

The following Lecture was given to the Centre for Policy Studies Meeting at the Conservative Party Conference by David Willets MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, on Thursday 8 October 1998

WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

During the long years of office, our ability to talk confidently and persuasively about Conservatism seemed to atrophy as, instead, ministers got bogged down in their departmental responsibilities. Now we must once more paint a big confident picture of Conservative beliefs. William Hague has set that process going with cogent speeches on the family, on Europe, on community and society - and, of course, with a speech at the Centre for Policy Studies earlier this year on the constitution. The Centre for Policy Studies is central to the debate about Conservatism.

But we cannot leave it all to him. Others must follow. Indeed, the Party Conference is a great opportunity for speeches on Conservative ideas. But I do not want today to reflect on ideas in the abstract, or on great Conservative thinkers such as Hayek, or Oakeshott or Keith Joseph. I want to take a rather different approach. The intellectual flowering of Conservative ideas is essential but this evening I want to talk about the roots in British history, culture and society which sustain them.

Quite simply, the Conservative Party has been, and has seen itself to be, the national party; the British party; the one-nation party. Critics are quick to dismiss what they see as a Conservative attempt to hijack the language of patriotism for party purposes. But this makes us sound far too calculating. Conservatives were never detached from Middle England but straining to work out what it felt; we are in it, and of it. Underneath the criticisms from the Left there is a deep, if anxious, respect for the Conservatives' role as the national party. In his book *The State We're In*, Will Hutton refers, for example, to the Conservative Party as 'finding middle-England's centre of gravity and ensuring that no other party endangers middle-England's pleasures and privileges'.

But before going any further down these lines, we must ask whether we are talking about Englishness or Britishness. We can't exclude either: each have their own sphere. Britishness is perhaps more to do with the outer world, the face we present to foreigners; after all, it was the British Empire and it is the British army. It is the same in economic matters: it is always British industry, British exports, British output. But when we shift from the world of foreign affairs and economics to more domestic matters then Englishness comes into its own. It is English schools and English universities, English history, English literature, the English language, the English football team and the English cricket team.

What our opponents once most feared about us, and perhaps still do to this day, is that somehow Conservatives understood the drumbeat of national identity. We had an ability to reach the hearts of the electors and evoke instincts and emotions which were a closed book to the rationalist progressives. Conservatives knew the British people in a way radicals could never hope to do. Conservatism was not a political ideology aimed at trying to win the British people over to some abstract set of intellectual propositions. Instead, it was an emanation from what was regarded as the central features and deepest currents that ran through our national life. The identity of the Conservative Party was apprehended only by understanding the identity of the country. That is why, in order to answer the question of who we are as Conservatives, we must first answer the question of who the British people are. The worst possible thing for Conservatives, worse even than intellectual decay, is for us to feel strangers in our own land; to come to feel that we are some 'sect', possessing a special political insight hidden from the vast majority of the people. But we confront a Labour Party more determined than ever before to align themselves with central aspects of our national identity.

Last year's CPS Conference Lecture was given by Michael Portillo. One of his central messages was that the Conservative Party could not afford to have a notice on its entrance door saying 'no teachers admitted, nobody in the health service, no single parents'. One of the most disconcerting problems of canvassing during the last election campaign was to find a number of people who, when you knocked on their door, did not even mount a political argument against Conservatives; they took it for granted that just by describing who they were, they could not be voting Conservative. 'Well, I am a teacher so I will be voting Labour.' 'I am in the health service so I will be voting Labour.' 'I am a single parent so I will be voting Labour.' As the national party, we found large swathes of the nation had turned against us.

Tony Blair, by contrast, had assembled a more broadly-based coalition of support for Labour than it had ever secured before. Look at some of New Labour's peers. Not just the Chairman of Sainsbury's or the Chairman of BP, but the Director-General of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Chief Executive of the First Division Association. Blair has cast his nets more broadly and ambitiously than ever before. His ultimate objective is very ambitious indeed. He wants to enter the twenty-first century with British politics dominated by a centre-left radical coalition, instead of the centre-right Conservative coalition which has dominated the twentieth century.

It is no accident that Peter Mandelson, the central figure in the reconstruction of the Labour Party, attaches such importance to the Millennium celebration. It is to be a symbol of the new country which they are creating. This was just what his grandfather tried to do with the Festival of Britain. Herbert Morrison described it as 'new Britain springing from the battered fabric of the old', but he failed to secure a Labour dominance of that new Britain. His grandson hopes to do better.

Labour really believes that having modernised themselves, they now need to give the country the same treatment. They genuinely believe that Britain suffers from the disadvantage of not having had a revolution which swept away 'pre-modern' political institutions and social structures. They think the time has now come to do this. One New Labour adviser is supposed to have observed: 'We inherited a feudal state and we are going to make it a Napoleonic one'. They want to remake our country in their image.

