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FOREWORD

I HAVE KNOWN AND RESPECTED Peter Bauer for more years than I care to recall. The immigrant son of a Hungarian bookie, a former professor of economics of international repute, and now a British peer, few could be better placed to examine, with the objectivity of an outsider and the insight of one who has made his home here for more than half a century, the popular thesis that our suffocating class system is an impediment to Britain's economic progress and social harmony.

That British society is marked by class distinctions no one in their right mind would seek to deny. Britain is not, and is never likely to be, a classless society. Nor, *pace* John Major, is there any sense in wishing it to be one, Shakespeare had it right:

O! when degree is shak'd,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick.
...Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy.

The recent extraordinary popular manifestations following the tragically premature death of Diana, Princess of Wales, points a similar moral. There are many lessons to be drawn from the unprecedented phenomena we have all participated in and witnessed. But one is clearly the enormous importance the British people attach to the monarchy, the apex and symbol of Britain's ordered and orderly society, and the deep sense of national unity which this engenders.

Bauer has little difficulty in demonstrating that, for all its class structure, Britain is in fact marked by a remarkable degree of social mobility. So far from class distinctions acting as an impediment to economic progress, the true economic threat lies in those measures

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ostensibly aimed at eliminating such distinctions, ranging from the imposition of a stultifying egalitarianism through taxation to the elimination of excellence in education, and invariably involving restrictive government intervention – not to mention, at the extreme, the exploitation of the notion of class war, which is no more elevated than any other form of civil war.

The original version of this pamphlet appeared in 1978, on the eve of the Thatcherite dawn. The remarkable reforms of the ensuing years, as Bauer acknowledges in this edition, have made the British economy and British society more open and flexible than ever before – too much so, indeed, for the taste of some on both the left and the right. But the bogus critique still refuses to lie down. Bauer quotes from the *Observer* Editor, Will Hutton's 1996 best-seller, *The State We're In*, in which this country's alleged economic failings are ultimately, with it must be said a stunning lack of originality, laid at the door of "the British public school system".

Not that non-economic forces are irrelevant to economic performance: far from it. The model to emulate which Hutton holds up to us is Germany, evidently unaware that, successful though that country's economy has hitherto been, it is now threatened by a degree of rigidity far greater than anything that can be laid at the door of Britain's conspicuously open class system, as the President of Germany acknowledged when he lamented his country's loss of economic dynamism and the ossification of its society. Nor, for institutional reasons, will it be easy to remedy. The present head of the German Federation of Industry (BDI) has been moved to inveigh against the political paralysis which in his opinion stems from the combination of Germany's federal structure and its system of proportional representation.

It would be a malign irony if New Labour, while refreshingly freer from the Marxist mind-set of the class war than any of its predecessors, were to seek to impose that same paralysis on this country in the name of constitutional reform.

The Rt Hon Lord Lawson
September 1997

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE FIRST EDITION of this pamphlet appeared, it remains part of contemporary political folklore that a restrictive and divisive class system is the bane of this country. The system is supposed to be a major barrier to economic progress in Britain and also a significant source of justified social discontent. This is untrue.

I shall, first, summarise the widely accepted opinion about class in Britain; second, show that it is misconceived; and, finally, suggest that the widespread acceptance of the misconceptions has led to harsh restrictions on mobility and freedom and threatens further and even more drastic restrictions.

My central contention is that the established but erroneous view on class in Britain mistakes a differentiated but open society for a closed or even a caste society – that is one in which people's occupations are fixed by the class into which they are born. It confuses distinctions with barriers. In Britain, class distinctions do exist, but they are not, and rarely have been, significant barriers to social or economic mobility.

THE STANDARD CLICHÉ

IN THE 1970s, when Herr Schmidt was the West German Chancellor, he provided a terse summary of received opinion on the subject of class. He was on an official visit to London in December 1975 when the pound was weak and the balance of payments in heavy deficit. He was reported in the *Financial Times* as saying:

As long as you maintain that damned class-ridden society of yours you will never get out of your mess.¹

And indeed this was what foreigners are told all the time by the British intelligentsia. Thus the *Financial Times*' staff writer, who quoted Herr Schmidt approvingly, went on to say:

The single most important fault in Britain's social structure remains its propensity to accentuate class differences...Most foreigners can see this, but many people in Britain are curiously blind to the grim reality behind the Chancellor's words.

