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# Liberalism, Conservatism and the British Nation State

*A hyper-liberal ideology has developed*
*that aims to purge society of any trace*
*of other views of the world.*
John Gray[1]

*Ultra-liberalism on the right*
*is matched by ultra-liberalism*
*on the left.*
Nick Timothy[2]

Conservatives, if they allow their imaginations to run away with them, can see the heavy hand of Marxism almost anywhere. This was true of the earlier economic form of Marxism at the height of the Cold War, which the Conservative Right thought was rampant in the Universities, the BBC and the trades unions – the latter being seen as both a bastion of domestic Marxism and a Trojan horse though which the USSR could infiltrate British politics. The Monday Club, that redoubtable source of right-wing Conservatism in the 1960s and early 1970s, before it was itself undermined by extremist infiltration of a different kind, detected the communist menace in domestic and foreign issues facing Britain. Marxism, it seemed, was everywhere. So too, today, some believe that Marxism has marched a long way through the institutions – not so much the old economic form of Marxism, though no doubt some fear that the recent wave of strike action is a return to the 1970s, but more so the rise of "cultural" or "Western" Marxism.

1 Gray 2018.
2 Timothy 2020: 40.



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I am not seeking to ridicule such notions, but rather to suggest that the conservative's identification of Marxism as the main foe is misplaced. Firing in the direction of Marxism is to miss the target. Wiser conservatives, even in the 1970s, recognised that the problem was not so much Marxism – since few actually believed in its theories – but rather a particularly authoritarian form of liberalism. Today, it is not so much Marxism which challenges the traditions, customs and values of the British people but rather a cosmopolitan liberalism, which far from valuing the classical liberal belief in tolerance and diversity of opinion is increasingly intolerant. Moreover, the prevailing economic viewpoint in the UK in the last half century also owes much to the ideas of economic liberals. The argument in this chapter is that these are two faces of liberalism, one from the right and one from the left, which conservatives (again of the left and the right) should reject as they search for a politics of the common good.[3]

The chapter begins by analysing the dominance of liberalism in both its economic and social senses, showing how this has undermined traditional conservative values. It then explores the ways in which those of a more conservative disposition can best respond. In so doing, it revisits thinkers and themes I examined in my book, *Conservatism in a Cold Climate: Traditional Toryism since 1945*.[4]

## THE CHALLENGE OF ECONOMIC LIBERALISM

In 1970, Lord Coleraine argued that the Conservative Party had been far too willing to compromise with a mythical "centre ground" in British politics in order to win elections.[5] Much of the blame for this was put on Stanley Baldwin and R.A. Butler. Instead, Coleraine argued for a more principled form of Conservatism, which for him meant a commitment to reducing the size and functions of the state in favour of the economic market. Of senior postwar

[3] I use Conservatism to denote the ideas and political practices of the Conservative Party and conservatism as a wider philosophy or instinct.

[4] Hickson 2020.

[5] Coleraine 1970.

Conservatives at the time he wrote, only Enoch Powell had argued for this. Coleraine started from a pessimistic view of the human condition in which the irrational nature of the fallen man was paramount, but this did not stop him from arguing that the free market should be pursued as far as possible in order to set the people free. The economic crises of the 1970s gave encouragement to this free-market counter-revolution.

The economic liberals appeared, in such a climate, to have ready-made answers to these problems.[6] Friedrich von Hayek mounted a sophisticated philosophical critique of social democracy which, his supporters claimed, exposed the moral vacuum at the heart of the ideas which had underpinned government policy since 1945 irrespective of which party happened to be in power at a particular time. All of the central nostrums of social democracy – equality, welfare rights, the positive conception of liberty and social justice were found wanting. Instead, argued Hayek, the superiority of the free market over the welfare state was twofold. Firstly, it was more efficient than government planning and would better tackle poverty than the welfare state had done since the rising tide of capitalism would raise all ships even if some rose faster than others. The gap between the rich and poor was unimportant. What mattered was the increase in absolute incomes. This would happen through the so-called "trickle down" effect of markets. Secondly, the market did not distribute according to any preconceived idea of fairness. The unlimited interactions of supply and demand produced an entirely random set of outcomes. This would overcome the arbitrary nature of patterned distributions of income, itself an unfairness since there was no way of deciding objectively between different principles of distribution such as equality, desert, merit, effort, need etc. The lack of an objective basis for redistribution had resulted in pressure group competition for government resources and a bidding up of commitments between parties at election time. By the 1970s these economic consequences of democracy, as Samuel Brittan called it, were all too apparent.[7] The market would overcome these distributive dilemmas.

