

3CR SOLIDARITY BREAKFAST

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### **That other 'c' word: conservative**

'... The Marxist view point ... derives from a theory of human nature that one might actually believe ...' So writes Roger Scruton in his 1980 book *The Meaning of conservatism*, where he devotes a chapter to 'Alienated Labour'.

Being conservative does not equate with being pro-capitalist. Throughout the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels emphasise that capitalism is the most revolutionary system that the world has ever seen:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.

Such feverishness is the antithesis of a conservative sensibility according to Scruton.

#### Cs – small and BIG

Scruton contends that the 'political expression' of conservatism 'follows persuasively from natural beliefs that are the common property of every social being.' The British Conservative Party, for his ilk, expresses conservatism as a disposition, a temperament or sensibility. In keeping with that approach, Britain does not have a formal constitution.

#### The Dismissal

The gap between Big-C Party politics and a small-c temperament is seen in one response to the 1975 dismissal, to which the journal *Politics* devoted a section in the following May. That essay came from the man who had taught me political philosophy in the early 1960s - Dick Staveley. He had been trained at the University of Chicago under the very conservative Leo Strauss.

Staveley headed his essay 'The conventions of the constitution: Kerr's folly'. He attacked Fraser and Co for violating tradition. Small-c conservatives, Staveley insists, value habit and precedent above short-term convenience. They set the spirit of the laws above the letter of the law.

I might add that there was a gulf between the philosophers at Chicago and its economists. Both were far to the Right but the Chicago Boys were radicals – think Chile. They plunged in, delivering short-sharp shocks to fragile economies, often turning them into failed states. The Chicago philosophers supported the aims of the economists but feared that their methods would lead to ungovernable outcomes.

#### Cringe-making

Next weekend, a conference in Sydney is being promoted as 'Conservative'. Speakers include Abbott and Farange.

Of one thing we can be certain. No one on that platform will endorse Scruton's views of Marxism as a believable account of human nature. Indeed, none of them will have the faintest notion of how a conservative could say anything so preposterous.

Another index of the gulf between Scruton and our lot is to dip into the English weekly, the *Spectator*. The edition on sale here opens with a dozen pages from locals. It is not cultural cringing to point out that their columns career between loutishness and yoboo-dom. They revel in spleen instead of seriousness, impotent rage in place of incisive reasoning, flaunting a mockery devoid of wit. Do any of them read the Arts pages in the British edition? We can expect Latham to howl 'extreme political correctness' when ex-National leader John Anderson calls for a return to civility.

Two reasons go some way towards accounting for the ocean of difference between Scruton in 1970 and the local yahoos today. The first grows out the history of capitalism in Australia. The second flows from changes in global capitalism across the past fifty years.

### A newer Britannia

The British conquest of Australia did not get far before 1815 by when capitalism was secure in Britain. Thus, the un-settlers inherited the political and social outlook from 175 years of bourgeois liberalism, with a few feudal trappings. An attempt to create a Bunyip Aristocracy in late 1840s was laughed out of court. Menzies rejected the Conservative label when he formed the Liberal Party in the mid-1940s.

The Australian colonies never had the social basis in the chattel-slavery of the American South. Canada has a major Conservative Party, one legacy of the Tories who fled north after their defeat in the American War for Independence.

### 2. the latest globalisation

Scruton conceived his book just as Thatcher was coming to power in 1979. We can assume that he voted for her. Yet her policies and her methods split the Conservative Party and alienated small-c conservatives, like the erstwhile prime minister, Harold Macmillan, a landed Tory grandee.

Thatcher's insistent question about other members of her Party was 'Is he "one of us"?', meaning is he a Dry? The Drys thought of themselves as Economic Rationalists. The Wets clung to the wreckage from the Welfare State.

Thatcher's remark that there is 'no such thing as society' exposes how far she was from the small-c conservatives as a social behaviour. Her pronouncement is wrong in ways that too few on the Left appreciate. Yes, she is right to say that 'society' is not a 'thing'. Society is an ensemble of human practices conducted through social relationships. Marx and Scruton could agree with that. They could also accept that there are individuals and families.

Where they part company with her is when she implies that's all there is. Her Big Lie came from pretending that were no state apparatuses for her to manage on behalf of the corporates.

It's worth noting that the godfather of Thatcherism, Friedrich von Hayek, made his position clear in an essay 'Why I am not a conservative'. Conservatives, he felt, are of some use in resisting the serfdom of socialism. They're useless when it comes to getting things done – unlike Thatcher and the Chicago Boys.

### Shopping for friends

Michael Oakeshott's essay 'On being conservative' from the 1950s remains a touchstone for certain strata of small-c conservatives. Most of what Oakeshott upholds strikes me as special pleading for established privilege. Yet I'm with him on two matters. The first is when he finds

'it is a blessed relief to gaze in a shop window and see nothing we want'.