There has been a serious intellectual shift in writing about British history which has prepared the ground for this Labour offensive. The crucial figure in all this is Professor Eric Hobsbawm. He and his friends and allies, E. P. Thompson and Christopher Hill, wanted to re-write British history from a Marxist perspective. Instead of the old high politics they wanted to write the history of an oppressed working-class. From Diggers and Levellers during the Civil War, through Luddites, Chartists and finally the Labour aristocracy of the organised trade unions; all were seen as sharing some sort of authentic, organic proletarian experience. I will not stray too far into historical argument, other than to comment that their Marxism seems to have come before their history.

The next wave of progressive historians lost the Marxist commitment of their predecessors, so there is less romanticising of some supposedly unified working-class political social force surging through centuries of British history. They recognised that the Thompson/Hill/Hobsbawm version of the experience of the British working-classes did not stand up to scrutiny and evidence from the popular culture of the time. But there is a residual influence of the Marxist analysis. If the authentic voice of mass of the British people is the cry to be freed from economic exploitation and political oppression, then it follows that when not seeing things in those terms they must be suffering from some sort of false consciousness.

Eric Hobsbawm has led the shift; he co-edited a set of essays with the significant title *The Invention of Tradition*. Linda Colley's influential book, *Britons*, is sub-titled *Forging a Nation*. Benedict Anderson's book on nationalism is entitled *Imagined Communities*. What is being attempted is to show that the conventional national identities - and particularly those of British men and women - are somehow artificial, invented or forged. Having lost the confidence to write an alternative Marxist social history, all that is left is a critical account of any non-proletarian identities.

There is a further shift in Linda Colley's work. The authentic identity, hidden by forgery, is no longer a naïve Marxist faith in a proletariat. Instead, the authentic identity is a European one. The implicit argument is that we are therefore emerging from an aberrant period when Britishness was identified in opposition to the continent of Europe - albeit, an aberrant period which lasted several hundred years. The argument is that the sense of Britishness was forged through the experience of being a Protestant island off a Roman Catholic continent, engaged in prolonged warfare with the Continental Powers, particularly the French. Now these conditions are disappearing: on a typical Sunday more people in Britain will worship in a Roman Catholic church than in an Anglican church. We have, let us hope, experienced the last major war in which the Great Powers of Western Europe fought each other. Now therefore we can revert to Linda Colley's supposed European identity which existed before these conditions arose. And also, as the roots of national identity weaken, so we need to re-write our constitution in the continental quasi-contractual style.

This is all part of a wider interest in Englishness and Britishness. Earlier this year we had Peter Vansittart's delightful book *In Memory of England*. Last month, Julian Barnes' new novel *England, England* was published. It is an investigation of what is bogus and what is real in our national identity. Now the pugnacious Jeremy Paxman is moving on from tackling individual politicians to giving the same treatment to the entire English people. There is a flood of academic studies of Englishness, Britishness and our cultural identity, reflecting the growing belief that our national identity is more problematic and more complicated than it used to be. It is this uncertainty and unease which creates the conditions for Blair's attempt to create a dominant new progressive electoral coalition, focussing on a European and constitutional agenda.

I am reminded of what the progressives did to the way we think about the family. What was once seen as an unproblematic and fundamentally right way of living - a married couple with their children - has come to be just one of a variety of lifestyle choices. We were told that we should not assume that one way was more effective than any other way of bringing up a family; even to believe in the traditional family was in some way prejudiced. Now the empirical evidence is beginning to come in and it shows that actually it is generally best for a child to be brought up by his or her two natural parents. And all along most people have continued to spend most of their lives in a household headed by a married couple. Meanwhile, however, the damage has been done. What was previously obvious and accepted has been rendered problematic. The progressives are trying to do for our national identity what they have done for the family.

How should Conservatives respond to all this? There are several responses; and I shall look at them in turn.

First of all there is the simple point that, of course, a nation's culture and sense of identity emerge through experiences. It is not some exciting discovery that British identity and patriotism were intensified by the experience of frequent wars with the French. That is exactly the sort of thing which does create a national identity. They are quite right to show how traditions and cultural identities may emerge. But what is wrong is that they believe that their explanations are evidence of something being invented, and that there is some other authentic form of national identity. So we should simply keep calm and refuse to be shocked by these so-called disclosures. Their history is interesting even if the rhetoric of 'invention' and 'forging' is absurd.

There is another Conservative response which is simply to appeal to the unproblematic shared habits and ideas which hold a country together. We do not have to be self-consciously aware of these - they just are. One is reminded of Edmund Burke's observation in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that:

"Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that of course they are many in number; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour."