This is part of a stereotype. For many years now, politicians, journalists and academics have blamed on the class system just about every form of economic adversity or social malaise in Britain. Some of these allegations are plainly far-fetched as, for

¹ *Financial Times*, 11 December 1975.

example, the idea that a weak pound reflects the class system, they do not often say the converse when the pound is strong. Thus, speaking again in London in October 1977, Herr Schmidt said that the British economy had improved greatly; but on that occasion he said nothing about class.

In spite of the mounting academic evidence (which as we shall see, shows that social mobility in Britain is high), politicians and the *intelligentsia* continue to imagine class barriers exist and hamper the latent powers of the British people. Even the last Conservative Prime Minister subscribed to this prejudice; when John Major accepted the leadership of his Party, he famously declared:

We aim for a classless society: not in the grey sense of drab uniformity – but in the sense that we remove the artificial barriers to choice and achievement.

And the politicians of the Left continue to blame the social ills of Britain on its 'class structure'. Even a supposed moderate such as Roy Hattersley still declares – from his seat in the House of Lords – that:

There is not enough class war in Britain... We keep hearing about the politics of envy but the British working classes are incredibly lacking in envy. They take what's coming to them, they accept their inferior position in society, they see other people enjoying privileges that they can never aspire to and they take it without a moment's resentment.²

Commentators such as Will Hutton also lay the blame for much of what has gone wrong in Britain at the door of the class system. In *The State We're In*, he admits:

² Quotation taken from the television programme, *Class*, broadcast on ITV on 10 June 1997.

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Throughout this book, the persistent theme has been the destructive role of 'gentlemanly capitalism' and the privileged place occupied by finance and financial values in British society. Yet these do not appear out of a clear blue sky; they are socially produced, and the principal transmission mechanism is the British public school system.³

The underlying thrust is clear, namely, that the British class system is rigid and iniquitous, and leaves large reservoirs of talent unused to the detriment of both social peace and economic efficiency. It is also alleged to be an instrument of exploitation. The allegations misconceive the character of British society and the nature of economic activity. They also ignore simple and undisputed facts of British history and of British social, economic and political life. And the repetition of such false claims encourage a sense of passivity and disaffection among the nation's youth. As Professor Saunders has written in a recent analysis of social mobility in Britain:

The game is worth playing, even for those born into the poorest social conditions. The mountain-tops are within reach. All that is needed is the ability and the will to start climbing.⁴

But if the poor are told that they will never be able to reach the top of the mountain, why should they ever start climbing?

CHAPTER THREE

STEREOTYPE AND REALITY

ACCORDING TO THE STEREOTYPE, Britain is governed by a rich ruling caste. Yet Disraeli was Prime Minister from 1866 to 1868 and 1874 to 1880; Lloyd George, a very poor orphan brought up by an uncle who was a shoemaker, was Chancellor of the Exchequer by 1908, and Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922; and Ramsay MacDonald, illegitimate son of a fisherwoman, was Prime Minister in 1923-24 and from 1929 to 1935. None of them had been to university; Lloyd George and MacDonald had elementary education only, and Disraeli attended a relatively unknown secondary school. More recently, although Mr Heath and Mrs Thatcher went to university, their backgrounds are not exactly upper class. Nor, of course, were those of Mr Wilson, Mr Callaghan, Mr Healey, Mr Kinnock and Mr Smith. Mr Major, of course, came from a very modest background and left school at the age of 16 with only two O-levels. Of the contenders for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1997, Mr Clarke, Mr Hague, Mr Howard and Mr Redwood all went to state schools and were, respectively, the sons of a watchmaker, a small businessman, a Romanian refugee and a cost accountant.

Much critical comment on the rôle of class in British economic life is even more insubstantial. Those exposed to the stereotype could not guess that British industry is managed, and has been managed for decades or even centuries, by new men, people who have made their own way, often from humble beginnings. This is evident in the transport, food-processing, electronic, chemical,

³ W Hutton, *The State We're In*, Vintage, 1996.

