

Maurice Cranston

AMERICAN VS. BRITISH CONSERVATISM: AN EVEN MATCH?

Each variety has its strengths and weaknesses. We have our Constitution and our individualism; they have Mrs. Thatcher and Michael Oakeshott.

Conservatism, it is often said, is not the same thing in America as it is in England, not so vigorous, so well-organized, or so well-equipped intellectually to answer the challenge of radicalism. A recent editorial in this magazine predicted that the Bush Administration would be likely to follow a vaguely center-right drift in the absence of the kind of hard thinking that might direct it toward distinctively conservative policies.¹

This may be the case, but I would argue that the strengths and weaknesses of American and British conservatism are more evenly matched than Mr. Tyrrell's analysis suggests, and also that it is necessary to see just what the differences are between the two conservatisms both as movements and as systems of political thought.

The first obvious advantage of British conservatism is having a parliamentary party that has had a majority in the legislature more often than a minority since World War II, while the Republican party in America, insofar as it can be considered a conservative party, has had a majority in the House of Representatives for less than five of the past fifty years. To be in opposition for a time is not a bad thing for a political party, since it enables its members to think and speak freely without the constraints of office. But unfortunately the almost permanent majority of the Democratic party in Washington has prompted its members to develop the mentality of the one-party state; which means that their politics has progressively relapsed toward power-brokering, intrigue, and, far too often, corruption, veiled by pronouncements of empty radical rhetoric. At such a level of debate, coherent conservative policies

can hardly be expected to emerge.

There is another development in America that could not happen in England, and which creates a dilemma for American conservatism, and that is the extent to which the judiciary has taken over the legislative function from the U.S. Congress. No longer do American citizens, through their elected representatives, decide what to do about such questions as public education, abortion, pornography, or even rent control; the judges rule, and often their decisions are such that the ordinary citizen cannot even understand let alone authorize, since American judges have taken it upon themselves to redefine the English language so that words like "family," "obscenity," and so forth no longer mean what everybody who speaks English thinks they mean. The embarrassment for the American conservative is that this is all done within the system of the American Constitution, even though in defiance of that Constitution's principles

of separating the executive, legislative, and judiciary powers.

American conservatives venerate the Constitution, and they are surely right to do so, for it gives them something more than an attachment to the idea of tradition which is all that British conservatives have in common among themselves. Assuredly the U.S. Constitution is a liberal document in the classical sense of "liberal" and a product of the Reason of the Enlightenment, but its confirmation by experience, its success in preserving stable government down several successive generations, has given it the authority of time. Since the Constitution is the original contract, so to speak, on which the nation as a nation is based, every American must respect it; but the conservative cherishes it especially because it ensures the permanent rule of law and preserves Americans against those dangers—whether of anarchy or despotism—to which other nations are prone.

The Constitution confers another advantage on American conservatives: it provides a bond of unity among them. British conservatives are much less united, although the discipline that prevails in the British Conservative party may prompt foreign observers to think otherwise. The deepest division is between those British conservatives who derive their basic philosophy—their conception of the human condition—from Edmund Burke, and those who take it from Thomas Hobbes. The Burkean view is that the human race is composed of natural societies or communities. The Hobbesian view is that the human race is composed of individuals, self-protective and often competitive. The Burkean view has inspired the conservative politics of Disraeli and Harold Macmillan and those who share their "One Nation" creed. The Hobbesian view has inspired the conservative policies of Mrs. Thatcher, and is at present the dominant school of thought on the conservative benches in the British House of Commons, if not in the House of Lords.

Hobbesian conservatism in its present "Thatcherite" formulation passes from its belief that the nation is composed of individuals to the conclusion that the public good is best achieved when everyone's energy is harnessed to what he most enjoys, making life better for himself—working together with others when he wants to, like an oarsman willingly rowing together with his crew, but never forced to act as a member of a team by the dictates of the state. Disraeli and Macmillan and their followers are, by contrast, paternalistic; conceiving of the nation as a kind of family writ large, they press the more prosperous members of the family to look after their needy brethren, even demanding by the time Macmillan reached office in 1957 sacrifices of the better-off that are hardly distinguishable from socialism. Although both Disraeli and Macmillan were middle-



¹"Bush and the Conservatives," by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr. *TAS*, October 1989.

