

The Changing Face of British Conservatism

Geoffrey Finlayson discusses how Margaret Thatcher's style of Conservatism reflects the development of the Tory Party over nearly two hundred years.

Decades sometimes attract epithets which indicate their most distinctive features and, barring unforeseen events, the epithet which will be applied to the 1980s in Britain can scarcely fail to include the word 'Conservative'. The General Election of June 1983 ensures that this decade is virtually certain to be dominated by Conservative governments. And, as the present Parliament re-assembles to continue its prolonged first session, the historian may be prompted to reflect that its final session – and the term of the government – should expire little short of the two hundredth anniversary of the event which did much to bring about the foundation of modern Conservatism. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 – and the radical threat which this posed in the 1790s to the established political and social order in Britain as well as in France – rallied the bulk of the political nation to a defence of that order. This, then, is an appropriate time at which to consider the development of a movement which, after almost two hundred years, shows every sign of vigour and health. What have been the faces of Conservatism during this period? And does the evidence thus far of the 1980s denote the emergence of a significant new 'Thatcherite' face?

At various periods in the party's history, the defensiveness inherent in Conservatism on political and social issues has assumed a reactionary or a repressive face. This aspect was most noticeable in the 1790s themselves and in the years after 1815; in both periods, radical and reform movements were met with strong resistance. Resistance was also evident in 1831-2 when the Tory party, in opposition, threw its might – unavailingly – against the Whig Reform Bill. Tories saw this as making dangerous inroads on the political structure of the country and as presaging encroachments on landed property. In 1846, the protectionist wing of the Tory party bitterly attacked the repeal of the Corn Laws as a betrayal of the landed interest. And the Liberal reforms after 1906 likewise evoked violent resistance. If the first Reform Bill in 1831-2 had been regarded as the 'beginning of the end', the Liberal reforms were opposed as the 'end of the end': the end of the political and social pre-eminence of the old order. And there were Tories ready to die in the last ditch rather than submit to that. On all these occasions, the defensive face of Conservatism contorted itself into the diehard face.

Conservatism at later periods has also, on occasion, worn a face of extreme defensiveness. The political and social threat seemingly posed by the General Strike in 1926 provoked extreme reactions; and the tactics of the leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers in 1974 against the Heath government were presented in terms of a 'Who Rules Britain?' debate, in which some hawkish Tory sentiments were expressed. The phenomenon of 'Powellism' in the 1960s was, in some respects, a defensive reaction to forces which were seen by Enoch Powell as disrupting the country's traditional social fabric. Immigration was handled by Powell in the late 1960s in the context of a threat to the stability and continuity of British society. This was later widened to include other manifestations of the 'enemy within': student unrest and problems in Northern Ireland. 'Britain', said Powell, 'is under attack... from forces which aim at the total destruction of our nation and society as we know them.'

Yet to suggest the Conservatism has always worn a face of extreme defensiveness would be misleading. In the 1790s, Edmund Burke wrote of the need for balance in the constitution: the 'whole scheme of our mixed constitution is to prevent any one of its principles from being

carried as far as, taken by itself..., it would go'. The theme of balance, rather than extremism, has often been stressed by Conservatives. In 1947, David Clarke, the Director of the Conservative Research Department, wrote of Conservatism being 'essentially the striking of a balance...between freedom and order'. Similarly in social terms, the desirability of an organic society has also been emphasised. Burke wrote that 'the idea of a people is the idea of a corporation'. If this were broken up by one group pursuing its own interests, the corporation fragmented into a 'number of vague, loose individuals and nothing more'. Society, then, is an inter-dependent unit, held together by mutual attachments and responsibilities. In 1978, William Waldegrave wrote that 'inherent in the Conservative tradition is an understanding that the statesman must preserve the patterns of life which weave themselves into...communities'. And in 1983, Sir Ian Gilmour brought these themes together when he wrote that 'the Tory tradition is one of balance and community'.

