



Autumn Address

# The Politics of Manners

and the uses of inequality

Peregrine Worsthorne



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



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## The author

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## 1

### Rentiers of the future

AS PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE GO I AM NOT WHAT COULD POSSIBLY BE called rich. Nobody who has been salaried on the *Telegraphs* all his career is rich. Yet because I own a very modest house in Fulham – far more modest due to my improvidence than those of most of my professional juniors, let alone peers – and another on a river in Essex, my daughter stands eventually to inherit a small fortune. She is, if you like, an heiress. And if the daughter of a more than normally improvident second-son journalist who has spent his entire working life in Grub Street is an heiress, there must be many hundreds of thousands of people of her generation with far, far greater expectations. Inheritance is no longer a privilege of the rich. The children of the entire middle class can reasonably bank on inheriting a sizeable nest egg more than sufficient to enable them to educate several children privately, if they so choose, or to buy a bit of land or to build up a library, or even – dare one admit it – to bring up their offspring to lead lives of leisure. A new rentier class is in the making: possibly a richer rentier class than the one that emerged in the 19th century; and this, to anybody of my generation, is a most incredible turn-up for the book.

Incredible, because after the war my generation simply took it for granted – some with enthusiasm and some with resignation – that egalitarianism was the wave of the future. I remember the panic that hit some of my rich fellow officers – Astors and Barings – when the news of Labour's victory in 1945 reached our mess in Holland. They thought the game was up there and then, and blocked the 21st Army Group headquarters' communications system telephoning anguished instructions to sell to their stockbrokers. As it turned out, for them the game wasn't up. The very rich managed to survive and do quite well under socialism. For short of forcible expropriation as in a revolution, it is exceedingly difficult to dispossess the very rich. The Labour Government did consider a punitive wealth tax. But the proposal bristled with complications on how to implement it, and had to be abandoned. Nor was it possible to devise a form of death duty that entirely stopped up the bolt-holes

through which the very rich might pass on some of their fortunes. New fortunes were not altogether ruled out, either. Where, however, the egalitarian spirit of the age did succeed was in making the rich feel insecure. If egalitarianism was less than wholly successful practically, it was very, very successful psychologically.

Permit me here a personal reminiscence. Shortly after the war my elder brother inherited a large estate in Lancashire. He was delighted and absolutely determined to live there, as he has succeeded in doing. But at the time enormous pressure was put upon him by the rest of the family to sell up before the land was nationalised. All the conventional wisdom of the period had it that the days of landed estates were over. Did my brother not realise that crippling taxation would make it quite impossible for him to repair the roof, etc? And where were the servants going to come from? In the event, he bravely stuck it out and prospered, to the great advantage of the village and county of which he is now Lord Lieutenant. But how many others gave up the ghost and handed over to the National Trust? As for successful businessmen, they kept their heads down well below the parapet. It did not do to be seen to be making money; let alone passing it on. Of course people were making money and were handing it on. But the less said about it the better, since no one in their senses wanted to tempt the envious fates.

Such defeatist attitudes continued into the Macmillan years. And understandably so, since socialism remained, under the surface, the ever present threat; or if not socialism, inflation as the price that had to be paid to contain and appease socialism. But inflation is as much the enemy of a rentier class as socialism. There was a lot of wealth around under Macmillan. But not for a moment did those in possession feel confident that it would survive long enough to be passed on. It was a period of phoney conservatism. Everybody knew that the battle against socialism had not yet been fought, let alone won. The trade unions were as powerful as ever. Eat, drink and be merry today. But don't suppose for a moment that it will all last for very long.

Harold Macmillan's was a superb rear-guard action. He was a magician who conjured the threat of socialism away for the duration of the performance. But it was bound to return as soon as the curtain went down. Nothing had really changed,

and certainly nobody in his senses would have dreamed of thinking that the days of inherited wealth would ever come back again for keeps.

After a decade of this Thatcherite Government it is now not inconceivable to believe that they have done so. Inherited wealth, you will object? Surely that is not at all what Thatcherism is about – and I readily concede your objection. Inherited wealth is indeed not what Thatcherism is about and I noticed a leading article in *The Sunday Times* a few months ago urging the Prime Minister to make sure that the entrepreneurs of today did not turn their children into the public schoolmen of tomorrow, as happened in the 19th century. What Thatcherism is about, of course, is wealth creation, restoring dynamism to the economy, getting rid of all those socialist attitudes and values that stand in the way of productivity and commercial and industrial enterprise. The creation of new wealth is the aim, not its transference to the next generation; still less the preservation and passing on of old wealth. But it so happens that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide effective incentives for the creation of new wealth which do not allow for the new wealth to be passed on to the next generation, because most human beings, once given the chance to accumulate wealth, do not want to amass fortunes simply for themselves. They want to be able to do well by their children, and won't give of their best if this instinct is frustrated. And if new wealth is allowed to pass on its wealth, no tax system can either in practice or in equity disallow the same privilege to old wealth. So in effect, if not in intention, Thatcherism is about inherited wealth, as much old as new, and if today's tycoons were laughing all the way to the bank after Mr Lawson's last budget so also, I am glad to say, were yesterday's grandees.