⁴ P Saunders, *Unequal but Fair? A Study of Class Barriers in Britain*, Institute of Economic Affairs, 1996.

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retailing, entertainment, building, property, and plantation industries. But it applies in a large measure also to steel, shipbuilding, and the mass circulation newspapers. The British motor industry has always been in the hands of new men or of American companies; therefore it would not be right to attribute its past troubles to class.

In the inter-war period the leading figure of the British motor industry was Lord Nuffield, who began as a bicycle repairer and had had very little education. He made a large fortune, with part of which he founded Nuffield College. Indeed, it is quite usual to read accounts in the newspapers of the careers of very rich people who have started with nothing, side by side with articles complaining of the rigid class structure in Britain.

The richest man in Britain is, according to the *Sunday Times Rich List 1997*, Joseph Lewis. He was born in The Roman Arms, a pub in the East End of London where his father was landlord. His first fortune was made in catering; further fortunes were made in retailing, bureaux de change and currency dealing. He is now one of the largest shareholders in the auction house, Christie's. At least 20 of the top 100 richest people in the *Sunday Times* list are self-made. They include Jack Walker, the steel magnate; the Barclay twins, who started their professional life as decorators; Ann Gloag, a former nurse, who founded the bus company, Stagecoach with her brother Brian Souter; the musician Paul McCartney; the former Smithfields meat trader, David Thompson who founded the Hilldown food and furniture group; Trevor Hemmings, a former apprentice bricklayer who now owns the largest stake in Center Parcs and Pontins; Bernie Ecclestone, the man who owns and manages Formula One motor racing, has been the highest-paid Briton for the last three years. He is the son of a Suffolk trawlerman. Mark Dixon left school at 16 to sell sandwiches; in 1988, at the age of 28, he set up Regus which is today the largest provider of serviced offices in Europe; Sir John Hall, Paul Sykes and Sir Graham Kirkham, all three the sons of miners, made their

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fortunes through, respectively, the Metro Centre development in Newcastle, the creation of the DFS furniture chain and property development. Indeed, it is striking that there are six sons of coal miners in the list of the richest 500 people in Britain. All in all, only 31% of the richest 500 people in Britain inherited their wealth.

It has been just as possible for men from modest backgrounds to rise through to lead Britain's largest companies. Unilever, one of the most dynamic manufacturing companies in the world, grew out of a business started in the closing years of the nineteenth century by a Lancashire grocer who made his own soap. For many years the founder's successors as chairman and chief executive have been new men. Thus from 1960 to 1970 the position was held by Lord Cole, son of a clerk. Cole had a very modest education and started to work for the company at the age of 17. On retiring from Unilever, he became the government-appointed chairman of Rolls-Royce. (His son went to Eton, and then to Oxford.) Its current chairman, Niall Fitzgerald was born in Limerick and joined Unilever when he was 22.

Less familiar are the names of Sir John Hay (1882-1964), undisputed leader of the British rubber industry of the inter-war and early post-war years; Sir John Ellerman (1862-1933), founder of the Ellerman shipping line, who at the time of his death was possibly the richest man in England; the first Lord Catto (1879-1959), chairman of Yule Catto, director of Morgan Grenfell, and finally Governor of the Bank of England. All three came from poor families and started their business careers in very modest jobs in city offices. David Robinson, who gave £17 million to found a Cambridge college in the 1970s, is also a self-made man.

The higher civil service and Oxford and Cambridge are often thought of as the exclusive preserve of the upper and upper-middle classes, at any rate before World War II. But the first Lord Stamp of Shortlands (1880-1940) began as a clerk in the Inland Revenue in 1896. He reached a high position before he retired young, moved into industry, became a director of the Bank of England and

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chairman of the largest British railway company. A more recent example of how humble birth is no barrier to advancement is the career of Sir Terence Burns. He is Permanent Secretary at HM Treasury and often referred to as the most powerful mandarin in Whitehall – yet he was born in a council house in the pit village of Hetton-le-Hole in Tyne and Wear.