There can, of course, be disagreement as to the location of the point of balance; and those who have taken an extreme stand would have claimed that this was necessary to counter extremes at the other end of the political spectrum and thus to bring the whole back in to balance. Equally, critics of Toryism would argue that one does not have to scratch a Tory too hard before one finds a reactionary. Yet the leadership of the party has usually tried to avoid tilting the balance too far in the direction of extremism. Pitt himself in the 1790s only gradually moved over to the side of defence; the resistance of the years after 1815 was modified by the so-called 'Liberal Toryism' of the 1820s; and, although Peel opposed the Whig Reform bill in 1831-2 on the grounds that it went too far, he also deplored the reactionary sentiments of the ultras in the party, with whom, in the years after 1832, he was regularly at odds. And it was, of course, Peel who initiated the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, much to the fury of a section of his party. In the 1909-11 period Balfour tried to restrain the excesses of the 'Ditchers' particularly over the issue of the reform of the House of Lords – and, like Peel, earned much displeasure for his pains. He was, indeed, replaced by Bonar Law who – at least in public – adopted an intransigent line, considerably to the right of centre. Here was an exception to the 'balance'.

After 1926, however, the course was once again one of restraint and moderation. Baldwin tried to deflect the party – not always successfully – from taking a vindictive attitude towards the strikers. 'Our business', he said, 'is not to triumph over those who have failed in a mistaken attempt.' It is said that Edward Heath was reluctant to hold an election in early 1974, fearing that an election on the issues raised by the miners' leaders would be divisive and give opportunities for extremism. An extreme right-wing attitude towards trade unionism has been more characteristic of the Tory party in the country than of the leadership; a point which also applies to law and order – and race. Heath denounced Powell's speeches in the late 1960s as 'disgraceful' and 'racialist' and dismissed Powell from the Shadow Cabinet. Thus Sir Ian Gilmour's remark that 'it is of the essence of its tradition of balance that the party should not come down wholly on one side or the other' has been true of the Tory leadership for much of its history. This is, indeed, part of the view which the party takes of itself as the 'national' party, rather than the party of any one section or class.

But has Toryism merely been concerned with defence? Has it essentially been a party which has – whether immoderately or moderately – opposed change initiated by others rather than initiating change itself? It is, indeed, sometimes argued that Toryism has had a democratic face: 'Tory Democracy' is a phrase used to demote certain phases of its development. This is usually taken to mean a commitment to democratic practices on the one hand and to humanitarian and socially progressive policies on the other. The concept is often bound up with the careers of Disraeli and Lord Randolph Churchill, both of whom, it is argued,

furthered political democracy: Disraeli in the Second Reform Act of 1867 and Churchill in the Tory party organisation in the 1880s. Similarly in social matters, Disraeli's early literary efforts formulated the idea of the 'Two Nations' of rich and poor; in 1872, he spoke of the 'elevation of the condition of the people' as one of the Tory party's chief objectives; and his Ministry of 1874-80 passed a considerable volume of social legislation. Similarly Churchill also talked about the need for social reform: 'that must be our cry' he said in 1884.

This 'legacy' of Disraeli and Churchill has been made much of by many modern Tories. In 1953, Sir Edward Boyle (as he then was) wrote that Disraeli 'established a tradition of Conservatism that is still the inspiration of our own day', adding that 'it stretches through Lord Randolph Churchill to be still vital'. Ian Macleod was also fond of evoking the memory of Disraeli and Churchill and gave a lecture in 1954, when Minister of Health, entitled '*sanitas sanitatum*', a phrase used by Disraeli in 1872. Macleod was a contributor to the book *One Nation* and a member of the '*One Nation*' group within the Tory party; again the acknowledgement of Disraeli is clear. And Lord Butler wrote that the 'very philosophy of Conservatism itself was to be found in Disraeli'.

The extent to which Disraeli and Churchill consciously bequeathed a legacy of 'Tory Democracy' in a political or social sense is, however, open to doubt. It would be extremely hard to build any firm and consistent conclusions on the works or conduct of either. Both tended to be activated much more by immediate political or personal considerations than by any long-term philosophy; and such statements as they made about 'Tory Democracy' amounted to little more than rhetoric. In practice, the Tory party in the Disraelian period was concerned more with assimilating the propertied and wealthy middle classes than with championing the rights of the working classes; and when Churchill was once asked what Tory Democracy amounted to his reply was frank: 'Chiefly opportunism'.