Nor can it reasonably be said that their laughter, or relief if you like, is misplaced or premature as it would have been during the Macmillan years. For this time socialist egalitarianism has well and truly met its Waterloo. Mrs Thatcher's victory over the miners changed the balance of power in this country, even more than did Baldwin's victory in the general strike fifty years ago. Mrs Thatcher's victory was no conjuring trick, or sleight of hand, since unlike Macmillan's it was not won by paying danegeld in the form of inflation. Nothing is certain in this world,

least of all perhaps the conquest of inflation. But it is beginning to look as if those with wealth can begin to feel a little bit more secure than they have been able to feel since 1945. Nor is this only a matter of power in the sense that nowadays the big battalions, both politically and economically, are on the side of the 'haves' rather than the 'have nots'. It is also, to some extent, a matter of psychology. For if the spirit of egalitarianism, of fair shares for all and privileges for none, could reasonably be credited with creating the wartime spirit which saved the nation in the 1940s, something like its exact opposite – incentives for the outstanding and rich rewards for the successful – has to be credited for creating the spirit which saved the nation in the 1980s. Yes, saved the nation, for that is what Mrs Thatcher has done, not as dramatically as Churchill did, but scarcely less profoundly since when she came to power the threat of economic ruin was very real. Nor was it averted without the equivalent of much blood, sweat and tears in the form of mass unemployment. But it was not socialism that wrought this deliverance, or anything stemming from socialism. The victorious recipe was individualism, and just as corporatism and even socialism gained immense popular momentum by being associated with the wartime victory – a momentum lasting for at least thirty years – so can individualism hope to gain a comparably long-lasting momentum from its association with Britain's most recent deliverance. By which I mean to say that there is little likelihood in the foreseeable future of the British people turning against the entrepreneurial geese that have laid the golden eggs. Not only has inequality been a practical success but it has also scored a mythological victory as well. All this was meant to happen when Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne in the early 1950s. People wrote and orated about a new Elizabethan age and looked in vain for the new breed of Francis Drakes and all the other glorious buccaneers. Well, we have now got them, in the age of Margeret Thatcher, belatedly, only in the nick of time, and I suspect that the last ten years will soon acquire a kind of legendary brilliance, associating individualism, Thatcherism, call it what you will, with national glory as well as national prosperity.

What I am seeking to establish is that wealth, new and old, can breathe a bit more freely; not only can but should, and

the purpose of this lecture, as you may have guessed, is to suggest how this new freedom can be put to purposes which so far have not figured on the Thatcherite agenda, social purposes rather than exclusively economic ones. Economically speaking, the case for egalitarianism is now upheld by few, even within the Labour Party. If Britain is to compete with the rest of the world in industry, in commerce and above all in the many new service industries associated with the City of London, those who excel in these high-risk activities must be allowed to earn lots of money. This may not be laudable. But it is certainly inevitable. So much is now almost universally admitted. But it is admitted by many rather in the manner that in wartime people admit that wars cannot be won without legitimising male aggressiveness or bloodlust. The attitudes to yuppies is very revealing in this respect. Few would deny that they have played a crucial part in the expansion of the City which in turn has played a crucial part in our economic recovery. But nobody loves them. As Kipling might have said, *it is yuppy this and yuppy that, and chuck him out the brute, but 'es saviour of the economy when the shares begin to fall.* Let them earn lots of money, since there is no alternative. But don't give them social or moral approval. It could be argued, of course, that their general conduct is not such as to deserve moral or social approval; that they are vulgar, loud-mouthed, drunken jobboes, scarcely better, if at all, than football hooligans. That may well be so and I would not wish to argue otherwise. But the question has to be asked why they are as they are and the answer, I suggest, is that as a result of decades of egalitarian attrition there nowadays exists no upper class at the top of society with enough social authority to keep them in order and teach them how to behave.

## The duties of wealth

Mention of the upper class usually gets me into trouble. People switch off or begin to mock. So let me hasten to say that I am not about to call for the restoration of the British aristocracy. All I am saying is that yuppy new wealth has come into being at a time when there are no generally understood criteria of the duties of wealth, old as much as new. Lords and Ladies nowadays, if the gossip columns are to be believed, seem to behave, as often as not, as vulgarly and disagreeably as do yuppies, and to be almost indistinguishable from yuppies. No, it is most certainly not my intention to recommend the contemporary hereditary upper class as a model of anything. But in their defence, I would maintain that they are the products of a long period when vulgarity was almost required of them, as a mark of respectability or acceptability in the age of the common man. Not to be vulgar was to give oneself airs. In any case, since the gentlemanly game was up, why continue to play by the rules? Having been confined to the dustheap of history, the upper classes took on the colouring and the aroma of refuse. I have watched this process from its early beginnings after the war – so many admirable public schoolmen with good war records returning to find themselves out of a job; out of the jobs, that is, they were brought up to do. After the First World War, it was the private soldiers who returned to a country that had no place for them. After the Second, the same fate applied more to the officer class whose amateurish role in society was increasingly usurped by professionals. I am exaggerating, of course. The rate of change was not as sudden as I am suggesting; not nearly sudden enough for radical extremists. And many of those I am remembering did succeed in adapting to the spirit of the age, going into advertising and even journalism. But many more did not, and in the Fifties one saw them hanging around the London clubs like lost souls. Relatively few of my contemporaries were killed in the Second World War; far fewer than my father's in the First World War. But a higher proportion of my friends than his failed to make the grade after the war, and in some ways their slow disintegration in an alien world

which had no time for them was almost sadder – because less tragic – than the heroes' death at the Front of an earlier generation.

