

**THE CONSERVATIVE  
TRADITION AND  
THE 1980s**

**Three Gifts of Insight Restored**

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### Three Gifts of Insight Restored

If as we enter the 1980s, Conservatives are everywhere questioning, with increasing insistence, ideas that post-war conservatism took for granted, it is not because we have read a few books — Adam Smith, Hayek, Friedman — and have been converted.<sup>1</sup> It is because the certainties of the past thirty years can no longer be taken for granted. It is because things have not worked out as we were promised they would.<sup>2</sup>

The post-war generation of younger Conservatives believed in Keynes, in the welfare state as we have come to know it, in high government spending, in government's ability to create full employment and encourage growth. They were attractive ideas.<sup>3</sup> But we are Conservatives, pragmatic, which means that we judge ideas by their results. We were promised full employment; we have large-scale unemployment. We were promised growth; we have stagnation. We were promised greater social harmony, industrial peace, social solidarity. By the end of the 1970s, after five years of a Labour Government which placed harmony with organised labour above all else, we had the very opposite.<sup>4</sup>

We were promised better health care, higher educational standards, wider opportunities; but all these services are worse, and educational opportunities diminished in the past decade for the poorer groups.<sup>5</sup> Bi-partisan consensus, which is always worth seeking, came to be replaced by something called 'consensus' but which was clearly founded on the consent of the wrong (and unrepresentative) groups, and on the wrong policy. Economics came to dominate politics more than ever before. But what did we have to show for it by the end of the last Government except a society of abstract compassion, except a miserable withering of those attitudes which nourish

our national self-confidence; and except a terrifying neglect of that vital component of a good and civilised society, the maintenance of the rule of law?

Of course the post-war Keynesian settlement had its high noon. At that time people worried themselves sick about the problems of affluence. Redistribution of the growth to come, the wealth that seemed to grow on trees, became the pre-occupation of moderate-minded people of goodwill right across the centre of British politics.

At the same time, naturally, wealth creating and trade went out of vogue, rather, I suspect, as in late Victorian and Edwardian England it became vulgar to be in, let alone discuss, trade and money-making in polite society. No one of any breeding talked five per cent at dinner! In the same way in post-war Britain — and I do not think I am parodying events — in the humdrum world of independent and smaller business, the whole great middle layer of what in Continental terms would be called petit-bourgeois society, with its little enterprises, its tiny credit needs, its need for stable money, its unglamorous expansion plans, its emphasis on family firms, its preoccupation with the minutiae of business life day by day, literally disappeared off the policymakers' maps.<sup>6</sup> 'Informed' opinion in Westminster and Whitehall had virtually nothing to say at all about this world — its problems and needs.

Of course there was big business, whose plans were tangible and visible in Whitehall, where they could be discussed and where jobs could be 'created' in thousands; there were the investors or capitalists, and there were the workers. These were the building blocks, the aggregates, for post-war economic and social policy, visible to government, easy to understand, easy to cajole, subsidise, control from the centre, and to build 'strategies' around.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted how comfortable both Socialists and Conservatives apparently felt with this analysis of British society. What they wanted to do about it may have differed. The Left wanted overthrow; the centre Right saw, or thought they saw, the familiar two nations which their political instincts told them must rapidly be joined by bridging, if political stability, and their own position was to be preserved.<sup>8</sup>

But between the two political groups there was what Robert Skidelsky has perceptively called 'a diagnostic alliance' about the economic and social structure of society.<sup>9</sup> And who was

left out of this alliance? Why, the millions of people who were neither 'the labour movement' nor 'the bosses', who were neither 'Nation', nor felt themselves embraced and represented either by nationally organised trade union officialdom or by the Whitehall world of big government and big business — in fact, a very great many people indeed, the whole of 'Middle' Britain — some would say, and I would be one of them, the backbone of our nation.

How Disraeli would have laughed at the post-war political consensus. All that activity with national plans and impressively titled Strategies. All those rather ungainly efforts to build bridges between the classes, to appease working class militancy before it gobbled everyone up — when all the time this 'two class' world was melting away and when the real and binding interests of the nation lay entirely elsewhere.

But of course the point is a deadly serious one. It meant that post-war Britain sailed out into a changed and dangerous world with its middle or bourgeois layer, the ballast of the nation, ignored and, worse still, with that crucial layer's confidence in its own values fatally weakened. It meant that concern with modest and widespread property ownership, which ought to be within reach of almost all, hardly got a look in at the policy-making level, where problems tended to be discussed only in terms of capital and wages. (It is true that Tories talked a fair amount about the property-owning democracy in the 'fifties and Lord Woolton's, Harold Macmillan's and Ernest Marples' housing policies offered a passing break in this grey sky, but it was soon clouded over again.)