Yet if the idea of 'Tory Democracy' cannot be taken very seriously, Toryism has not been without its positive and progressive face in both political and social matters. In the 1790s, Burke argued for a preservation of the 'method of nature in the conduct of the state' – a cycle through 'the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression'. Thus, he continued, 'in what we improve we are never wholly new, in what we retain... never wholly obsolete'. This was a prescription not for total resistance to change; rather for a rhythm of controlled and ordered change to prevent decay and death. Indeed, in famous words, Burke wrote that 'a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation'.

Conservatism has thus been able to recognise the need for the initiation of measured change. In the Tamworth Manifesto of 1835, often regarded as a classic formulation of Conservatism, Peel undertook to review institutions in a friendly temper, to correct 'proved abuses' and to redress 'real grievances'. Lord Derby in 1858 wrote of the continuing need to adapt institutions 'to the altered purposes they are intended to serve'; and in 1883, Salisbury wrote that the object of the party was not 'and ought not to be, simply to keep things as they are'. It is in this context, rather than that of 'Tory Democracy' that it is best to see the political initiatives of Disraeli. Disraeli argued that the question in a progressive country was 'not whether you should resist change which is inevitable but whether change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws and the traditions of a people or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principle and arbitrary and general doctrines'.

Conservatives in the twentieth century have struck the same pragmatic note. In 1962, Michael Oakeshott wrote that innovation was 'called for if the rules are to remain appropriate to the activities they govern'. But for the Conservative, he continued, 'modification of the rules should always reflect and never impose, a change in the activities and beliefs of those who are subject to them... Consequently,, the Conservative will have nothing to do with innovations designed to meet hypothetical situations...' Sir Ian Gilmour has also stressed the need for action in accordance with circumstances not theory. 'Circumstance,' he writes, 'for Burke and for other Conservatives is of crucial importance.' For Gilmour, Tories 'seek to recognise facts and aim to adapt institutions to fit them. By such a change they try to preserve political stability'.

In social and economic matters, too, Tories have shown a reforming or 'improving' face. Once again, Burke set the tone. He wrote of a 'habitual social discipline in which the wiser, the more expert and the more opulent, conduct and by conducting, enlighten and protect the weaker, the less knowing and the less provided with the goods of fortune'. This was also taken up by Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey – the 'lakeland poets' – who stressed the social responsibilities incumbent on the wealthy and the property owners. In the early stages of industrialisation, they deplored an undue attachment to free market forces, which, in their view, led to the exploitation of the vulnerable sections of the community. Southey corresponded in the late 1820s and early 1830s with Ashley, later Lord Shaftesbury, and urged him to take up the cause of factory reform – already being promoted by other humanitarian Tories, such as Oastler and Sadler.

There was, then a 'socially caring' face within Toryism – or to use the modern word, a 'wet' face. A term more contemporary to the nineteenth century was 'paternalistic' – a great deal better than 'Tory democrat' or 'Tory radical'. For in political and social terms, Tory paternalists were far from sympathetic to any kind of radicalism. Indeed, part of the motivation for their social concern was to remove the social problems which would give rise to radical movements: to 'kill radicalism by kindness' and to make the world safe for property. Here again, there was a desire to promote political stability. But to dismiss the activities of the Tory paternalists in terms of 'social control' would be much too extreme; rather it sprang from their sense of an organic and interlocking society in which all sections had duties and responsibilities a sense which could be further developed by a desire to free the individual of his temporal burdens so that he could foster his spiritual capacity. It was, in that respect, 'soul work' first and 'social work' second.

Not, it should be said, that *all* Tories adopted the paternalistic prescription at *all* times. Peel was often much criticised by Ashley in the 1840s for betraying what Ashley regarded as an undue attachment to *laissez-faire* and an unwillingness to give sufficient protection to those who could be exploited within a free market. To Ashley, Peel put the fortunes of cotton above the fortunes of man. 'To Peel', he wrote, 'Cotton is everything, man nothing', or, on another occasion: 'imports and exports. Here is Peel's philosophy. There it begins and there it ends.' Certainly, too, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – in the time of Salisbury, Balfour and Bonar Law – Toryism was not noted for its social paternalism.