Hereditary wealth remained to a surprisingly large extent intact, as did privilege. Britain's social revolution after the war was very gentle and civilised, materially speaking. But the egalitarian *Zeitgeist* left nobody in any doubt that in the new Jerusalem being built by Labour the hangovers of aristocracy were a liability rather than an asset; objects more of ridicule than of admiration to all Left-minded people. It was a pity they couldn't be legislated out of existence. But that was impossible under our Parliamentary system. So for the time being there was no choice but to put up with this albatross until it died of natural causes (rather as the Bolsheviks in Russia have had to put up with Christianity), and to complain all the time that it was not dying nearly fast enough for the country's good. Outwardly the class system continued. That is to say its forms were preserved – Eton, Oxbridge, Brigade of Guards, Ascot and so on. But what was it all for? Into what social scheme of things did this continuation of privilege fit? Confusion reigned, to the point where Eton boys, for example, self-consciously developed oikish accents and the likes of Lord Harlech (British Ambassador and President Kennedy's friend) would dress down in jeans for dinner and make those who arrived in black tie feel that it was they who had committed some social gaffe. Upper class accents, correct diction, formal clothes, good manners, superior education, even morally correct behaviour, instead of bestowing social authority on a man, actually detracted from it. It was a social advantage to be common and a distinct drawback to be cultivated. Of course, egalitarianism cannot be blamed for all these developments. But a reigning doctrine that says Jack is as good as his master, that rank is the result of past exploitation, that proletarian values are best, was bound to demoralise the old upper class by obliging it to pay lip service to a whole set of notions in which it could not genuinely believe.

Given socialist assumptions about the shape of the future, a demoralised upper class was obviously not something to worry too much about. In no time there would be a new classless society made up of public spirited citizens all bound together by feelings of communal solidarity born of social justice. In that

brave new world there would be no need for a ruling class endowed with social authority since everybody would voluntarily want to behave well; to work hard, to serve the community and so on. Under socialism there would be far less crime, far less violence, far less aggression, all of which were the inevitable consequences of an unjust system. Property was theft. So all that was needed to abolish theft was to abolish private property. Of course I am over-simplifying. Intelligent socialists, like Tony Crosland, did not intend to abolish private property. But an essential tenet of their socialist faith was the belief in socialism's morally uplifting consequences. People would become more civic-minded; better citizens; more law-abiding; more considerate and sensitive to the needs of others, and so on. In other words, there would no longer be any call for authority figures to impose social control from above, since socialism would have removed the causes of deviant behaviour. Whether or not such an ideal socialist society is ever attainable I do not know. Suffice it to say that it was not attained and is so unlikely ever to be attained as not to be worth considering at this stage of human development. It was not proceeded with if only because the economic consequences of trying to attain the ideals in a free society – trade union power, high taxation and, above all, inflation – nearly ruined the nation. So much became clear in the last years of the Callaghan Government. Something had to be done to restore industrial discipline, to allow managers to manage.

Under Mrs Thatcher something has been done. At least on the shop floor there is now once again a clear chain of command. Jack is not as good as his master. It is accepted on all sides – even by the Labour Party – that the master deserves to be paid more than the man and that his orders have to be obeyed. The idea that businesses can be run on the basis of co-operation between equals has pretty well entirely gone out of fashion, except as a kind of incantation which fools nobody except possibly the Liberal Party's industrial spokesmen. And most workers, let alone managers, seem to find the restoration of hierarchy something of a relief. They know where they stand. But so far this recognition that hierarchy may be a good idea applies largely to people at work. The inevitability that some people have to give orders and others obey them is seen as the

high price society must pay to get the economy moving again; part of a necessary efficiency drive. But increasingly in the late 1980s we are beginning to realise that there are other pressing problems over and above getting the economy moving again; problems to do with law and order, good behaviour in public places, good manners, social obligation. And the question that now needs to be posed is whether the restoration of hierarchy might have as constructive a role in alleviating these problems as it has had in alleviating our economic problems. It has been found necessary to allow some people to become much richer than others, much more powerful than others, in order to restore prosperity to Britain – the restoration, if you like, of a boss class. But our challenge today is to restore civilisation to Britain, to alleviate social rather than economic disorder, and the question that ought to be asked is whether the restoration of hierarchy might prove as beneficial socially as it has economically. In other words, do we need a new social class as well as a new boss class, not just functionally superior people who give orders and provide leadership in particular fields – business, banking, the professions, etc. – but socially superior people who exercise a much more intangible kind of civilising influence across the board?

In these kind of waters one soon gets out of one's depth. So let me begin cautiously at the shallow end. I am much struck when travelling on the underground either to or from work, how business and professional people nowadays seem to think that their responsibilities begin and end at the place of work. On the underground they sit as does any yobbo – lolling in the seat with their legs wide apart. Their verbal language often is equally loutish and they never get up to let old ladies have their seats. At work they do behave like superior persons, accepting extra responsibilities as a result of their executive position – staying late, renouncing holidays and so on. But off duty their behaviour and manners are quite indistinguishable, say, from those of the building site labourer. In the socialist dream world this would not matter at all, since the building site labourer would have become as much of a gentleman as the doctor or lawyer. But the socialist dream world has not come about. Instead of everybody becoming a gentleman, it is more a case of everybody becoming a yobbo – not at work, where hierarchy



has restored a measure of discipline – but when not at work, or when at play. Of course this matters dreadfully. Our public places are becoming increasingly disagreeable and even dangerous. This used not to be the case very largely because hierarchy played a part in maintaining order and decorum outside the place of work quite as much as inside.

Before the dawn of equality, there were lots of authority figures around in public places – as many authority figures as there were members of the upper and middle classes. Almost everybody respectably dressed and speaking with the right kind of accent – women nearly as much as men – was an authority figure able to over-awe merely by his or her presence. One such person in a railway carriage was enough to promise order and decorum and to deter bad behaviour. Nowadays only a policeman in uniform can be relied upon to have that effect. A vicar can't, a doctor can't and most certainly a peer of the realm can't.

