look back to our Victorian forbears. They were incredibly fertile in creating new institutions, though sometimes, like dubious antique dealers artificially distressing their furniture, they did like to pretend they were ancient already. In fact most of mediaeval England was created by the Victorians. We are just as fertile at creating institutions today, be it the London Marathon or the Notting Hill Carnival. These have rapidly become part of our national life. Indeed, the BBC is now discovering that a medley of tunes created by a German émigré 30 years ago has

already become a much-loved national institution – I must listen to it sometime.

Gordon Brown recently tried to define Britishness. He gave us a list of abstract nouns – liberty, responsibility and fairness. These are all good things but it sounds more like a United Nations declaration than a celebration of a distinctive national identity. What brings these principles to life and helps us to live up to them, and gives them their distinctiveness is when they are embodied in real living institutions.

Gordon Brown did talk about these in his speech, but there wasn't the same passion as when he is talking moral absolutes. For him public policy is always physics or geometry; it is never chemistry or biology.

When he says that only the state can guarantee fairness we know that he is ready with his steamroller to flatten out all those local institutions that stand in his way. Back in 1870 he would certainly have been on the side of those who wanted a Prussian system, not the Tories defending the hotch-potch of schools that had already been created without any state support.

All this matters enormously today. These institutions provide a public realm in which people can co-operate and they also provide a diversity of endless experiment to show what works and what doesn't. They are our

precious social ecology and we Conservatives have a long history of trying to enrich it.

Conservatism is rooted in our national life. We are not a bunch of ideological obsessions or social reactionaries denouncing our own society from outside it. We speak up for the best traditions of our own country. De Gaulle wrote a book entitled '*Une Certain Idee de la France*' and Conservatives ultimately rest their politics on a certain understanding of Great Britain. One of the Party's crucial challenges which we are tackling at last is to offer a convincing picture of what Britain is like today and what it could be like if it lived up to what is best about it. We speak up for the best traditions of our own country.

David Willetts MP

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