Even arguing about national identity might seem somehow to be an un-Conservative occupation. A Conservative simply enjoys what he has. Here are four attempts at identifying who we are, not by elaborate

intellectual argument but by the association of ideas. The four quotations all come from the twentieth century. See if you can identify them. The first, a description of the coronation of George V in 1910 goes as follows:

"It is to be doubted whether one person in that whole assembly had a clear thought in his head. Rather, words and their associations marched in a grand chain, giving hand to hand: England, Shakespeare, Elizabeth, London; Westminster, the docks, India, the Cutty Sark, England; England, Gloucestershire, John of Gaunt; Magna Carta, Cromwell, England." [SEE ENDNOTE 1]

The second is on what makes a national culture:

"All the characteristics and activities of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the Twelfth of August, a Cup Final, the dog races, the pin-table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century gothic churches and the music of Elgar." [SEE ENDNOTE 2]

Then there is a Conservative Prime Minister:

"To me, England is the country and the country is England. And when I ask myself what I mean by England, when I think of England when I am abroad, England comes to me through my various senses - through the ear, they eye, and through certain imperishable scents. I will tell you what they are, and there may be those among you who feel as I do. "The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the cornrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been seen in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England." [SEE ENDNOTE 3]

And someone who was far from a Conservative:

"The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the labour exchanges, the rattle of pin tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to holy communion through the mists of the autumn morning - all these are not only fragments, but characteristic fragments of the English scene." [SEE ENDNOTE 4]

Incidentally I have always wondered why so many commentators mocked John Major for that image of old maids bicycling to Holy Communion when he was only quoting George Orwell.

All these accounts dissolve the difficult questions about national identity by listing what we share and can celebrate. Although this will no longer do on its own, it is certainly an approach to Britishness which still has life. When we fly into Heathrow on a British Airways inter-continental flight they show a video aimed at foreign visitors of things that they might like to do in Great Britain. The images are powerful and appealing. Obviously there is Buckingham Palace, the Changing of the Guard, the Houses of Parliament. But there is also the Notting Hill Carnival, the excitement of West End theatre. Conservative politicians must certainly not lose touch with these associations.

So far we have seen two ways Conservatives might tackle this debate about who we are. First to shrug our shoulders when the progressive historians claim our traditions are invented and say: "So what?" Secondly, we can celebrate all the associations of ideas and images which make us One Nation. But we can and must do more than that. The challenge is for Conservatives to have real, substantial things to say about England or Great Britain which strike a chord with most people and which tie in with our principles and policies. Labour might try to say them as well - there is nothing that they would not say - but even if they did, they would not have the same credibility as we would. These are demanding conditions but I would like to suggest some really quite fundamental facts about Britain in which Conservatives take pride and which Labour does not understand.

First here is a question which tests whether or not you are an optimist about British society and social mobility. If you take a child aged 7, which is the better predictor of the eventual occupational status of the child: his or her performance in a simple aptitude test at the age of 7, or the occupational status of the child's father? The answer is that performance in the aptitude test is the better predictor. *Britain is an open, mobile society*. I do not think that many Labour politicians would feel comfortable with that fact. They are driven by a different view of this country, one in which they have to spend billions of pounds on the New Deal to overcome what they see as structural social disadvantage.

There was a revealing survey by the *Sunday Times* before the last election, asking Labour MPs which books had influenced them the most. There were the standard replies: the Bible, Marx, Ruskin. But the single book which was cited most was *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* by Robert Tressell. This is an appalling hotch-potch of class prejudice based on the belief that Britain is such a snobby, snooty society that if you come from a modest background, doors which will lead to a better education or a better job are slammed in your face. That is not the experience of the British people but it is the belief which drives Labour politicians to this day. So if we talk about Britain as a meritocratic society, I do not believe that most Labour MPs will be able to follow us. But we will be speaking the truth and reflecting the experience of the majority of the people.

This is all of a piece with another feature of Britain which the Labour Party does not understand. We now know from a careful study of the village of Holywell cum Needleworth in John Major's constituency of Huntingdon that of 140 families studied, 51 failed to maintain residence for longer than a generation. And when was this high rate of mobility? Between 1250 and 1450. In this way, Alan Macfarlane painstakingly assembles the evidence in his book, *The Origins of English Individualism*, which shows "that the majority of ordinary people in Britain from at least the thirteenth century were rampant individuals, highly mobile both geographically and socially 'rational', market-oriented and acquisitive, ego-centred in kinship and social life." So it is not the case that Britain had the Industrial Revolution and then became a market society. It is the other way round - it is because we were a market society that we were the place the Industrial Revolution started. *Britain has always been far more of a market economy than the Continent*. So when we talk of the cash economy, the rise of the market or individualism, we are not speaking of some extraordinary alien import from America that arrived in 1963. We are talking about a fundamental feature of English society. And the importance of this market culture is that it ties in with the individualistic mobile society we described above. Again, can you imagine a Labour MP, even Tony Blair, speaking in praise of Britain as the world's first market economy and praising the fact that we historically have been a far more individualistic culture than the continent? They still cannot do it and yet it is true.