The more one thinks about the Tory tradition the odder this post-war episode in Tory thinking becomes. Here is a party which has always seen society from the middle, not from the middle ground between professional and political parties, but from the modest middle-owning part of society, accessible to all, from whom ideas and attitudes and values spread throughout the whole community. Not a very 'smart' party, not a grandee's party, not a court party at all. Yet there were post-war Conservatives looking straight past *this* middle ground to a Whitehall world of institutions and bureaucracies and supposed classes and class interests, playing court politics with a vengeance.

Here is a party which traditionally believes very strongly in the individual, in the endless unplannable variety of human needs and ambitions, in the cellular formation of society,

always as far as possible of the everyday human scale.<sup>10</sup>

Yet there were sincere Tories tossing aggregate abstract concepts about, shunting around things called 'demand', 'the working class', 'employment', 'growth', 'investment', 'manufacturing industry', as though they could, by being placed in proper magical sequence, generate creative activity and prosperity all on their own.

I think I can see how the Tory party fell into this way of thinking and looking at things after 1945. After all the mythology of class struggle was very strong. And the War had shown that the state could, when moved, organise things and people on a very large scale. Hence the temptation to believe that state action could solve the unemployment and poverty problems of the post-war world, which were assumed to be a continuation of those of the 'thirties, (itself a much misunderstood period) must have been irresistible.<sup>11</sup>

A collectivist perspective could be forgiven in 1945, but the really strange thing is this: in the thirty years after that, while our society lost its classified 'two nation' character almost entirely, while life inside the family was transformed — especially by the new role of women — and the neglected middle, far from disappearing, began to embrace the vast majority — while all this changed, the Tory outlook did not. The growing reality, which historically it had always been in the Tory character to perceive beneath the slogans and the generalities, somehow eluded the post-war Tory party. The omission is all the more bizarre when one reflects that it was the deep, traditional, root-land of Tory Britain that the Tory party was overlooking, the independent businessmen, the self-employed, the shopkeepers, small traders, yeomen, the little platoons, as Burke called them. Moreover, it was not overlooking them in a spirit of ruthless realism which could have been at least understood as '*real politik*' were they plainly a dying class and a dying cause. The opposite was the case. The new unorganised 'middle' was set to grow and grow. It was a burgeoning, re-awakening, flourishing, Tory cause, and for far too long the Tory party failed to take it up with vigour.<sup>12</sup>

Much the most exhilarating post-war political event in Britain is the Tory party's return to its tradition of understanding and facing up to the real and changed character of society.<sup>13</sup> It is not easy to put a finger on the precise point when this occurred; it probably did not take place when a Tory Government was in office.

But my own guess would be that sometime in the mid-seventies, amidst the grandiose absurdities of income policies and industrial strategies, it began to be seen by the Tory party that policies built on this static view of society, with its so-called social partners, its stratified corporate rituals and its odd vocabulary so alien from everyday living, just would not do. The gap between the way life, from common observation, for millions of families, and the stilted rhetoric of the metropolitan consensus had just become too great. It had become a consensus between too few, between generals without troops, emperors without clothes, while in the outer real world the swelling armies of a new and different 'middle' Britain demanded increasingly to be heard, as they should have been long before.

What are now returned to us in the Conservative Party of the 1980s are three precious gifts of insight — pillars of wisdom — without which the fabric of our nation would soon have been in mortal danger. In fact by the late 'seventies many in Britain, and quite a few commentators abroad, were taking the view that that moment had already arrived.

Three gifts which have been given back to us in the nick of time are, first, national self-confidence, second, political optimism — in place of the terrible defeatism which seemed to infect so many of the upper reaches of our political society of the 'seventies — and, third, an understanding of the supreme importance of personal ownership to every family, however modest the scale — an understanding that had been all but lost during the years of swelling state power and possession.

If we wish to survive and prosper as a nation in a very dangerous decade we must not again lose sight of these three things. They are the hoops which bind us and they become daily more vital as the old institutions and links crumble. Socialism, which in a way was once a binding force in Britain, can no longer command mass loyalties. The Labour movement is in disarray.<sup>14</sup> Indeed it is no longer a movement at all, except perhaps in a centrifugal sense as the parts fly off in different directions. It cannot hold things together in modern conditions.