At Oxford and Cambridge some of the highest and most coveted positions have always been held by new men of very modest background, including people who had not been undergraduates there. For instance, Sir James Chadwick, the famous physicist, was a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge for most of the inter-war period, and became its Master in 1948. He was the son of an unskilled worker, and went to Manchester University on a scholarship. The world of the arts and entertainment has also been open to men of talent: Sir Roy Strong was the son of a struggling commercial traveller but was appointed Director of the National Portrait Gallery at the age of 32 and then Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum when he was only 39. Similarly John Birt was born in Bootle into an extended family of Liverpool dockers – yet became Director-General of the BBC by the age of 48. And Melvyn Bragg, the TV presenter and Director of London Weekend Television, was born and brought up in the family pub in Wigton, Cumberland.

Class domination of the British army before World War II is often thought to be so self-evident as not worth discussing. But for most of World War I the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was Sir William Robertson (1860-1933). Robertson, who enlisted as a private in the 1880s, was the son of a landlady. He published his memoirs under the title *From Private to Field Marshal*. For most of his life he dropped his aitches.

Similarly, the Church of England has often been criticised as being dominated by the middle classes; yet George Carey, the present Archbishop of Canterbury is the son of a hospital porter. He was born in the East End of London and left school at the age of 15.

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Not even the diplomatic service was closed to people of humble origin. Sir Reader Bullard (1885-1976) was the son of an extremely poor casual labourer. He entered the consular service before World War I, having largely educated himself, and rose to become ambassador to Iran at a critical time.

Perhaps the greatest example of the heights to which men of talent can rise from beginnings however humble is the man who, today, is the Chancellor of Oxford University, President of the Royal Society of Literature and leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Lords (he has also been Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and President of the European Union). For Roy Jenkins, clubman, bon viveur, academic, historian and politician is, despite appearances to the contrary, the son of a miner who went to prison in the Twenties for his part in the General Strike.

These are not isolated examples. They can be multiplied indefinitely. Prominent writers and scholars have recognised for well over a century the extensive social mobility in Britain, and especially in British economic life. De Tocqueville commented on the ease of entry into the British aristocracy in the nineteenth century and the rise of new men in society and in business has often been noted at length by academics and others.

A few years ago Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, two American sociologists, published an authoritative book, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*⁵ in which they argued that the degree of social mobility, including that affecting business leadership, was much the same in Britain as in the United States. In that book they quote a study published in Britain in 1912 under the revealing title, *The Recruiting of the Employing Classes from the Ranks of the Wage Earners in the Cotton Industry*.⁶ According to that study over two-thirds of owners, directors and managers in the cotton

⁵ University of California Press, 1959.

⁶ S J Chapman and F J Marquis, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 75, 1912, pp. 293-306.

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industry had begun their careers either as manual workers or in modest clerical positions. Lipset and Bendix wrote:

The researchers, surprised by their own findings, attempted to check them by interviewing company executives, union leaders, and economic historians of the industry. They found general agreement with their findings. Sidney Webb, the Fabian leader, commented, 'In Lancashire I think that practically all mill managers are taken from the ranks of the Spinners' Union'.

But the findings are of interest on wider grounds. First, the British cotton industry at the time was a relatively old industry so that the large proportion of new men may be surprising. Secondly, the industry has contracted considerably since World War I, which suggests that Britain's industrial decline has nothing to do with the class system.

There are many other academic studies which show the high degree of social mobility in Britain. They are often by authors who are critical of British politics and society but who are nevertheless prepared to recognise evidence on this point. (Examples include books by Professors D V Glass and John Westergaard⁷).

A major survey on social mobility was carried out in the late 1970s by a group of research workers under the direction of Dr John Goldthorpe, Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. The results were noted in *New Society* of 10 November 1977 in an article which also emphasised the remarkable silence with which these highly interesting results were received. The article deserves to be quoted at some length:

Over the past few months John Goldthorpe and his colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford, have begun to

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publish the results of their analysis of social mobility in Britain in a variety of sociological journals. And these, for once, challenge rather than reinforce stereotypes.

For they showed that Britain is a much more mobile society than the received wisdom suggests: that we are a surprisingly open society, with people moving up and down the occupational escalators in a bewilderingly complex pattern. For example, only a quarter of those in social class 1 – managers and professionals – had fathers in the same category: rather less than the proportion drawn from a manual working-class background (at least partly, of course, because the managerial class has been expanding so fast that it simply couldn't recruit from among its own members).