In some ways this is a good thing. It is a good thing that ordinary people should no longer have to go around in fear and trembling of their so-called social superiors. But in other ways it is a bad thing. Take the recent case of the famous baritone, John Cashmore, who was set upon by thugs and beaten to a pulp on the crowded Paddington to Birmingham Intercity train, without any of the other passengers coming to his aid. In the old days the likelihood is that some middle class type would have simply ordered the attacker to desist. As late as the 'fifties, if Miss Marples had said "Stop that, my man" – "my man" would have stopped. As it was, those middle class elements present at the incident did nothing except offer business cards after the damage had been done . . . not at all the kind of public school, officers-and-gentlemen behaviour which the great Dr Arnold of Rugby would have demanded.

Most probably the public school types present were prudent to do nothing, since any attempt by them to intervene might have aggravated matters. A plummy accent provokes more ridicule than respect, and to be well-dressed and politely spoken is more a reason to keep quiet and retain a low profile than to start throwing one's weight around. But is it wholly desirable that decades of egalitarian indoctrination should have knocked all the stuffing out of the top sections of society and

all the deference out of the bottom sections? If the result had been a spirit of fraternal and comradely civic responsibility uniting all sections of society, that might have been desirable. But that, as we have seen, has not happened. What has happened is that we have all the evils of divisiveness arising from great economic inequalities without any of the advantages of social control which traditionally go with class stratification.

## Incentives to rise

Incentives are all the rage in the economic field. It is taken for granted that economic man won't give of his best unless he is tempted by the prospect of making more money. Carrots (and sticks, too, for that matter) are back in fashion for economic man. But not yet for social man, who is assumed to be able to do without them. By social sticks and carrots I mean those incentives and disincentives having to do with a person's desire to rise above the station into which he or she was born, or at least to avoid falling below it. No one can read English literature without appreciating the extent to which a desire to rise socially and not to fall socially affected behaviour and manners, to the point where in many cases people were quite as anxious to conform to the code of a superior class, or to avoid breaking that code, as they were to conform with, or avoid breaking, the law of the land. If greed played a part in activating people to put their best foot forward economically, snobbery (in the twentieth century use of the word) must be given the credit for activating them to put their best foot forward socially, ie. to improve their manners, their speech, their education, their appearance. Not their morals, admittedly, but pretty well everything else. Minor public schools aspired to the standards of Eton and Winchester and struggled equally hard not to be taken for grammar schools; line Regiments were determined to show that they were better soldiers than the Brigade of Guards and could not possibly be mistaken for the Pioneer Corps – and so on in every field.

The economic dynamic of greed is now very much back in favour, at least within the Conservative Party; and we all wonder how anybody was ever so naive as to suppose that an efficient economy could ever function without giving it considerable scope. But the dynamic of snobbery has not yet been re-legitimised, and very few Tories seem at all aware of the part it used to play, and could again play, in raising social standards.

That a man should aspire to own more expensive goods – that is accepted as a desirable motivation, since it might be expected to add to national wealth. But that the same man might also aspire to a superior social class, that is felt to be socially

undesirable – mere snobbery, without any beneficial purpose. But a desire to rise socially *does* have a useful purpose; is indeed an essential part of the civilising process.

Courtly conduct, let us remember, started at the top of society and gradually spread downward. It was, broadly speaking, what happened at medieval princely courts – as the adjective 'courtly' implies – and covered table manners, clothes, hygiene, language and diction, treatment of women, swearing, and codes of honour and chivalry. Anybody aspiring to be acceptable at Court had to conform to strict rules of behaviour. Castiglione's *Courtier* in the sixteenth century was the most widely read book in Europe. Thus did the civilising process begin: by making successful careers conditional on courtly – or gentlemanly, as it came to be known – conduct. Boorishness became unfashionable, leading to exile from Court. So by and large, at any rate in the matter of externals, the powerful conducted themselves with dignity and decorum – dressed well, eschewed bad language, were polite to women, and compelled those beneath them who wished to rise in society – ie. the bourgeoisie – to do likewise.

Something else happened as well. Because good manners and behaviour came to be associated in the public mind with those who exercised power, they slowly acquired an inherent authority of their own. Thus people who spoke well, dressed well, etc. – those, that is, who looked and sounded like ladies and gentlemen – came over the centuries to command a kind of innate authority, irrespective of whether or not they were genuinely wealthy or powerful. Originally this power was naked. Prince and nobles could impose good behaviour by force. The iron fist was known to be in the velvet glove. But over the centuries the velvet glove alone became quite enough to get the right response. No need for the truncheon.

Good manners and decorous behaviour have always been very much the products of an unequal, hierarchical society. Those at the top, the upper class, wanted to differentiate themselves from the untutored, unwashed and coarse-grained masses by adopting refined and polished ways of doing things which were difficult and expensive to emulate. This only provoked those lower down in the social scale, the middle class, to make redoubled efforts to join the élite club by overcoming

these obstacles, which in turn provoked the upper class to become even more polite and refined. Thus was the civilising process energised with a permanently upward dynamic.

In theory this civilising process could have continued until all sections of society had become polished and refined – first the middle and then the lower classes, and indeed this was precisely what was happening until about 20 years ago when doctrinaire socialist egalitarians put the whole process in reverse. Their doctrine was as follows: because good manners and behaviour, correct speech, clean linen and so on were originally the hallmark of privilege (and privilege was bad) they must be bad too. Good manners were elitist and exclusive and therefore undemocratic. They were, it was alleged – quite rightly alleged – a form of social control practised by the few over the many. For the many to triumph, therefore, it was not enough simply to change the economic and political order. Equally important was to change the social and cultural order – the way people dressed and spoke – to the point where the ambitious, instead of feeling it necessary to emulate the upper classes, felt it necessary to emulate the working classes.