Yet even at such periods, Toryism has not been devoid of social content. Peel put primary emphasis on creating the conditions for economic expansion; yet he was not dogmatically attached to *laissez-faire* and his economic liberalism was directed towards creating a prosperity in which all classes could share. At the time of the repeal of the Corn Laws – a measure which Ashley supported – Peel said that the real question at issue was 'the improvement of the social and moral condition of the masses of the population'; this was

what he sought to achieve. The means could, then, give rise to disagreement – whether a removal of restricting practices and an expansion of the economy or measures of direct social improvement; but the end of social improvement and harmony was not lost sight of.

In the Disraeli period, social legislation was once again favoured, even if this was much more a consolidation of what already existed rather than a new initiative in the direction of 'Tory Democracy'. In the 1920s, Baldwin's background was that of a paternalistic factory owner and he tried to bring some of this experience to his public life. 'I want to be a healer', he said in 1923; and he urged his party to avert class bitterness 'by the hardness of your heads and the largeness of your hearts'. He respected the challenge and social commitment of Labour and stressed the theme of social responsibility when he said that the Conservatives 'though the first to offer a serious contribution to the amelioration of...the working classes... had lagged behind since Disraeli died'. He stressed that both sides of industry should think more of their duties than of their rights.

Again, then, Conservatives have been able to find room for the concept of balance in their social thinking and practice. They have not had the traditional Liberal attachment to the rights of the individual nor, of course, the Socialist belief in the virtues of the state: as the Conservative MP, Chris Patten, has put it, Conservatives, 'unlike every other political philosophy' have not been 'transfixed by the alleged antithesis between the individual and the state'. The title of Harold Macmillan's book, published in 1938, is an illustration of this balance: *The Middle Way*. In this book, Macmillan argued in favour of 'a mixed system' which combined state ownership, regulation and control and private enterprises and initiative, each in its appropriate sphere of activity. In 1945, L. S. Amery criticised *laissez-faire* individualism and the capitalist orthodoxy which, he wrote, 'tended to relegate the majority, under the designation of Labour to the position of a mere commodity, governed by the laws of supply and demand'. He called for a Conservative social policy: 'Not a mere weak imitation of Socialist policy, but one based on our own philosophy of life. A social policy appealing to every class in the community.' In his final sentence, Amery struck the idea of the corporate nature of the country, not one divided into working sections or classes.

It was, of course, Labour which introduced the Welfare State; yet since its introduction, Toryism has reacted to circumstances and proceeded on a broad acceptance of its main principles; and the phrase 'Butskellism' was coined from the names of Hugh Gaitskell and R.A. Butler to denote a broad consensus on social and economic matters between moderate Labour and Tory: a consensus which prevailed for much of the third quarter of the century and of which the 'One Nation' group in the Tory party was evidence. In 1980, Sir Ian Gilmour wrote that the 'interventionist state and the Welfare State are not going to go away', and Chris Patten has written that 'there is no case for dismantling the Welfare State; when they function well, its services help to bind the community together'.

In terms of the Tory party's foreign or imperial policy, defence of institutions and interests at home has been accompanied by defence of British interests abroad; and in the late nineteenth century, the Tory party became closely identified with Empire. This was, indeed, also among Disraeli's famous objectives of 1872: 'upholding the Empire of England'. He – and Salisbury – were quick to point to the contrast between the 'national' and the 'patriotic' Tory party and the 'unpatriotic' Liberal party of Gladstone. Concern for Empire could, indeed, merge into an extreme and aggressive jingoism. Gladstone had his windows broken and his effigy burned for his advocacy of peace and neutrality during the Eastern Crisis of 1877-8, when the more popular mood was one of violent Russophobia. During the Boer War, there were outbreaks of patriotic frenzy directed against the Boers – and the pro-Boers in Britain. In the years before

1914, Bonar Law's public utterances gave Ulster unconditional support in its fierce opposition to Home Rule. Even in the later twentieth century, Empire – or shades of Empire – could still evoke a beat in Tory hearts: as in the Suez Crises of 1956 or the Falklands episode of 1982. The gleeful 'Gotcha' headline which appeared fleetingly in a tabloid newspaper on the sinking of the *Belgrano* in the summer of 1982 conjured up echoes of a jingoistic past.