Nor is the loud silence which has accompanied the publication of these findings an isolated example of the reaction to research which doesn't fit easily into conventional pigeon-holes.

The absurdities of trying to categorise people into a rigid class structure are well-illustrated by the following letter which appeared in the *Observer*:

I was interested in your questionnaire on TV and had intended to complete it, until I noticed the usual horrid little box at the end, asking me to state my 'class'. According to the sociologists, I have two middle-class sisters and one working-class. I have one middle-class and one working-class daughter. My son-in-law was middle class until the age of 23 then became working class for three years. He is now middle class again. From now on I refuse to fill in any questionnaire which perpetuates such absurdity.⁸

⁷ D V Glass, *Social Mobility in Britain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954; J Westergaard, *Class in Capitalist Society* (with H Resler), Heinemann, 1975.

⁸ *The Observer*, 28 April, 1976.

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Within the last 18 months, two studies have been published which again provide notable confirmation of social mobility in Britain. In *Two Nations? The inheritance of poverty and affluence*,⁹ Paul Johnson and Howard Reid examined the sons who ended up in the top fifth of income distribution and investigated where their fathers were in terms of income distribution. In a totally mobile society with no inheritance of aptitudes and no differentiation in education and upbringing, the sons in the top 20% would have fathers equally distributed across the entire income range, so that 20% of their fathers would have been in the top quintile down to 20% in the bottom quintile. The authors estimate that in fact 10% of the sons in the top quintile had fathers with incomes in the bottom quintile, compared with 34% of sons in the quintile whose fathers also had incomes in the top quintile. Whether or not this represents a *perfectly* mobile society, it surely proves that Britain is not the closed and blocked society imagined by some social critics.

In another recent paper,¹⁰ Professor Saunders of Sussex University analysed data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS). This study traced the lives of a group of children since their birth in 1958 and investigates how they have fared during their school years and early careers. The parents of the individuals in the survey, and the individuals themselves, were grouped, by profession, into the classification system used by the Office of Population Censuses (OPCS). It showed that, dividing the classes into three groups (professionals; semi- and unskilled manual workers and the 'intermediate classes'), as many as 52% of the individuals studied had moved class. One quarter of lower working class had been upwardly mobile into the middle class, and a further half had been upwardly mobile into the intermediate class.

⁹ P Johnson and H Reid, *Two Nations? The inheritance of poverty and affluence*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 1996.

¹⁰ P Saunders, *Unequal but Fair? A Study of Class Barriers in Britain*, Institute of Economic Affairs, 1996.

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In British economic life such mobility goes back many centuries. Professor Donald Macrae wrote:

We have never, since Elizabethan times, had serious legal barriers to moving up or down social ladders, never had a closed nobility of the European kind. Our statistics, which on this matter take us back with some doubts to the early twentieth century, suggest a high and constant rate of mobility equal to that of the United States and greater than in Western Europe.¹¹

His findings have not been disputed. Indeed, the expression 'new rich' seems to have been used in England as early as the 15th century. And by the early 18th century Addison wrote:

A superior capacity for business, and a more extensive knowledge, are steps by which a new man often mounts to favour, and out-shines the rest of his contemporaries.

Addison might almost have been anticipating the question asked by Lady Bracknell more than a century later in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'Was he born in what the radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?'

¹¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 1976.

THE RISE AND FALL OF BARRIERS

THERE HAVE BEEN FEW class barriers in access to wealth and to management in Britain. But after the Second World War, British economic society did become less open and less flexible than it had been in the past. It needed the reforms of Mrs Thatcher's governments to re-open the road of opportunity.