True, Thatcherism has changed some of that. The ambitious no longer feel compelled to emulate the working class in terms of consumption. They drive more expensive cars than do the working class (Porsches rather than Sierras), drink champagne rather than beer, eat caviare rather than fish and chips, and in many cases even refrain from wearing jeans which for twenty years were a kind of classless uniform whose effect on sartorial standards was scarcely less disastrous than that of high-rise blocks on domestic architecture. But they make no attempt whatsoever to be more civilised, to have better manners, to be less loud-mouthed, to be more public-spirited, there being no social group to which they aspire that makes these things a condition of entry into their charmed circle. But there could, once again, be such a group, if the new rentier class which is even now coming into existence, in conjunction with old wealth which is being given a new economic lease of life, combined to create one; combined to create a contemporary way of life that compelled admiration and emulation. The means for such a way of life – inherited wealth – are going to be there and all that is required to transform potentiality into reality is a change in the

wind of intellectual fashion. Out of the soil of rentier wealth in the 19th and early 20th century a thousand blossoms bloomed, many of them highly progressive; that is always the risk. Bloomsbury was one such, as were the Webbs; and I sometimes think that the best hope for a socialist revival lies in the kind of public-spirited do-goodism which only a rentier class can supply. But it can supply much more than public-spirited do-goodism. It can supply so much else that is lacking today – cultural standards, custodianship of the national institutions, respect for learning, love of beauty, probity in the professions and even – with a bit of help from the old aristocracy – glamour, excitement and a certain style or what used to be called *ton*. All these things may well come back anyhow, once the habits of inherited wealth are learned again; but they could come back far sooner if influential people consciously willed them to do so.

## The uses of inequality

Inherited wealth, it will be objected, is unfair; gives some people an advantage in life which is denied to others. That is obviously true, and one understands why egalitarians want to do away with it. But are we not beginning to understand how difficult this would be without society suffering other, even worse disadvantages like a stagnant economy and a quite intolerable degree of interference with individual liberty? In view of this experience the more sensible approach might be to consider ways of making the best of inherited wealth. Oddly enough this thought is nowadays heard more often on the Left than on the Thatcherite Right. How much more caring and compassionate was the Tory Party when it was run by 14th Earls (says the Left) than it is today, when it has fallen into the hands of self-made tradesmen and tycoons whose only concerns have to do with wealth creation. This view is far too kind to 14th Earls and far too unkind to grocers and tycoons. But it contains a grain of truth.

Someone who comes from a well-off background can afford to take a relaxed view towards the acquiring of money because he has lots of it already. So although not necessarily at all less self-seeking than the son of poor parents, his self-seeking is likely to look for outlets other than money-making – success in sport and the arts, in public service, and philanthropy, diplomacy, the law, depending on his character and inclinations. And, of course, the more settled and secure the family becomes – after fourteen generations, for example – the more exalted its view of its role in society is likely to be. As de Tocqueville wrote: 'Aristocracies love to invent for themselves noble pleasures, to carve out splendid objects for their ambition . . . and although they often commit very tyrannical and inhuman actions they rarely entertain grovelling thoughts'. While nobody in their senses would ever want to go back to the time when the tone of opinion and the guidance of affairs was entirely left to these superior creatures, surely at least something of that tradition is desirable in high places. One wants a blend: a self-made meritocracy tempered by enough inherited wealth to make sure that those at the top of society understand that creation of wealth

isn't the only important thing in life.

Until recently, of course, the socialist ideal or ethic could be relied upon to be more than sufficient to do this. So long as socialism was a widely held faith there was never any danger that British society would become excessively concerned with the individual pursuit of wealth. Concern for the community was very much a priority for the Labour Party and indeed under its sway the State increasingly took up the burden of public responsibilities laid down by the aristocracy (which is why quite a few of the more intelligent members of the upper classes were attracted by the Labour Party). But today it no longer makes sense to rely on socialism or the Labour Party to fulfil this function. For British politics today, like those of all the advanced societies, are undergoing a fundamental change as a result of 'the haves' becoming the majority. A political system based on one-person-one-vote now favours the well-off. Instead of democracy guaranteeing a square deal for bottom dogs – as it was expected to do in the days when there were more bottom dogs than top dogs – it now favours the top dogs because there are more topdogs than bottom dogs. So it seems to me most unlikely that we will ever go back to high progressive taxation intended to fund ambitious programmes of universal social provision. The likelihood must be that the bourgeois ideal of individual self-interest will increasingly prevail, since that is what the will of most of the people – ie. the haves – will ordain. So in the future we won't be able to rely on socialism to make sure that those who have the guidance of our affairs understand that wealth-creation is not the be-all and end-all of man's purpose in life. I don't want to be unfair here to the bourgeois ethic. Of course it does not specifically encourage money-making as the only purpose in life. What it says is that everybody should be free to pursue his self-interest and if some people interpret their self-interest as starving in a garret while painting pictures that is fine by the bourgeois ethic. But it surely stands to reason that, in a society where everybody starts from scratch (ie. without any inherited wealth), the proportion of people who will interpret the pursuit of self-interest exclusively in material terms will be greater than in a society where quite large numbers start with a comfortable patrimony.

The more people there are with inherited wealth, therefore,

the less exclusively acquisitive a society is likely to be. Not all inheritors of wealth are generous-minded by any shadow of means and the sense of *noblesse oblige* which comes from inherited wealth could never have tackled the scale of 19th century and early 20th century social destitution. For that, socialism or State action may well have been necessary. But socialism is no longer a genuine option. Nor is the scale of social destitution any longer all that large, being ever more confined to an under-class. In present circumstances, therefore, inherited wealth really could have an increasingly significant role to play in augmenting the State's dwindling provision of social services. It won't be Lady Bountiful so much as Ms Bountiful. But the idea behind it will be much the same.