We can tie our belief in the free market economy to our interpretation of Britain's economic history. W D Rubenstein's book, *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain 1750-1990*, successfully demolishes the theory that somehow the British upper classes were deeply hostile to business. What it shows is that we have long had distinctive strengths in, for example, financial services and the law. These may well be areas in which we have what economists call a comparative advantage. Labour's stake-holding rhetoric reveals that they have a different model. For them, what matters above all is physical investment. They look enviously at the fixed capital behind a German worker, which is indeed higher than the physical capital behind a British worker. This is the rationale for Labour's attack on dividends; they believe that firms should not be distributing so much money to their shareholders but, instead, should retain them to spend more on investment. But that is not how the British economy has ever worked. Although Britain's capital stock is lower than Germany's, we are able to use our capital stock much more efficiently because of our less regulated labour market and our more open capital market. That is why capital is much more efficiently used in Britain. So there is a British economic model which is different from the German one, and it is none the worse for that. This is something the Labour Party does not appear to understand.

Here's another fact about Britain which Labour does not understand. *We are not a regionalist country*. We are a country of local neighbourhoods, local communities, of small towns. A research study looked at the different regional structures used by a variety of British organisations - the BBC, the water companies, the Police, the Health Service, the Assize Courts, the distribution networks of the bigger retail organisations. It found that there was no overlap between the different maps. You will not have much success in identifying

regions with strong and agreed boundaries which people, by and large, stick to voluntarily - apart, perhaps, from the South West and North East. The fact is that England is just too fine-grained a country to fall easily into big regional lumps. We are a country of the local neighbourhood, at most of the county. If Labour tries to pursue their regionalist agenda they will be cutting across most people's sense of their local identities rather than embodying them in new political structures. Conservatives can be the party of the local, leaving Labour as the party of the regional. Again we would be the party in tune with the instincts of the average voter.

Finally on my list is the role of our political institutions in contributing to our national identity. If you apply the postcard test - what it is that foreign visitors buy as a symbol of the country they have visited - it is clear that *political institutions are a particularly important part of British national identity*. Visitors to Paris do not go to see the Assemblée Nationale or the Presidential Palace; the postcards brought back as reminders of France are of the Eiffel Tower, the Mona Lisa or the Champs Elysée. Germany and Italy are also treated in this way. But for Britain, it's Buckingham Palace and, as all MPs know to their cost, a flood of foreign visitors want to see round the Houses of Parliament as well as Westminster Abbey. They believe those places are central to what it is to be British. That is one reason that constructing a European identity through political integration is to exact a particularly high price from us. If your sense of national identity is tied up in cuisine or language, engineering or industry, then political integration is less of a threat. But if your sense of national identity is particularly linked to the sovereignty of parliament, the role of the monarchy and so on, then that exercise is far more painful. Again, this is something which you could not imagine Tony Blair saying but it ties in with the instincts of the vast majority of the British people. They do not agree with Blair's advisers who are shocked at what they claim is Britain's quasi-feudal political structure. They do believe that Parliamentary sovereignty and traditional constitutional understandings matter.

These are not static observations. They are four essential parts of a story, a story about our country which Conservatives can tell and which Labour cannot. We have a sense of a mobile and open society; of individualist enterprise; of the importance of the local community; of the way we are all bound together by historic political institutions. I do not believe that Labour can match any of these statements. They still belong to the grievance culture and are more willing to believe in deprivation than in opportunity. They still want to pursue an agenda for a much more corporatist type of capitalism, one which owes much more to the continental model of capitalism than ours. They are regionalists, not localists. And, of course, Labour does not understand what it is that binds a nation state together. De Gaulle had what he called *une certaine idée de la France*. We Conservatives need to have in the front of our minds a certain picture of Britain. Once we have that, the ideas and the political arguments follow.

ENDNOTES

1. Vita Sackville-West, *The Edwardians*, 1930.
2. T S Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture", in *Selected Prose*, Faber, 1975.
3. Stanley Baldwin, "On England", address to the annual dinner of the Royal Society of St George at the Hotel Cecil, 6 May 1924.
4. George Orwell, *England Your England*, 1940.