But Toryism can. Or rather the qualities which I have identified and which belong firmly to the true Tory tradition can do so. Let me now say a word about these three quintessential ingredients of Toryism as I feel them. And there I will leave the matter. This is not the occasion to go on and spell out how I see this new recovered Tory party working out its purposes in

Government — although after a year I think it is beginning to be recognised that changes, already long obvious to many in the way people live and work in our country, are at last being reflected at the level of national government, and that the 1979 Tory administration is a true child of these changes.

But we will only stay true if we hold on tight to the Tory tradition and to the three 'gifts' I have mentioned.

First, then, national self-confidence — how does Toryism help re-awaken that? Partly, I think, by ceasing to tell people that they belong to social groups and classes, that they are struggling against capital (when in fact it is largely theirs), that our history is a class history, which it is not, and that we should therefore go in the world with an air half apologetic, for all our national guilt, and half demanding, for all our decency in admitting it to anyone who will listen.

Merely to put a stop to that kind of cantata is, I think, a marvellously refreshing change.

But the other part of the story is that Conservatives have always had a sort of romance with England, and with renewed confidence animating the Tory party I see and feel signs of that again. By this I mean not merely a persistent concern for what was good for Britain and its people. The true Tory is almost literally in love with his country, with its character, its people and its history, its beauty, its ugliness, warts and all. The Tories of old loved every bit of it, and so should we.<sup>15</sup>

In other words the great Tories of the past were nationalist in a special sense, as we should be. Not the strident sort, forever looking for foreign devils to blame, but simply understanding that each nation is different and is therefore comfortable with its own institutions and its own peculiarities, and that these distinguishing features are an essential part of nationhood without which people feel lost and uneasy.

The Tories of the past were national in another sense, too, in that they were not sectarian. They accepted differences and irregularities. But they did not wrap whole categories of people up in labelled parcels, and then condemn or stereotype the lot. You would never get Burke or Disraeli or Salisbury slanting their historical judgements in favour of Tories against men of other parties and of no party.

English and British history began long before the Tory Party — wherever you care to set the Party's foundation date. Who knows whether future generations will continue our party

system? But they will still be British — I profoundly hope. Nor would any sensible Tory claim that Tories have always been right and non-Tories always wrong. Would any Tory claim that Tories of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century had been right in supporting James II, and that the Whigs who brought William II on to the throne were in the wrong? Burke certainly did not; on the contrary.

Would any Tory denigrate the great Whig contribution to eighteenth century history? Would any Tory, apart from a few far-out demi-intellectuals of the so-called Tory Reform fringes, deny the great moral authority and political contribution of Gladstone, just because having begun as a Tory he ended as a Liberal? Which Tory does not regard Palmerston as part of our heritage? Would not most Tories indeed regret the deepening of the division between two parties, which began with Lloyd George.

Today's Tory party is, I believe, as national in these senses as it is possible for a party to be. Its enemies call it 'middle class', 'suburban' or anti-working class. But that of course just reinforces the point. It is of the middle, because that is where Toryism begins and where, when we have hauled our nation back from the edge of extremism to which it was sliding, we will again settle down, on the common ground.<sup>16</sup> It is of the suburbs because so many, many millions of families are and because many of the good and caring values which this nation was built upon have their strongest upholders in suburbia — although it is a nice commentary on the political fashion of many years past that the word 'suburban' has come to be used, like 'middle class', as a term of abuse.

The Tory party today is anti-class, and therefore anti all self-conscious and imposed definitions of class, especially those foisted on to people by Marxist intellectuals and those which bully people into believing that they are caught up inescapably in some great struggle of interests which does not in fact exist.

The second one of the three 'gifts' I mentioned I called political optimism. But it is really shorthand for something much deeper. It might best be described as faith in coherence — that extraordinary, almost intoxicating belief in the patient, organic unfolding scheme of things, the quality which ensures that the true Tory, while he may be healthily sceptical, is never a cynic. Even less is he a gloomy deteriorationist who, like Mr. Escott in Peacock's Headlong Hall, sees nothing but grief

and ashes in all human endeavour, especially in the field of public affairs.

That is not a Tory state of mind at all, although it sometimes goes in Tory clothes. In fact looking back over the last decade of the Conservative Party I see this caste of mind playing much too large a part in our affairs. I remember calling it, perhaps a little melodramatically, 'defeatism in high places,' by which I meant a view so gloomily and so loftily detached about the way our country was going that it seemed to have no will to resist deterioration at all, let alone to turn the tide. It was a form of battle-weary resignation, a conviction that in the end collectivism was *bound* to win, although a few cunning ploys and worldly-wise manoeuvres would delay the process.