That is why it is so depressing to read of people like Antonia Fraser and Harold Pinter and other well-heeled intellectuals joining together with a view to re-animating egalitarian socialism. How much more constructively employed they would be to use their brains to think up ways of tempering bourgeois society with that older, more aristocratic tradition which is so deeply rooted in our national past – far more deeply than in the United States, or indeed in any of the European countries which suffered the discontinuities wreaked by the French revolution. Here in Britain it is not wholly unrealistic to imagine the great public schools, for example, once again trying to inculcate the values and codes of behaviour suitable for people called upon to play a leading role in society. Such a concept has been rigidly excluded from public school speechday rhetoric in recent years, out of deference to the reigning egalitarian gods. But it could easily come back; and has indeed never left the armed forces where officers still maintain the habits of authority rooted in an earlier age. The contrast in this respect with the United States is particularly striking. There the officer is unfortified by any habit of authority – he has power but no authority – just as the private soldier is unsuited for service by any habit of deference, with the result that neither has any idea of how to treat the other, as becomes clear in any American war novel where the enlisted man usually hates the officers far more than he hates the enemy.

Leadership has become an unfashionable word. I am told that it is virtually banned from use at public schools. In its place has come the buzz word 'community'. But communities do not

spring forth fully formed. More often than not they are created and kept going by a strong personality; someone who takes the initiative and does the organising . . . a leader who more often than not comes from a background where the exercise of authority is habitual, almost instinctive. Like it or not, that tradition still exists in this country in however attenuated a form and, in my view, urgently needs to be given a new lease of life.

## Custodianship the key

But even more important than restoring the habits of authority is the need to restore the habits of custodianship. Custodianship is a word that does not figure much in the rhetoric of Thatcherism – possibly for good reasons, although not in my book. Many felt that post-war Britain had suffered from having too many upper class custodians around and not enough lower class innovators. That was Anthony Sampson's point made repeatedly in successive *Anatomy's of Britain*, on the principle that if you do succeed, try it on, try it on and try it on again. It was a silly point. Custodianship and innovation are not mutually exclusive activities. They were both present, co-existing happily together in the 19th century, sometimes even in the same persons: The great aristocratic landowners, for example, were often in the forefront of agricultural advance and succeeded in preserving their estates intact – in being good custodians, that is – precisely because they were good innovators. Nor was this combination limited to agriculture. Many of the self-made industrial innovators received the investment they needed to get them off the ground from aristocrats with an eye for the main chance. Socially the aristocrats may have been cool to new money; not wanting the *nouveau riches* in their houses. But they were not in the least opposed to exploiting the new money for their own purposes – marrying an heiress if that was the only way to keep the ancestral home intact. No, what slowed down wealth-creation in the 1950s, '60s and '70s was not an aristocrat-dominated class system, as Sampson argues, so much as an equality-obsessed tax system; not so much the dukes, earls and viscounts of ancient lineage as the new trade union barons of contemporary lineage. Be that as it may, many Thatcherites – people like Lord Young and Mr Rupert Murdoch – have come to believe that the class system is to blame, by which they mean a system in love with memories of a feudal past, rather than with the promise of a technological future. Thus custodianship got a bad name; being associated with attitudes which had caused Britain's decline. Apart from being untrue, this was and is very dangerous, since a healthy society needs both custodians

and innovators. It needs custodians . . . oh dear, does one really have to explain to a Tory audience why a society needs custodians? It needs them because otherwise, without people who feel an obligation to pass things on – houses, institutions, values, myths – to the next generation, society falls apart, loses all its savour, all its beauty, all its charm, all its virtue.

The monarchy, of course, is one institution which pretty well everybody thinks worth preserving. It is worth preserving, above all, because it symbolises the continuity of our national life – in a word, the past. How does one quantify the value of the past? One can't, any more than one can quantify the value of a poem. Nor can one quantify the value of Westminster Abbey or of the Royal Parks. All one knows is that a country which has preserved its past as well as Britain has done is far better off than one that has not. Most people love the familiar and it is no accident that when the soldiers in the First World War put their thoughts to paper before going over the top, more often than not they were thinking of some familiar domestic English landscape which for them represented what they were fighting and dying for. Preserving 'old England' is not some quirky passion felt only by genealogists or nostalgic romantics. It is something vitally important, above all to ordinary people for whom belonging to an ancient nation is their only privilege. Too few Thatcherite lieutenants understand this. They have even suggested, for example, that the Royal Parks should be privatised, so as to be run more efficiently and to bring in more revenue. In the old Tory Party, controlled by inheritors of wealth in whom the habits of custodianship come as second nature, such a lack of understanding about the value of continuity would have been inconceivable.

Arguably there was too great a concern with continuity, too great an emphasis on custodianship, in pre-Thatcherite Britain; and it may well have been necessary to break with all sorts of traditional practices and historic traditions in the struggle for economic survival. But a pendulum can swing too far. Most people are happier, more at peace with themselves and their maker, when doing things in a traditional, time-honoured way. Ancient churches are more popular than new ones; the older universities – not to say older pubs – are more popular than the new ones, old housing estates less vandalised than new ones,

and so on. As I say, one can't quantify the value of continuity (except perhaps as an aspect of the tourist industry) in any way acceptable to the mind of an accountant. But that used to be the strength and glory of the Tory Party: that it reached those parts of the body politic that utilitarianism can never reach.

