

Andrew Roberts¹

Conservative Traditions: Remarks by Andrew Roberts

I would just like to boast about quite how august I am by saying that, seeing that photo of Lord Hinchingsbrooke, I actually met him when I was writing my first book; Michael Oakeshott was mentioned, and I knew him too; Roger Scruton and Peregrine Worsthorne were friends of mine, and I knew Shirley Robin Letwin. Margaret Thatcher appointed me to take her place in the Margaret Thatcher Archive Trust. Enoch Powell actually collapsed on top of me at a party once, and David Cameron saved my life from jellyfish. All of those people apart from David are dead now, so thank you for reminding me of my mortality. I'm in my late 50s but you've made me feel very, very old.

David Cameron, of course, won two general elections, and I think he would have won a third if he had listened to me when I told him in April 2016 that he needed to lead the Leave campaign in the European referendum. How different history would have been if he had.

We have been blessed today with these fabulous series of speeches. This is a really successful conference already. What Matt was saying about Brexit reminds me of the way in which Leave and Remain are still vital forces in understanding British politics. It's even present today in the Ukraine crisis, when you might have thought that perhaps we'd have been able to have got beyond Brexit. Yet former MP Nick Boles put out a tweet recently asking why didn't Leave feel bad that we weren't doing as well as the EU when it came to sanctions against Russia. I would just like to remind everyone that Britain was sending lethal aid far earlier than any EU country. It's disgraceful, in a way, to try and make political capital over Brexit even out of the Ukraine crisis, but people do.

¹ This chapter is an edited version of Lord Roberts' talk at the *Post-Liberal Turn and the Future and British Conservatism* conference.

You're so right, Matt when you talked about Jeremy Corbyn, but I think there was one other adjective that you could have used with regard to him, which is "anti-Semite". And that was a very important aspect, it strikes me, of his defeat. I was rather proud to be British for the way in which the British people were disgusted by that. And, of course, you saw that in the General Election poll.

When you said conservatism is alive in the academy, I am not so sure, because it strikes me that every single conservative British academic is actually present in this room!

Last night I was sitting next to a young chap who was editing the conservative magazine at Harvard. "How many conservative academics are there at Harvard?", I asked, and he was able to name all three of them. Which is rather nerve-wracking in a way. I thought David's point about liberal authoritarianism was absolutely right. Of course, we are seeing the closing down of free speech, the pulling down of statues, the cancelling of distinguished careers, and your speech was a clarion call against all that. So thank you for that, David. I was hoping that I was a post-liberal conservative, but then I saw the pyramid on your slide. And I noticed that I was the little chap in the bottom, the blue chap in the very bottom right-hand corner. So I felt rather out of place.

I was very pleased when you mentioned that Matt Hancock had said, "I love people", because that has to be the cringe-making and ridiculous statement of somebody who wants to become leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister. And of course, we know that if he didn't love one person he was caught on camera with, he probably still would be in his job. I was interested in your remark about how much he likes technology. I wonder whether or not he extends that to CCTV?

I thought it was a very interesting graph on voter placement as well, which basically says that over two-thirds of Tory voters are post-liberal. In a sense, therefore, it obviously has to be the Tory party that embraces this. It's only the Tory party that can become post-liberal and you made that very, very clear. Anybody who's got any money in this audience should be giving David some in order to do more work on this, and actually get the statistics.

It also proves that Danny Kruger is pretty much alone amongst Tory MPs, being in the same quadrant as Tory voters. So your constituents are lucky Danny, but virtually no other Tory voters are.

Daniel Pitt, the remarks that you've made about the Tory green agenda, especially quoting poets, who we learn from Percy Shelley are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, was a great breath of fresh air, especially in the way in which you were able to go beyond economics. Wasn't it pleasing the day before yesterday when President Zelensky said to the German Parliament that all the Germans were interested in was economics, economics, economics. That is not what Toryism is about. That is not what wider conservatism is about. I thought that you made that very clear and also this idea of localism getting bigger and bigger, and beyond the nation state it getting weaker and weaker. People who say that they're a citizen of the world are so often actually a citizen of nowhere.

My question to you is how many of the seven core principles could non-conservatives and non-Tories sign up to? Because it seemed to me that you made a very good case for them all being core Tory principles. However, if you ask Sir Keir Starmer, he would say that the Labour Party could respect prudence, localism, trusteeship, piety (to a lesser extent), but also obligations. And so we can see that they are principles, but are they solely Tory principles, or are they just popular policies, things like pedestrianisation and returning otters to the wild and so on?

I do feel a little bit like the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer on Budget Day where you have to work out what you're going to say whilst the Chancellor is actually presenting it. Philip Blond asked for a collective noun for post-liberals. I'm not sure, but I've long said that the collective noun for historians is a malice. Amongst post-liberal conservatives, I wonder whether our collective noun should be "an optimist", because it seems to me this is a very optimistic movement. We're told, of course, that pessimism is an essential element of Toryism: you look at Samuel Johnson, you look at Alan Clark, you look at all sorts of Tories. But nonetheless, I think that there's something optimistic going on here this morning and this afternoon.

The demand of Boris Johnson that all of the candidates for the Conservative Party in the 2019 general election must support Brexit, I found to be an absolute key prerequisite to victory. When one thinks of the forces that were opposed to Brexit, the way in which so many of the great institutions of the nation and of our culture and society and our politics were opposed to it, I'm just going to make a quick list of them to show what the Brexiteers essentially were up against. They were up against both the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition; although the leader of Opposition didn't say much, nonetheless he was on the record against Brexit. We were against *The Times*, the House of Lords, the Church of England, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Oxford and Cambridge (of which there is only now one Tory master of the 70+ colleges), the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party, the Confederation of British Industry, the BBC, the liberal press, easily the worst Speaker of the House of Commons we've had for 300 years. (He was totally against it, to the point of actually putting rude remarks about Brexit on the bumper sticker of his car.) The quangos were against Brexit, the Supreme Court – it later turned out – was against it. Much of the civil service were, especially the Treasury that put out endless prognostications about the economy, all of which have been proved to be wrong. The institutions and the great panjandra of society were all opposed to it. The only people who were in favour of it were the Brexiteers and the British people. The British people are therefore, in my view, post-liberal.

This is something to build on enormously. What we also find is, with regard to liberal authoritarianism, that free speech – which used to be the great Liberal cry – is now *our* cry. And it's a very potent one. Every time the people are given a chance to vote in local referenda about whether or not they want to keep up statues to some imperialist, they vote in favour of keeping it. We saw that recently in Watford; you also are seeing in San Francisco huge support for the traditional position. The fear, of course, is that the millennials, especially in America, are turning against free speech. It's a very worrying development that some 62% of them think that it's alright to close down debate if they don't agree with what the other person is saying. This is a nearly two-thirds majority;

we have to worry about this. But overall, as I say, the anti-woke agenda is tremendously popular in the localities.

The last thing I have to say is that so far nobody has said anything positive about Margaret Thatcher. I want to point out that if it weren't for her, Britain would have dropped into the third tier of nation states in the world. I want to say well done to the person who I see as my ultimate political heroine.