In Britain the establishment and development of many businesses from small beginnings had become much more difficult by the 1970s. This was the result of the nationalisation of many activities, widespread licensing, far-reaching bureaucratisation and heavy taxation, both of persons and of small businesses. In addition, housing policy (primarily rent controls), trade union restrictions, minimum wages, so-called employment protection and closed shops all reduced mobility both directly, and by making it more difficult to start new businesses, indirectly. These policies and measures made it difficult for people to rise from poverty to prosperity by means of legitimate business activity. For people of modest background such progress was largely restricted to those who could advance through the civil service or corporate bureaucracy, or to the small number who could do so in the free professions. Many gifted working-class children (as well as many other people) had the capacity to establish and run small businesses, but not have the aptitudes or qualifications of a successful bureaucrat, nor the skills required to succeed in a bureaucratic society.

The reforms of the last 18 years removed many of these barriers: privatisation, the restraints imposed on the trade unions, deregulation, the sale of council houses and the great reduction in income tax have all helped to create an environment in which talented people have been able to succeed.

The journalistic profession illustrates how the barriers had risen and fallen. From the early 19th century until the late 1970s, journalism presented an excellent opportunity of advance for talented people of working-class background and with little formal education. Some of the great figures of 19th century and early 20th century British journalism, including outstanding and influential editors of *The Times* and *The Observer*, came from modest backgrounds and had little formal education. Compulsory unionisation and the widespread insistence on formal qualifications made such careers less likely in the late 1970s.

This closure of opportunities became well-recognised. An item in *The Times*¹² referred to the careers of Louis Heren, deputy editor of *The Times*, and Admiral Sir Raymond Lygo, the Vice-Chief of Naval Staff. They were messenger boys together on *The Times* and rose to their exalted positions from this beginning. The report concluded that in journalism such careers are not possible today. Again, Frank Johnson, then parliamentary sketch writer and editorial writer of the *Daily Telegraph* and now editor of the *Spectator*, received in January 1978 the award of Parliamentary Sketch Writer of the Year. He is the son of a working-class man, and his formal education terminated with one 'O' level (in commerce). He started as a messenger-boy on the *Sunday Express*. He is emphatic that, had the conditions of the 1970s endured, such a career would no longer be possible because of the widespread insistence on formal qualifications and career structure by unions and management. Today these restrictions have been removed and the media is once again a profession open to people from all backgrounds.

¹² *The Times*, 8 December 1977.

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As a result of these numerous restrictions Britain was, by the 1970s, much less of an open society or economy – the sense of a society or economy with *carrière ouverte aux talents* – than it was formerly. The prospects of many talented working-class children had been prejudiced also by the abolition of many schools catering to their needs, and the replacement of these schools by institutions intended to serve as social engineering laboratories rather than as educational institutions. But these were not the complaints of the critics of the British class system.

These obstacles to social and economic mobility and advance owed much to the stereotype of the class system. The belief that British society is class-ridden and therefore restrictive paved the way for the politicisation and bureaucratisation of life. Measures introduced ostensibly to assist the poor and to promote greater equality and opportunity, in fact, restricted social, economic and occupational mobility and made it more difficult for enterprising, ambitious and self-reliant working-class people to get on. In the prevailing climate of opinion, these obstacles to movement had come to be attributed to a restrictive class system, an attribution which is then used spuriously to justify further extensions and the erection of further obstacles.

CHAPTER FIVE

DIFFERENCES AND ADAPTABILITY

BRITISH SOCIETY HAS FOR CENTURIES displayed acute awareness of fine distinctions. The difference between a CB and a CBE is recognised to this day throughout the civil service, and often beyond it. Civil servants are unhappy to receive a CBE when they expect a CB, or an OBE when they hope for a CBE.

In matters such as education, speech and dress, many freely and widely accepted distinctions are related to social standing and class. In this sense Britain has indeed always been a class society. But for about eight centuries Britain has not been a closed society, much less a caste society. Britain has not had a closed aristocracy or nobility since the early Middle Ages. Marriage, money, services or official favour enabled many aspiring members of the working- and middle-classes to enter the aristocracy, including the highest ranks. Wolsey was the son of a Yorkshire butcher. Queen Elizabeth I was descended from a serf.

Nor could class barriers have obstructed economic progress or damaged the social fabric, since no significant branch of British industry or commerce has ever been restricted to a particular class.