Yet to suggest that Toryism has always been characterised by an extreme defence of patriotism would be as misleading as to suggest that it has also been marked by an extreme defence of prescriptive rights or property. Although Disraeli talked a great deal about Empire, much of this was rhetoric; as in matters of political or social reform, so in matters of Empire, it is very doubtful if Disraeli ever had any coherent policy. Indeed, in the mid-nineteenth century, he had spoken despairingly of Empire. Again, it came back to 'circumstance'. The domestic and the international situation in the late nineteenth century prompted growth in interest in imperial matters and, even at its height, extreme patriotism and flag waving were more characteristic of the Tory rank and file than of the leadership of the party. Leaders, conscious of the cost and responsibility of colonial aggrandisement, were necessarily more cautious. Salisbury has been called a 'reluctant imperialist', and even Bonar Law's public stance of extreme intransigence on the Ulster issue masked a more malleable private, behind-the-scenes, position which aimed at a measure of compromise. In 1927, Balfour argued in favour of 'some combinations of different patriotisms', which went further than simply British patriotism; and most Conservatives have not been averse to some sinking of national identity in NATO or the EEC. Chris Patten has written that 'patriotism does not mean that Britain should set its face against joining a military alliance or a wider grouping of nations'. Once again, it is a question of what is judged to be in Britain's interests at any particular time: a recognition of the reality of the situation. The same could be said of Britain's withdrawal from Empire. Bending before the 'winds of change' is a classic Conservative tactic – abroad, as at home.

Conservatism has thus, on occasion, been characterised by extreme defensiveness – but also by a sense of balance; by an advocacy of economic freedom – but also by a sense of social community; by an attachment to circumstance rather than to theory or ideology. How far does present-day Conservatism offer a new face? Here, perhaps, it is appropriate to quote a sentence from the opening speech made by Mrs Thatcher in the 1983 Election campaign at Perth. 'What a prize we have to fight for', she said, 'no less than the chance to banish from our land the dark divisive clouds of Marxist Socialism and bring together men and women from all walks of life who share a belief in freedom and who have the courage to uphold it.' Once more, Mrs Thatcher emphasised the role of Conservatism in defending the political and social order from radical encroachment the encroachment of Marxist Socialism. The Tory advertisements later in the campaign also stressed this theme. The reader was presented with certain items in the Labour and the Communist Manifesto: and the two were shown to be identical. The reader was urged to vote Tory to resist and reject this; just as the Toryism of the 1790s or the 1830s and 1840s resisted and rejected the radicalism of the French Revolution or the Chartists.

Then Mrs Thatcher appealed to all 'who share a belief in freedom and have the courage to uphold it'. Again, this scarcely struck a new theme in Conservatism. Freedom is the counterbalance to Socialism, with – as Tories see it – its overtones of compulsion, centralisation and control. Citizens should be free to choose, to exercise their own initiative and take responsibility for their choice. And such a creed could appeal to men and women 'in all walks of life': here again is the idea of the Tory party being the national party which unites the country rather than dividing it into warring interests or classes.

The Falklands episode is not mentioned and, indeed, was raised by Labour much more than by the Conservatives in the 1983 Election; but Mrs Thatcher did, on occasion, stress the importance of Britain's role in the world as a reliable defender of liberty and justice. And at the Tory party Conference in the autumn of 1982, she said that the 'spirit of the South Atlantic' was the 'spirit of Britain at her best'.

Thus one could argue that there is little essentially new in Thatcherite Conservatism. If the defensive role is emphasised, this, it can be said, is because the opposing views are extreme and a forcible expression of Toryism is necessary to bring things back into balance. In the course of the Election campaign, constant reference was made to the extreme left-wing nature of the Labour Manifesto. Mrs Thatcher has denied that she herself is an extremist: she has also denied that she has 'changed the direction of Conservatism' and quoted Burke as the authority for her belief in an 'ordered freedom'. And in stressing the need for individual enterprise within a system of 'sound' finance, the Prime Minister could be seen to be in the tradition of Peelite Conservatism; and this might also be said of her belief that social improvement will follow economic recovery rather than that it should be induced by measures of direct legislative intervention. The 'dry' prescription is not a new one in Tory thinking.