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class men (despite the fact that they rose to be Earls), they tried to reinforce their "One Nation" conservatism by an appeal to the aristocratic ideal of *noblesse oblige*, the duty of the lord to look after the poor, which probably explains the greater support that paternalistic conservatism has today in the House of Lords than in the House of Commons.

I do not observe such a split between Burkeans and Hobbesians in American conservatism, which has been able to combine Burke's philosophy of natural society with a distinctively American belief in personal liberty and individualism. Nowhere is this synthesis better expressed than in the work of the best American poet of our time: Robert Frost. The noted Burke scholar Peter J. Stanlis (writing in the *Intercollegiate Review* in 1985) has drawn attention to the unity of vision between Frost's poetry and Frost's philosophy in a way that may surprise many readers: surprise them because the progressive American literary establishment has for years been asserting that Frost should only be read as a poet and his "reactionary" prose ignored. Frost had a deep sense of human fellowship: of men, each defined by his individual freedom, being held together by the mediation of culture, as distinct from "all pigging together," as he put it, under the regimentation of "collectivist love."

Frost in his writings expresses a certain sensibility that is characteristic of American conservatism, a feeling both for the people and for the individual that is not found elsewhere. It is evidence, I suppose, of the extent to which democracy has come to be deeply ingrained in American political culture. Compare Frost with British literary men thought of as "conservative"—Chesterton, Belloc, Wyndham Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, Eliot (and Eliot would wish to be considered British)—and one finds in all of them no love for democracy but a profound mistrust of democracy, and no great enthusiasm for personal liberty either. The British literary right has always been influenced by the French literary right with its nostalgia for royalty and chivalry and the authoritarian Church.

American conservatism has been spared this influence; the few American writers who felt it, such as Ezra Pound, have simply gone abroad and gone fascist. The most notable foreign influence on American conservatism in our time has been German rather than French, and has come through philosophy, not literature. A fairly recent book by the late Senator John East, *The American Conservative Movement* (Regnery Gateway, 1986), names as the movement's leading contemporary theorists Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and

Ludwig von Mises, German-educated immigrants, side by side with the American-born Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, Frank Meyer, and Willmoore Kendall. I would not myself count Ludwig von Mises as an American conser-

for a minimal state, and its attachment to freedom—freedom being the thing that the political experience of the English has taught them to understand and appreciate best.

It would be fair to ask if there is any

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vative, but rather as a laissez-faire liberal economist who, with Friedrich A. Hayek, has had more influence on Thatcherite policies in London than on anyone in the United States. But both Strauss and Voegelin are significant figures in the recent history of American conservatism, especially in the universities. They were perhaps no more enthusiastic about majority rule than any other continental professor, but they both provided new reasons for their students to venerate the American Constitution, to uphold religion and morality and virtue, and, what was more original, to look to the political philosophy of the ancient world for all the wisdom that is needed in modernity.

There, again, is a marked contrast with the kind of conservatism that has gained ground in British universities in recent years. Here the most influential figure is Michael Oakeshott, whose conservatism is much like that of David Hume, based on skepticism rather than belief in religion or natural law or the classics or anything else. Like Hume, Oakeshott claims that in the absence of all rational certainty, political problems should be attended to in the light of experience; custom and habit being better guides to action than ideologies or the blueprints of social engineers. Oakeshott is insistent that the duties of the state should be confined to its only authentic function, the promulgation and enforcement of law. But whereas American conservatives, including Strauss and Voegelin, point to the concrete agent of the Constitution, Oakeshott invokes something much more elusive, a tradition of behavior that incorporates the practical knowledge of successive generations. Insofar as such a sophisticated form of political philosophy has any impact on popular political attitudes, the influence of Oakeshott has probably been to reinforce the Thatcherite school of British conservatism—if only because of its individualism, its demand