Until well into the 19th century Catholics, Jews and Nonconformists could not enter politics nor, for that matter, Oxford or Cambridge. The practical effect of these restrictions on industry and commerce was extremely limited. Any significance was probably the exact opposite to what has often been suggested: these barriers induced ambitious people within these groups to go into industry and commerce. The restrictions may, therefore,

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have contributed to the conspicuous rôle of the Nonconformists in the development of British industry and commerce, notably so in such activities as banking, brewing, engineering and textiles.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the Nonconformists were joined by the Jews. Their economic success shows how misleading it is to think that exclusion from political activity necessarily inhibits the economic prospects of a person or a group. Jews had no political rights in Europe until well into the 19th century, by which time, however, many of them had become extremely rich and prominent in many forms of economic activity.

The presence and the unenforced acceptance of social distinctions and differences, including small differences and fine distinctions, was the outcome of centuries of relatively peaceful history. And, in an open and mobile society, such differences and distinctions do not restrict talent or inhibit economic progress. In fact, they rather promote ambition and achievement because they offer inducement, something to go for, at all levels of society.

The British upper classes usually absorb new men very easily. Indeed, the new recruits soon become indistinguishable from the class into which they have been recruited. The ease with which the upper classes absorb new men is apt to mislead casual observers and to lend surface plausibility to criticism. The situation, in fact, reflects the adaptability and tolerance of British society. But superficially it suggests a static society or even a rigid system. No one could have guessed the background of the late Sir James Chadwick from his conduct as Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, which was founded in 1348, and of which he became Master exactly 600 years later. Much the same could be said about Sir John Hay and about Lord Cole, whom I have already mentioned.

After only a single generation, persons of working-class origin can merge completely into the aristocracy. Thus the career, connections and even the physical appearance of the late Lord Robertson of Oakridge (1896-1974) would have suggested that he

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was an aristocrat. He was a general, British High Commissioner, Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, ADC to two monarchs, company director and chairman of the British Transport Commission. He was the son of Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, a plebeian in appearance and some of his manners. Again, when Granada recently announced its plans for a hostile take-over of the Forte group, much was made of the fact that the Chairman of Granada, Gerry Robinson was one of nine children of an Irish carpenter. Yet Rocco Forte's father had arrived in England a poor man and started the Forte empire with one milk bar in Regent Street.

The conjunction of assumed rigidity and actual flexibility of the social system sets up pitfalls which can trap the unwary. When Sir Sydney Caine became the Director of the London School of Economics, one newspaper said that he had been educated at Harrow; in fact he had attended Harrow County School, a very different establishment.

CLASS, EXPLOITATION AND EDUCATION

SOME VARIANTS OF THE PRINCIPAL LINE of criticism of the British class system deserve notice. One of these is the suggestion, sometimes explicit, sometimes implied, that the prosperity of the well-to-do has been extracted from the rest of the population. There have always been some groups or individuals who have benefited from monopoly, or from state subsidies, or from political manipulation. But even in the aggregate, such instances have not been of major overall significance in the industrial and commercial fortunes over the last two hundred years.

The allegedly restrictive character and class bias of English education is often blamed for various economic and social difficulties. However, the educational system did not preclude rapid British economic progress in the 18th and 19th centuries, promoted and propelled largely by people with little formal education, a phenomenon which academics and educationalists seem reluctant to recognise. Moreover, neither the presence nor the privileges of Oxford and Cambridge, nor the prestige of the public schools enabled them to stop other groups from setting up academies and schools. There was no general state education in England until well into the 19th century, but there was no official barrier to the setting up of educational institutions. Again, the educational system in Scotland was quite different from that in England. There were old universities in Scotland, and these were not restricted to members of the Church of England, nor controlled

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by it, and the school system there was also more extensive than in England. Yet Scotland has not outdistanced England either in economic performance or in industrial relations. Nor is it sensible to describe the restrictions of the educational system as class-bound, when those against whom it discriminated included aristocrats such as the Catholic Dukes of Norfolk.

Much has been made of the large proportion of prime ministers and cabinet ministers in the 20th century who had been to Oxford and Cambridge. This is not evidence of the allegedly closed character of British politics. To a considerable extent it reflects the prestige which ability and education commanded in British politics until recently; the inclination of those with political ambition to go to university, coupled with the emphasis at Oxford and Cambridge on studies helpful in political life; and the access of gifted persons from all ranks of society to these universities. The careers of Mr Wilson, Mr Heath, Mrs Thatcher, Mr Healey and all of the recent contenders for the leadership of the Conservative Party reflect the open nature of Oxford and Cambridge rather than the allegedly closed character of British political life.