[6] See Hickson 2020: 121–133.

[7] Brittan 1977.

The ideas of Hayek were augmented by a range of neo-liberal political economists who put forward various theories. Milton Freidman argued that Keynesian counter-cyclical budgeting had resulted not in the intended aim of reducing unemployment – since only the freeing up of labour markets could do that – but in ever higher rates of inflation. The aim of government policy should not be to increase employment to levels above what the market could "naturally" create, but rather the reduction of inflation through control of the money supply. Hayek contested even this limited role for government by arguing that currency should be denationalised. Crowding-out theorists, such as Bacon and Eltis, argued that the wealth-consuming public sector used resources necessary for wealth creation in the private sector. Public choice theorists argued that the civil service operated in its own interests and had grown accordingly, needing to be cut back. Finally, supply-side economists argued that taxation levels were now too high and had a disincentive effect. Taken together these arguments amounted to a wholesale attack on the social democratic state.

The influence of these ideas was initially limited but through the campaigning of think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and their articulation in the national media they became influential on the Conservative Right. This was especially so in the 1970s when the economic problems of the day made them seem much more relevant. They were taken up from the late 1960s by Enoch Powell, and then in the 1970s by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. In the internal battle of ideas within the Conservative Party they won out, with the One Nation Conservatives and the more traditional right – which had been committed to a political economy of protectionism – being marginalised in the party.

From 1979 onwards, the Conservative governments of Mrs. Thatcher made decisive moves in the direction of economic liberalism, beginning with monetarist policies to control inflation. These appeared to be a straightforward solution to an evident problem, but in reality proved much more complex. In the second term, privatisation became the flagship Thatcherite policy. Privatisation had always been part of the Thatcherite agenda, starting with the sale of council housing in 1979 to tenants at significantly reduced prices. Her ideological opposition to

state provision meant that councils were not permitted to use the receipts from house sales to build new social housing. State holdings of companies began to be sold off tentatively, but in the second term whole industries were privatised in an attempt to foster a "popular capitalism". Finally, in the third term, reform of the welfare state and local government finance took on a greater priority. Throughout the period these free-market reforms in the domestic economy were accompanied by free-trade measures including the removal of capital controls. By opening the domestic economy to international competition it was believed that inefficient parts of the economy would be forced to reform or go bankrupt. Often these policies were introduced cautiously and developed their own momentum, but the general thrust was clear from the time when Thatcher was Leader of the Opposition and had said that Labour had a philosophy and she must therefore have one too. Following her fall from power in 1990 the nature of governing changed considerably with the more consensual style of John Major, but the policy agenda was maintained with key measures such as privatisation of the coal mines and railways occurring in his administration. After the 1997 General Election defeat, the economic liberal agenda was never seriously challenged. New Labour's social policies were grafted on top of an economy which retained its neoliberal character. Inevitably, government policy has to take account of administrative, political and financial constraints, meaning that for the free-market purists insufficient progress had been made, but not withstanding these objections economic liberalism had acquired a hegemonic status in government policy. Critics were dismissed as failing to understand realities, those who sought to compromise were seen as "wets" and organised interests who opposed the tide were identified as "enemies". Thatcher famously said there was no alternative (Tina). Neo-liberalism was reinforced by a rhetoric of globalisation – the argument that nation states had to adopt economic liberal policies in order to succeed in the global economy.

The extent to which neo-liberal ideas dominated the Conservative Party is evidenced by the debate around the turn of the millennium between so-called "mods" and "rockers". This was a debate over social morality, between social liberals and social conservatives. On the economic front, both sides remained

committed to economic liberalism. With the third successive Conservative election defeat in 2005, the party seemed finally willing to break with economic liberalism. David Cameron was elected Leader and the party became interested in the ideas of "Red Toryism" put forward by Phillip Blond.[8] However, in a cautious note Blond comments at the end of his book that these ideas were far from hegemonic. Economic liberals were still in powerful positions within the party. Following the banking crisis of 2008, the narrative became one of the bloated state under New Labour. Cameron won the election but a programme of austerity began, with George Osborne being the main driver of policy from the Treasury. As a result of government policy, the levels of poverty and inequality again increased. The twin developments of Brexit and the 2019 General Election results allowed for a recalibration of policy, but this never materialised.