In some ways the young today are much more custodian-minded than their elders. That is what accounts for the strength of the environmental movement which is acutely conscious of the impending dangers of pollution that come from commercial greed and governmental short-sightedness. What the young perhaps don't understand so well is how a society develops a sense of custodianship. It does so by making sure that a significant section of those in high places acquire the habit of custodianship from birth, as used to be the case with Britain's landed aristocracy. Shirley Robin Letwin put this point well in her book *The Gentleman in Trollope*:

As the inheritor of an estate, it is an aristocrat's special obligation to maintain and to pass it on. He does not regard what belongs to him as his own to do what he wills with but as a bequest of which he is, for his lifetime, the custodian, just as his father and grandfather were before him. And this sense of having a duty to perpetuate something that is impossible to create deliberately and easy to destroy, distinguishes the attitude of an aristocrat. He has an air of leisure, and the refinement that goes with leisure because his job of custodianship releases him from the whirl of his contemporary world and allows him to be indifferent to the demands of the moment. An aristocrat consequently has none of the brusqueness that characterises the man whose job it is to turn out something for here and now. But on the other hand an aristocrat does not feel free as an ordinary gentleman might to retire from the world. His job as custodian obliges him to play an active role in public life.

No, I am not suggesting that we should bring back the Duke of Omnium. But is it not possible for us to recognise that something precious departed from society when the habits of

custodianship were broken by the sustained moral devaluation in recent years of the whole idea of encouraging inherited wealth. Conceivably there are other means by which the habit of custodianship can be inculcated in a political élite; by special training, say. But it so happens that in this country, as a result of our history, we already have a habit of custodianship originating with a particular class but by no means limited to that class, since something of this aristocratic attitude toward property used to be found among all classes, even down to the allotment owner who cherished his tiny plot with almost the same proprietorial care as did the owner of a thousand acres.

## Belonging to institutions

But it is not custodianship of property with which one should be primarily concerned. Much more important is custodianship of institutions and of the values and standards of behaviour appropriate to these institutions. Of course every citizen concerned with the well-being of his country has some general responsibility for the nation's institutions, since all citizens benefit immeasurably from belonging to a country with great universities, regiments, Inns of Courts and so on. Indeed, a country is only as good as its institutions. But these general responsibilities of the citizen obviously need buttressing by the individual sense of responsibility which comes only to someone involved with a particular institution; and it stands to reason, I think, that the longer an individual has been involved, the greater his feeling of responsibility is going to be. And if this applies to an individual, by how much more so does it to a family. Let me give an example. I was brought up in a prominent City family, members of which had held responsible jobs in the square mile for the better part of two centuries. Honest dealing in the City, therefore, was much more for them than a mere matter of obeying the law or of financial prudence or indeed of personal morality. It was a matter of family honour. The same used to be true of hundreds of thousands of other families connected over generations with all the other institutions of the land. In all these cases to the ordinary loyalty that any individual may feel towards an institution was added that extra feeling bordering on love, that only family involvement over many generations is likely to engender.

During the last forty years or so it has become fashionable to deride these ancestral connections as 'the old boy network'; to see them as a bit of a racket. Oxbridge colleges nowadays for example tend to discriminate against the children of old alumni, because they want to discourage the idea that Oxbridge is some old-fashioned oasis of privilege. One Oxford college recently even went so far as to reject the descendant of a great benefactor, in spite of the adequacy of his academic qualifications. The reason given was that to accept him would suggest nepotism.

What concerned the entrance tutor no doubt was the fate of some other deserving young person who might have been excluded because he or she did not have a benefactor for an ancestor. Needless to say there is nothing wrong with such an attitude, which all of us might share to some extent. But not to the extent of wholly ignoring the truth that institutions also have legitimate interests, not to say rights, one of which is the overriding need to maintain a corporate character capable of arousing love and loyalty.

Here I think the egalitarians grossly undervalue the crucial contribution in this process that can be made by families whose connection is particularly close and long standing; the value of having some members whose feelings for the institution have been fostered from infancy onwards. The presence of such ancestral connections do not only enrich schools, colleges and regiments. They also enrich trade unions, businesses and indeed all human organisations – countries as well for that matter. Pity a country entirely made up only of first generation citizens. The mafia are only too well aware how vitally important to an institution ancestral connections are. It would be very sad, however, if the strength that can be drawn from sons following in their fathers' footsteps, and family love and loyalty, should be limited to those serving the lower rather than the higher reaches of society.

Yet too great an emphasis on meritocracy does carry this danger with it. The more new blood the better – that still seems to be the reigning assumption, as much under Thatcherism as ever it was under socialism. Under socialism, the reasons given were social justice and the abolition of privilege. Under Thatcherism, the case for new men is more economic than social. They are better than old blood, it is said, at wealth creation. Without the new blood of the likes of Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell there would have been no economic miracle. But in the long run a healthy society needs both old and new blood, and it would be very sad if this country were to have escaped from socialism, which hated inherited privilege because it was a threat to equality, only to become imprisoned by another equally narrow-minded prejudice which depletes inherited privilege as an impediment to economic growth.



## Lament for the Establishment

It is all a question of getting the balance right, the balance between excessive social ossification and excessive social fluidity. More and more in recent years we have become accustomed to viewing matters of class from the point of view of the individual. How unfair, we say, that somebody should enjoy a higher or lower position in society than he deserves on account of the accident of birth or breeding. Yes, indeed. Nobody would dissent from that proposition. But the matter cannot be left there. For the good of society in general also comes into the question, and I would like to argue that a society in which all the top people had got there on merit would have many obvious and serious disadvantages, some of which I have already mentioned. But I have left to the last the one I think may be the most important, or at any rate the one that in recent years I am most conscious of: the extent to which the growth of a meritocracy has spelt the death of what we used to call the 'the Establishment'. As everybody knows, the Establishment in its heyday was that intangible and invisible supervisory body made up of the good and the great, whose writ reached all those parts of the body politic – like the security services – which the more formal supervisory bodies located at Westminster and Whitehall could not reach. Nobody quite knew where the Establishment was located. Some said Whites, or clubland in general. More likely there was no fixed address, and the location changed every weekend depending on which country houses were offering hospitality. What the Establishment did was to keep an eye on things; nip some scandals in the bud, weed out some obvious misfits from public office; uphold a particular English interpretation of liberal principles; prevent any too violent or brutal departure from the national way of doing things, and in general thwart conspiracies or campaigns against the public interest. If the Establishment had said that the SAS were right in Gibraltar that would have been enough for me, because on the whole the Establishment got those kind of things right.