POISE AND VULNERABILITY

THE RELATIVELY PEACEFUL HISTORY OF BRITAIN, the absence of foreign invasion or occupation and of violent revolutions (at any rate since the mid-17th century), and the ready acceptance of differences, including social differences, imparted poise and self-assurance to the upper and upper-middle classes and to the representatives of traditional institutions. This poise made it possible to resist outside pressures. A Cambridge college, an institution widely regarded as class- highly ridden and insular, has unhesitatingly elected foreigners to -coveted fellowships at times of substantial unemployment, or at times when the country was swept by xenophobia. Similarly, it was able to elect to a fellowship a scholar from Communist China a few days after a Chinese force heavily defeated a British regiment in Korea. Such action is far less likely, perhaps even unthinkable, in American and Continental universities, which are generally thought to be much less class-ridden and restrictive than Oxford and Cambridge.

But the prolonged and largely unquestioned acceptance of differences and distinctions also made for vulnerability, in that the upper and upper-middle classes were not forced to examine or rationalise their position. They were thus ill-placed to face the upsurge of egalitarianism in the Western world. Having taken their situation for granted, they could not analyse or explain it. Their spokesmen or representatives knew and, perhaps, could even articulate the distinction in rank between a baron, a baronet, and a knight, or even between a CB and a CBE, but not that

between a differentiated yet open and mobile society on the one hand and a restrictive, closed, or caste society on the other. Nor were they able to scrutinise effectively such arguments as that the incomes of the well-to-do had been secured at the expense of the poor. They were thus unable to counter the arguments such as those often adduced for egalitarian policies, or in favour of the far-reaching privileges to trade unions. More generally, they were unable to resist effectively the arguments and sentiments which resulted in the politicisation of social and economic life, a politicisation often deemed necessary to offset the alleged restrictive class bias in British politics.

The upper- and middle-classes were intellectually unarmed to meet the egalitarian thrust, perhaps even more than are businessmen to meet the more specifically economic arguments of self-styled egalitarians. The resulting loss of poise and nerve was accentuated by the emergence of a guilt feeling over the presence of differences, in the face of growing belief that all such differences are abnormal and reprehensible.

INTELLECTUALS AND EGALITARIANS

BRITISH INTELLECTUALS ARE MUCH MORE preoccupied with class than their counterparts on the Continent, where class distinctions have usually been much clearer and firmer. There may be various reasons for this preoccupation of British intellectuals. Because they read and write English, they are apt to compare British society with American society (which on the surface at any rate is more open than British society), rather than with the other societies which in any case they know much less well. The long and relatively peaceful continuity of British history and society may have been a more important factor.

The absence of violent change has suggested a stable social system and an impregnable and static ruling class. The unobtrusive ease with which new men rose in the social scale and became indistinguishable from their former social superiors reinforces the plausibility of this suggestion. The open and mobile character of British society compared to Continental society may also have enhanced preoccupation with class. It made the aristocracy and the prosperous groups more accessible and conspicuous, and thus more envied and resented than elsewhere. They became more obvious targets than their counterparts abroad.

The reasons which I have suggested for the obsession of the British intelligentsia with class are conjectural. But whatever the reasons behind the misleading stereotype of the class system, its widespread acceptance has sustained policies which are restrictive,

which obstruct economic achievement and advance, and which cause resentment and even bitterness. As I have noted earlier, these sentiments are misdirected because they are based on mistaken ideas about the forces behind the restrictive measures.

The persistent harping on differences and distinctions is not designed to bring about equality, but to promote a thoroughly politicised society in which all aspects of life are subject to political direction. But the large scale, politically enforced reduction of social and economic differences, serves only to exacerbate another difference, namely that between rulers and subjects. Those who do not relish this prospect will do well to examine critically the stereotype of the class system, and also ponder both the background of social and economic differences, and the ultimate objective of ostensibly egalitarian measures.