The embrace of free markets in the 1970s left the traditionalists with a dilemma. Some were sceptical of Thatcherism, requiring time to be converted. This was the case with Roger Scruton, for instance, who wrote *The Meaning of Conservatism* in the belief that Thatcher had been too strongly influenced by the neo-liberals.[9] However, he was won over by the non-economic aspects of Thatcherism. The Falklands War was a particular turning point in Scruton's understanding of Thatcherism. Others moved in the opposite direction, for example John Biffen, who had been a close associate of Powell's and one of the committed monetarists in the 1970s. However, Biffen parted company over the style of government and pace of change.[10]

The tensions between the traditionalists over the nature of Thatcherism is most clearly seen in the contrasting views of Shirley Robin Letwin and Peregrine Worsthorne. Letwin was a close associate of Michael Oakeshott and key figure in the "LSE Right". Through her writings and think tank contributions, Letwin helped develop Thatcherite policies in the 1980s. Her sympathy for Thatcherism is seen in her book, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* published after her fall

[8] Blond 2010.
[9] Scruton 2001.
[10] See Hickson 2020: 135–136.

from office.[11] Letwin argued that although many of the reforms associated with Thatcherism were economic, the ends were not. Instead, the economic policies were the means to bringing about a change in morals. There were two sets of virtues, according to Letwin, softer and harder. Softer virtues, such as care and compassion, were legitimate but harmful to society if pushed too far as they had been since the end of the Second World War. What was needed was a restoration of the harder, or vigorous virtues. These included hard work, self-help, individual responsibility and the family, and all had been undermined by the growth of the welfare state. Thatcher understood this and sought a moral revival, what she herself would frequently call the "Victorian values". This was a brilliant thesis, quite different from many accounts of Thatcherism, which tended to focus exclusively on economics. It was also deeply flawed.

In contrast, Worsthorne argued that Thatcherism was doing nothing of the sort. Instead, her governments had encouraged greed, materialism and self-interest.[12] Success was measured increasingly in terms of the possession of material goods and high incomes. It mattered little what people had done to deserve this good fortune. Thatcher had been dismissive of the traditional, aristocratic ruling-class which had governed Britain – successfully according to Worsthorne[13] – who she believed were soft, all too willing to compromise, and imbued with a sense of aristocratic guilt. After all, many of her "wet" opponents had come from aristocratic backgrounds. The central task for conservatives, Worsthorne argued, was the preservation of an effective ruling class, imbued with a clear sense of a public service ethos. In this task, Thatcher had failed. In order to defeat her perceived enemies, Thatcher was forced to rely on the assistance of undesirables. Hence the rise of the Murdoch press. A sense of duty and public service was eroded, culminating in things such as the excesses of corporate greed and financial scandals. The new rich in the City of London were little better, if at all, than football hooligans.[14] She may have started off

[11] Letwin 1992.
[12] Worsthorne 2005.
[13] Worsthorne 2004.
[14] Worsthorne 1988.

with good intentions – the values of her father with a strong attachment to work, place and family – but she ended up creating a society fit only for the likes of her son he stated.[15] The new "meritocratic" liberal elite was not up to the standard of the old ruling order he claimed to speak for. The only skill that mattered in these days of meritocracy was having elbows sharp enough to push others out of the way.[16] Although it would be easy to dismiss these thoughts as those of a snob with a highly romanticised view of the past, there is considerable truth in them also. Indeed, Thatcher could be considered naïve for believing that the rich, safely retaining more of their own income, would necessarily act more philanthropically.

## THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL LIBERALISM

Complementing the rise of economic liberalism was social liberalism. In the 1960s and again more recently social liberal ideas have been hugely influential. It has attracted its critics, but they have had limited impact.

The 1960s is often seen as a golden age of social liberalism, though in fact it began in the previous decade. Labour Party Revisionists such as Hugh Gaitskell, Tony Crosland and Roy Jenkins all argued for a social liberal reform agenda. A similar direction was advocated by moderate Conservatives, notably R.A. Butler as Home Secretary between 1957–1962. During this time, Butler began to relax what he regarded as the Victorian corsetry. However, the extent to which he could move on issues such as the death penalty and homosexuality were constrained by the presence of social conservatives on the backbenches. The election of the Labour government in 1964 allowed this agenda to be pursued much faster. Measures were introduced – largely by backbenchers but with the support of the government, especially the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins – to decriminalise homosexuality, legalise abortion, relax rules around censorship, make divorce easier and abolish the death penalty. All of these measures were seen as "civilising"

[15] See comments by Peregrine Worsthorne in IQ² 2013.