Yet returning to the speech at Perth, it will be recalled that Mrs Thatcher urged the nation not to come to terms with Marxist Socialism but to banish it from the land. Here, there is no attempt to find an accommodation with other political ideas; rather, there is a total rejection of them. Defence becomes attack. Mrs Thatcher once said that 'politics is about compromise but there comes a point at which compromise has to stop'. Thus Thatcherite Toryism is often described as more ideological than earlier brands of Conservatism; consensus has given way to confrontation, pragmatism to principle, circumstance to conviction. The Prime Minister has described herself as a 'conviction' politician; and, while she disowned the idea that she had changed the direction of Conservatism, she did accept that she might have re-defined it. Here, she acknowledges her debt to Sir Keith Joseph, who she said, gave Toryism a new lease of life by reviving the philosophy and principles of a society in which individuals were given freedom – and the responsibilities which went with it.

Here, then, there is a change of emphasis and a break from 'Butskellism', at least at the level of argument. It is to the Victorian period that Thatcherite eyes are cast. Sir John Nott once called himself a 'Liberal I, of the nineteenth century'; so too, he said, was the Prime Minister and, indeed, this was what the whole government was 'all about'. Governments, if in such a view, cannot create wealth and employment, but only the conditions in which wealth and employment can be created. This is a matter for management and workforce, unfettered by a high-spending and high-taxing state. They should be encouraged to exploit the market by an exercise of the Victorian qualities of hard work and individual effort. People, then, should be encouraged to help and provide for themselves and to develop a sense of individual responsibility; and for those unable to help themselves, the state supplies a safety net, supplemented and strengthened by private and voluntary charitable efforts – an exercise of individual responsibility for others.

Critics within the party of this 'redefined' Toryism see it as abandoning the traditional moderation and balance of the Tory leadership and as departing from a recognition of circumstance in the interests of ideology and theory. To Sir Ian Gilmour, Thatcherite Tories have 'abandoned scepticism and embraced what almost amounts to a system'. In economic terms, he argues, this – monetarist – system will not work; and, in social terms, its thrust towards private advancement and its effects on employment and on public spending and

services destroy the concept of community and social balance – and threaten the fabric of order and stability. Thatcherite Tories, in argument and in practice, disown the paternalistic legacy and remove the social content from Toryism more completely even than earlier 'dry' Tories. Such are some of the points made by the Tory 'wets'; and, indeed, Edward Heath – not normally regarded as one of their number except in the sense that he, too, is out of favour with the leadership – wrote in October 1982 that it was 'extraordinary how far the party has been swept by a group who do not believe in Toryism at its best'. He continued: 'they do not believe in the responsibility we have to each other, in the recognition that there are some people who are never going to be victors... who are always going to have disadvantages... It is to them that we have responsibilities'. And Mr Pym – after his dismissal – has called upon the Prime Minister to use her talents 'to serve all the people of this country, not only those who can stand on their own feet but also those who can't'.

Equally, critics outside the party seize on what they see as the social indifference or callousness of Thatcherite Toryism. Austin Mitchell has written that 'genuine Tories' have been dominated 'bondage-style by nineteenth-century Liberals'; and he sees the Tory party as taken over by 'piggybank *poujadism*'. Denis Healey has written that 'the tradition of *noblesse oblige*, so powerful a strand from Shaftesbury to Mamillan', has given way to 'the rule of fear and greed'; and David Steel has commented that believers in the old 'one-nation' style of Conservatism are unlikely to be happy with the 'new abrasive and harsh Toryism that we see today'.

Thus, in one view, Thatcherite Toryism has simply stressed and given prominence to certain features of the Tory face which, in recent times, have been obscured – but which have been there all along. This is the re-definition argument; a re-definition which, apologists would claim, is the more necessary in the context of Labour extremism. And some would argue that the re-definition is one more of rhetoric than reality. In another view, the re-definition, both in rhetoric and reality, has amounted to a redrawing of the features to an extent which makes the face not simply a version of the old face but a new one; indeed, those who hold this view would further argue that the new face so distorts Toryism that it now presents an unattractive appearance. With the large Tory majority, will the face undergo a further re-definition – or 'distortion' – of Conservatism?

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TASKS

Write a 500 word summary of the article

How would you define 'Toryism'?

How is Thatcherite Toryism different from previous versions?