What we now have instead are lots of the great and the powerful at the top of their particular ladders – top businessmen,

politicians, artists, journalists, bankers etc. – but no connecting social thread which links them all together into a homogeneous whole. Of course I am exaggerating. We still have a class system to some extent, as I have said. But it is meant to be on the way out. Thatcherism as much as socialism wants to get rid of it, and if it is got rid of, then the departmentalisation of the élites, which is already bad enough, will get far worse, to the point where all the various top people will more and more live in different worlds without any effective bonding process to bring them together.

The hereditary element used to be the bonding process. For in a class society the descendants of élites of previous generations absorb into their class the élites of rising generations. Thus in the course of ascending their separate professional trees, the new élites, once they have climbed above a certain level, will merge into the ruling class whose members all know each other very well, coming from the same background: the social soil, that is, out of which an Establishment grows. In a meritocracy communication between the élites at the top of all the various professional trees is bound to be stilted. The artists and the men of action, the business and the professional men, will have little in common. Relations between them will tend to be a bit formal, rather as between the members of some inter-departmental committee. Whereas relations between members of an upper class, which have matured over time, are much more intimate and therefore much more trusting. But does a democracy want a tightly knit, mutually trusting governing order? My answer would be that it does, for a reason not sufficiently understood.

In a democracy almost nothing important can be talked about truthfully except in private, for fear of being misunderstood by a mass electorate. Race cannot be spoken about openly, Aids cannot either. Nor for the most part can foreign affairs, since a sentimental public refuses to accept the inevitability of cynical ruthlessness in successful statecraft. Talk to an expert in almost any field and at some point you will hear the phrase: *of course one could never say this, that or the other* (i.e. the truth) *in public*.

So in a democracy truthful, honest, realistic discussion, whether it be about politics, medicine, education or pretty well

anything else, is forced out of the public arena – nothing truthful is ever said on television – into private gatherings. In a meritocracy, such as we are increasingly becoming, that means the various élites meeting separately, with each conferring behind closed doors in a little private world of its own – doctors, dons, scientists, soldiers all being truthful and honest with each other. Clubland is a bit of a melting pot, but it is absurd to think that an occasional visit to, say, the Garrick can be a substitute for belonging to an upper class which includes representatives of all the élites and all the generations and also a few intelligent people with the leisure to think – meeting each other as a matter of course in their own homes (spacious enough for proper hospitality) and trusting each other because they have had plenty of time, including schooldays, to sort out the sheep from the goats.

A few weeks ago, Macmillan the publishers decided to hold a London launching party for Alistair Horne's new life of Harold Macmillan, oblivious that on the date they had chosen most of the proposed guests would be in Brighton for the Tory Party conference. Clearly the publishing élite and the political élite live in separate worlds. I suppose in theory that the breaking up of the ruling class into departmentalised élites, of which this is only a tiny example, might be a good thing from the point of view of ordinary people, on the principle of 'divide in order not to be ruled'. But in practice I suspect that as a result of the increasing lack of communication at the top, and of the growing mutual incomprehension of the various élites, many dangerous things are happening in this country, including rip-offs of ordinary people, which would not have been allowed to happen in the good old days when there was an Establishment to keep a not too unsteady eye on things. Of course the Establishment had many faults, but now that it has vanished, are we not beginning to realise that it had many virtues?

## Swansong

So, after all this, what are my conclusions? Nothing very specific, I fear. The most this lecture can hope to do is to set a few people thinking that there may be some virtue in inherited wealth; that inherited wealth is not only inevitable but desirable. Until recently it might reasonably have been objected that there was no point in asking people to think such heretical thoughts, since inherited wealth was on the way out along with all the other hangovers of our pre-democratic past. But it is obviously not on the way out. It is on the way back. Nor is its return being imposed from above by an unrepresentative minority. Now that 'the haves' are a majority it can truly be said that inherited wealth is returning to this country with the consent of the people; indeed by popular demand. But unfortunately not – and here is the rub – with the consent of the intelligentsia or with the consent of the clergy. So long as inherited wealth appears to have no *raison d'être* apart from being a minor and unwelcome part of Thatcherite economics, there is no hope of its acceptance by the moral voice of our society. One cannot imagine, for example, the modern public school headmaster championing inherited wealth simply on the ground that it is a lubricant that helps to make capitalism work.

But what if it could be presented as a social dynamic making for a more civilised society; as a means of replacing the politics of envy with the politics of manners; as a way of restoring authority figures other than the policeman, and custodians other than the civil servant – might it then not be possible to present inherited wealth once again as an idea capable of appealing to hearts and minds as well as pockets?

I should dearly like to think so if only because otherwise Thatcherism will never be able to inspire the idealists as well as the energetic and ambitious. The re-legitimisation of inherited wealth as a moral and social force as well as an economic necessity – that should be the great Tory aim for the 1990s, and if this swansong of mine masquerading as a lecture encourages even a few Tories to think along these lines then indeed I shall have done what I set out to do.

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