[16] Worsthorne 2007.

by their supporters and "permissive" by their opponents. They were very much in keeping with the spirit of the age as reflected in music, literature, broadcasting, satire and so on, all championing the "new" and rejecting the "old".[17]

Social conservatives opposed specific measures and also sought to formulate more general critiques. One such person was the journalist, T. E. Utley, who argued that this was the triumph of Millian-type liberalism as it rested largely on John Stuart Mill's distinction between self- and other-regarding conduct.[18] The state had no right, according to Mill, to restrict a person's freedom unless they directly harmed others. Since many of the reforms addressed what people did in their private lives they were justified. They should not be matters of state interference. However, Utley argued that there were, in fact, few areas of a person's private life that were entirely of a purely self-regarding nature. This can be seen in the campaigns of Mary Whitehouse, who argued for greater restrictions on what could be viewed on television – the explicit portrayal of sex and violence was not just a matter of individual choice but had wider implications for society since they encouraged undesirable conduct. Similarly, divorce was not just a matter between two individuals but had wider implications for their children and for wider society. Later Ian Crowther, a regular contributor to the *Salisbury Review,* argued that very few actions have no social impact.[19]

An alternative critique of the social reforms of the 1960s can be seen in the sociological writings of Christie Davies,[20] who argued that they constituted a rejection of the "moralist" arguments of the past in favour of a form of social utilitarianism, what he termed "causalism". Although many of the campaigns for legislative reform were accompanied with rights-based arguments (the right to abortion, divorce etc.) they were more often justified in terms of reducing/eliminating a known harm (the consequences of illegal abortions, violent marriages etc.). Davies argued that many of the reforms of the era had been beneficial in reducing harm and extending freedom, but it had also undermined

[17] See Booker 1969.
[18] Utley 1989.
[19] Crowther 2007.
[20] Davies 2007.

a shared sense of moral community leading to individualism and alienation. Into that void has come, what Scruton has termed, the inflation of rights.[21] Rights have been detached from corresponding responsibilities and the lack of a moral consensus means that there have been no limits to rights claims.

A further critique of Thatcherism, in addition to those outlined above, has been that her governments did nothing to reverse the social reforms of the 1960s. Thatcher did allow votes on restoration of the death penalty, but even some of her supporters argued that she did little to encourage its return.[22] No other reforms were reversed. The clearest example of social conservatism in the 1980s was in terms of the teaching of homosexuality in schools, where its promotion was outlawed by Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. This followed concerns that left-wing councils had been pushing this agenda against the wishes of more conservative-minded parents. Social conservative commentators, notably Peter Hitchens, argued that the Thatcher governments had done little to reverse the tide of social liberalism.[23]

Events since the fall of Thatcher have only demonstrated how inept social conservatives have been. The "back to basics" campaign of John Major was much lampooned, especially when the financial and sexual conduct of some of his own ministers was revealed repeatedly up until the 1997 General Election. After the election defeat, the party struggled with how best to respond to New Labour's reform agenda. The "mods versus rockers" debate pitched social liberals against social conservatives. In reality, few people advocated a clear social conservative agenda at this time, despite the utterances of MPs such as Ann Widdecombe and elder statesmen including Norman Tebbit. The social liberals argued that the party should move in their direction not just out of principle, but also for electoral reasons – they needed to be more representative of modern Britain. The attitude was summed up in Theresa May's famous comment that the party was increasingly seen as "nasty". Throwing off social conservative policies would make the party more attractive to voters, it was argued.

[21] Dooley 2022.
[22] Hickson 2020: 167–170.
[23] Hitchens 1999.

When Cameron was elected in 2010, the social liberal agenda triumphed in the Conservative Party. The clearest example of this was the legislating for same-sex marriage. Cameron believed in this personally, but his backbenchers were less convinced with him relying on the votes of his Liberal Democrat coalition partners to get the measure through. Cameron argued that the Act was consistent with social conservatism as it encouraged stable relationships, whether they were between a man and a woman, or between two people of the same sex. Social conservative opponents argued in contrast that it undermined the traditional, Christian conception of marriage.

Another consistent approach of social liberals has been to support greater levels of immigration. This goes back to the high point of social liberal legislative achievement in the 1960s with Roy Jenkins advocating the economic and cultural benefits of immigration. The New Labour era also saw mass immigration with the enlargement of the European Union eastwards. Although the Conservatives have repeatedly argued for greater immigration control, from Enoch Powell's notorious immigration speeches of the 1960s through to today, socially conservative critics of Labour and Conservative governments have persistently argued that irrespective of who is in power, the government of the day has failed to significantly reduce net migration.

Those of a more socially conservative disposition also argue that we are now in an era of further social and cultural liberalisation with issues such as transgender rights and critical race theories dividing opinion. These and other issues are said to reveal a "culture war" in which the social liberals are making great strides. Their critics have argued that social liberalism is intolerant of differences of opinion and has sought to suppress alternative viewpoints as an increasingly restrictive form of political correctness takes hold.

## TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE

Economic and social liberalism have made great advances in the past half century and at times have appeared hegemonic. The failures of economic liberalism

are now apparent, while the rise of social and cultural "hyper-liberalism" poses new challenges. British politics is now firmly socially liberal with none of the major parties advocating conservative/communitarian views. For a brief period, Theresa May and especially Boris Johnson seemed to offer a One Nation revival in which it looked as if they may break with economic liberalism, but that moment now seems to have passed. Economic liberalism is once again firmly entrenched. Despite this, there is clear public demand for a different politics, with clear public support for a "top left" (that is to say left-communitarian identity) ideological position. If a new ideological approach among the political class is to emerge which would bring it closer to that of the wider public then it has to come from outside the body of ideas which has motivated the political class for some time. However, surveying the arguments of the critics of liberalism reveals that there is scope to develop such an alternative agenda.

Firstly, in terms of economic policy there is scope to develop a clear alternative to the economic liberal belief that "free" markets are almost without exception desirable. There have been clear instances of market failure, both in specific cases and in more general terms. It is necessary and desirable to once again reassert the superiority of the state over the market in numerous areas of economic activity. Privatisation has clearly failed in key areas and public ownership is once again popular and necessary. The railways would seem an obvious case in point, with privatisation having clearly failed. Some operators have been brought back under public control but the whole sector, fragmented as it is, currently needs to be renationalised. Similarly, the water industry has seen little to no investment since privatisation and there is now widespread evidence of poor customer and environmental standards from current providers. Further extensions of national, municipal or cooperative ownership may be justified on a case-by-case basis. This can be justified in conservative terms as the organisation of the economy in the national interest, which is not synonymous with corporate interests.

A fundamentally different approach to industrial democracy to the one pursued by Conservative (and Labour) governments since 1979 is now needed. Again, one can draw here on approaches within conservative thought which

rejects the neo-liberal approach. Writing in the 1970s, Ian Crowther drew on the distributism of G. K. Chesterton to argue in favour of worker directors as a way of overcoming industrial tensions.[24] More recently, this approach has been revived by Phillip Blond in his notion of "Red Toryism".[25] In her 2016 leadership campaign, Theresa May argued in favour of worker directors on company boards, although later backtracked on the idea. Alongside this, ideas around mutual forms of ownership could be reconsidered. In key areas of health care, schools and universities it is necessary to revive the idea of professional autonomy in place of a neo-liberal audit culture.

A "One Nation" approach would recognise the ways in which the economy is fundamentally imbalanced – income and wealth inequalities have increased substantially since 1979. Taxation and public expenditure should seek to reduce the gap between richest and poorest. There should also be a revival of interest in regional policies. The 2008 crash exposed the dangers of relying on an expanded financial sector. Rebalancing the economy should also take into account the need to preserve the environment, as Roger Scruton highlighted in some of his later writings,[26] and include a new industrial policy to develop "green" technology.

Finally, in terms of economics, the ideology of free trade needs to be challenged. This has already happened in areas such as agriculture where consumers are more aware of what is produced, how and where, with a strong support for localised production. But this needs to be extended to manufactured goods. There are other factors which would encourage national over global production including national security. The war in Ukraine has exposed the dangers of being over-reliant on one country for energy supplies. There are clear security risks in allowing China to build a mobile telephone network in the UK. This has led to a divergence of opinion within the Conservative Party between those who continue to believe in universal free trade as a matter of principle and those who see limits to globalisation as a result of the rise of China. There is

[24] Hickson 2020: 139–140.
[25] Blond 2010.
[26] See Dooley 2022; Scruton 2012.

scope to revive earlier ideas of protectionism divorced from the imperial context within those ideas were proposed by Joseph Chamberlain and his followers.

In short, the economy needs to be reformed in such a way that prioritises the needs of the nation as a whole. A politics of the common good. However, a more patriotic appeal which this approach would require is undermined by the social and cultural developments associated with hyper-liberalism. More generally, certain strands of thought oppose the boundaries which nation states inevitably create. More specifically, there have always been intellectuals who dislike the British (and especially the English). In more recent times this can be seen in the revival of the declinist discourse since Brexit and the ways in which lofty Remainers have spoken of their fellow citizens who voted Leave. It can also be seen in the persistent denigration of British/English history. While Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalisms are often justified by anti-colonial discourses, England is usually seen as the oppressor and held as the supreme example of everything backward and conservative. If an economic approach which prioritises the needs of the nation is to succeed and carry popular support then it is necessary to challenge these simplistic "anti-British/English" attitudes which sap the morale which such an approach requires.

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