The second is his observation that making a friend is not like signing a contract. One friend cannot replace another:

'there is all the difference in the world,' Oakeshott reminds us, 'between the death of a friend and the retirement of one's tailor from business.'

Class bias is blatant in his reference to having one's own tailor.

In the six decades since Oakeshott wrote, the revolutionary essence of capitalism has undermined those two precepts.

*The Sales Effort:* Mass marketing means that most Australians are now exposed to some 7,000 'buy' signals everyday. Gone is 'the blessed relief' of not wanting whatever stuff is being promoted. Instead, we are subjected to anxiety about not keeping up to the split-second with the latest gadgets or apps.

*Friends:* A similar, and connected fate has overtaken friendship. There is still a difference between getting 5 'Likes' on Facebook and having five friends who 'll be there for us come what may. A recent survey reported that the number of Australians to whom most can turn has shrunk from five down to one in the past twenty years. One in five Australians is involved in therapy or counselling. Many have no one to turn to. They must talk problems over with an anonymous and invisible Lifeline respondent.

In the 1950s, establishing a personal relationship, if not a friendship with the corner grocer was the order of the day. A degree of trust allowed you to put items 'on tick' if you'd run short of the ready before payday. Now there are the PayDay Lenders. Supermarkets spelt goodbye to the rest. The remaining check-out staff are programmed to ask 'How are you today?' After they've taken our money, they told to wish us 'A good one.'

### -ive or -ist?

Marx and Engels devote a couple of pages in the *Manifesto* to what they call 'Feudal Socialism' and two more on 'Conservative, or Bourgeois, Socialism'. In the 1830s, such 'socialists' objected to the railway as 'the machine in the garden.'

Environmental politics is another domain where Big-C Conservative Parties can collide with a small-c conservative temperament.

A journalist asked Bjelke-Peterson what he thought it meant to be a 'Conservative'. After giving the matter due consideration, he replied 'A communist'. His answer is not a whacky as it seems on first hearing. I suspect he thought that he was being asked about 'conservationists'. As we know, anyone who gets in the way of a bulldozer must be a sanguinary commo.

In the 1990s, Western Australian Liberals stood against their own party in defense of the kauri forests. Recent decades have seen environmental actions stiffened by a small-c conservative sensibility. Behind 'Lock the Gates' is an urge to conserve the enduring elements of soil and water.

### What comes naturally

Engels warns us against supposing that we can rule over nature like a foreign conquerer. Our first attempt to impose our plans will come off; the second time, we can expect a 50-50 result; but on our third attempt, nature will bite us on the bum. The precautionary principle expresses Engels's approach and also that of many a small-c conservative.

Where both progressives and small-c conservatives often go awry is by fantasising about 'steady-state capitalism', and a growthless economy.

That prospect is as mistaken as is the slogan 'Conserve Energy'. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed. It can only change form. That's the first law of thermodynamics. Our task at the moment is to limit how our transformations of energy are adding to dangerous levels of anthropogenic global warming. It's as important to be clear about the laws of physics as it is to be clear about the dynamics that have, for more than 200 years, compelled capital to expand if it is to exist.

### Crises on the Right

The cover story of *The Economist* on 6-12 July carried the headline 'The global crisis in Conservatism'. This thought-filled essay explores the breakdown of the link that Scruton drew between conservatism as a political movement and conservatism as a system of values.

For almost 200 years, the *Economist* has been the voice of political liberalism and free trade. So why is it alarmed at the demolition of the Big-Conservative parties by radical, populist breakaways?

The answer is simple. Its editors understand that this upheaval spells an end to the formal and informal alliances between Conservative organizations and the kind of liberalism that the *Economist* supports in economics and throughout society.

### Crises on the Left

Lenin spoke of a ruling class's not being able to rule in the old way. Today, large sections of the population are refusing to be ruled in the old ways.

In the Sixties, Mao would have said: 'There is great disorder under heaven.' All too true again today. There is indeed great disorder. What's not the case for revolutionary socialists today is the conclusion that Mao could draw fifty years ago: 'The situation is excellent.' Over-confidence is even more hazardous than then.

The crack-up of coalitions is not confined to the Right. Similar ruptures are impacting left-wing parties and progressive movements. We can apply the lines of John Donne to ourselves: 'Ask not for whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee.' Threats and opportunities abound for socialists. Which wins out will depend on how we learn to respond to the wide and deep disquiet being felt by people of all persuasions.

The revolutionizing that is integral to the expansion of capital changes how we strive to put our principles into practice. Six notable examples of Australians who moved away from their right-wing origins are Martin Boyd, Judith Wright, Patrick White, Donald Horne, Malcolm Fraser and Robert Manne. For every big name, tens of thousands of everyday Australians continue to make their way towards progressive actions.