The same attitude had its counterpart, of course, on the world scene. The belief that Marxist revolution was *bound* eventually to prevail, that the historical tides were flowing *their* way, kept far too many minds in the free world on the permanent defensive — a mood that has only begun to change in a more creative and confident direction very recently indeed.

It is good that this fatalistic feeling of irreversibility about collectivist arrangements and corporatist institutions is now being dissipated,<sup>17</sup> as it is in our party today. But in the 'seventies the Tory party came perilously close to accepting it. For us no political doctrine is irreversible or determined by the forces of this and that. Human history unfolds but not to the order of theoreticians or politicians. People in public life catch and articulate the feelings of a changing world, shape and steady its progress where they can. They run their thumb along the grain of commonsense opinion (which is not half as easy to detect as some think and not always the same by any means as instant public fashion). They work and carve patiently with it, knowing that nothing goes on for ever, least of all so-called 'irreversible' social trends, and knowing, too, that much of life goes on in areas into which governments, at any rate in free countries, can neither know about nor influence.<sup>18</sup>

The third 'gift' — or wisdom restored — which I mentioned was an understanding about personal ownership. Here I think we are at the very core of the dilemmas which have so befuddled British post-war policy makers. It is entirely to be expected that the Left should have had a deep hostility to personal ownership and an equally deep attachment to ownership by the state,<sup>19</sup> so-called 'public' ownership, although it is, of course, no such thing.

It is necessary to the Left that people should feel themselves to be wage-earners not owners. Owing must be left to the state. Wages are the battle ground for properly instructed, fully class conscious workers.

But how did the Tory party ever allow itself to go along with this nonsense? At the heart of Tory belief is an understanding of the self-interest in all people, especially when it comes to their families and their homes and possessions.<sup>20</sup> The Tory sees this side of human nature and understands how, far from being something to be disparaged, it is a mighty virtue. One would have expected post-war Toryism to have given a central place to the idea of personal property ownership on the widest possible scale in as many forms as possible, from small business to employee shares, from home ownership to private pensions.

The Tory party of the more distant past knew about ownership, well-spread and on a modest scale. It knew intuitively and instinctively that the best defence against central state power and ownership was diffused and decentralised possession, so that as wide a number of the Queen's subjects as possible would have an over-riding concern to maintain the rule of law under which alone the possession and enjoyment of property was possible. It knew, too, that the reconciliation of all these diverse ownership interests, small and large, was far best done through Parliament rather than through any great and overmighty councils of state set up outside and above Parliament.

In post-war Europe enormous emphasis was placed on what were called, in continental terminology, the 'middle class' interests. In English one fumbles for a word to reflect the same interests and the same set of values. But Tories should know what it all means, even if the Tory party for a time lost sight of these values. Translated, I suppose these middle class interests might be said to embody everything that the post-war 'consensus' in Britain ignored or downgraded — voluntary effort, local community obligation and public service for no reward, widespread property ownership, the small business ethic, limitation of state economic power, scrupulous concern for law and order, belief in personal responsibility for one's actions, realisation that while many qualities are needed by those in public administration, the state is in constant need of humanising.

Or one can put the point the other way round. The post-war British policy-making establishment put its faith in the state, not in the people. Large-scale statistical compassion drove out

the human, person-to-person sort of neighbourly caring which a small community understands. Abstracts reigned. Industry and employment were categorised and planned. A consensus was declared to exist, which only the imprudent dared query.

Yet in all this, the people of the more independent 'middle', in their growing millions, while vigorously represented in the policy-making of our neighbouring social market economies,<sup>21</sup> seemed to have no place at all. They were an afterthought, an awkward bit that did not fit in to the diagnosis. They were not part of the corporate state.<sup>22</sup>

The post-war Tory party fell in with this deficient diagnosis and found itself on false ground in consequence. Its traditions should have warned it that our nation is not divided into classes which must somehow be pacified, nor into social groups whose interests can be neatly bundled and handed over to the care of committees and corporate institutions. Our traditions should have served to warn that we should never for one moment have lost sight of the ideal of private property, widely held, nor of the over-riding need to uphold the rule of law and maintain the value of money, so that the ideal could be fully realised.

Great Conservatives of the past gave these warnings. Now that we are at last again heeding them, now that we have regained the courage to denounce 'the frigid theories of a generalising age', as Coningsby aptly put it somewhere in his musings, now that the three gifts have been restored to us, let us never, never, forget or neglect them again.

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