British equivalent to American neo-conservatism, or that body of thought expounded in such journals as the *Public Interest* and *Commentary* by Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, and others who have the distinction of being liberals who were

willing to recognize that the old liberal policies of social engineering and welfarism did not achieve their stated goals of social amelioration, but instead were carrying America toward that tutelary despotism which Tocqueville had warned against in the nineteenth century. Tocqueville was converted from liberalism to conservatism by the evidence of his own social science; and American neoconservatives have almost all trodden that same path. In England, faithful readers of the magazine *Encounter* might notice political writers who were once on the left—Paul Johnson, for example, or Woodrow Wyatt or Hugh Thomas—having moved to the right, but no one has wanted to call them "neoconservatives" because the dominant, Thatcherite stream of official conservatism has readily assimilated them.

Occasionally, indeed, especially in continental Europe, Mrs. Thatcher is herself called "neoconservative." Noel O'Sullivan, a leading British historian

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of political thought, explains why in his entry on conservatism in the *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (1987). He points out that the wartime success of government control of the economy encouraged postwar British conservatives to perpetuate planning the control of consumer demand, full employment, and the welfare state and thus to accept "a drift towards collectivism which, by the mid-1970s, had become so powerful that it seemed to many to have left conservatism without any coherent identity." Both British Thatcherite conservatism and American neoconservatism, O'Sullivan suggests, mark an attempt to reverse this process; to recover for conservatism its specific and historic character.

Since Mrs. Thatcher's aim is to recover something lost rather than introduce something new, she is true to the central ideals of conservative philosophy. If Macmillan could claim to be the heir of Disraeli, prime minister between 1868 and 1880, Mrs. Thatcher could fairly claim to be preserving the heritage of the British Conservative party's first prime minister, Sir Robert Peel. He was elected in 1834 soon after the party was founded on a manifesto that called for law and order, including the strengthening of the police force, tax reform, and the reconciliation of landed and industrial interests. Mrs. Thatcher may also invoke the precedent of Lord Salisbury, prime minister for fourteen years between 1885 and 1902, who was as impatient with Disraeli's innovations as is Mrs. Thatcher with those of Macmillan and Macmillan's protégé, Edward Heath.

But of course Mrs. Thatcher has herself been an innovator, and she could not have achieved her objective of re-

establishing economic freedom and releasing the entrepreneurial energies of citizens without dismantling the collectivist system constructed by thirty-five years of consensus politics between Macmillanite Conservatives and the Labour party. This in turn meant that she had to galvanize her own party, rally the support of the ranks, battle with rival factions, and change her cabinet frequently without regard to personal feelings. In a word, she has had to be the politician for twenty-four hours a day.

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In this respect, Mr. Reagan was more fortunate. As head of both state and government in a presidential system, he could be, like Charles de Gaulle, above politics. Although the American press always called him "a conservative," Mr. Reagan contrived to run the government in his own way—again very like De Gaulle—with an authority derived directly from the people, without much mediation from party politicians. He responded to various crises and opportunities with a kind of intuitive skill that owed little to conservative political theory. If Mr. Bush proves a model conservative President, that will be largely because Mr. Reagan handed on to him an America in pretty good shape, which was not the case when he himself took it over from Jimmy Carter. Mr. Bush has much to conserve.

It was often said in newspapers that Mr. Reagan "dozed off" at political meetings. Whether this is true or not, it looks much as if a great many American conservatives dozed off while he was President; partly because he did none of the things that Mrs. Thatcher has done and does to keep British conservatives awake.

There is one area, however, where American conservatives suspect British conservatives of slackness, and

that is the matter of opposition to Communism. One reason why British conservatives have had less to say about Communism is that British liberals have never been apologists for it to the extent that American liberals have. In England, apologists for Communism have been more or less confined to the left of the Labour party and to avowed Marxists even further left. British conservatives have not had to battle with the vast edifice of liberal nonsense that in America presented the pre-Gorbachev Soviet regimes as peace-loving, popular, and caring experiments in guided democracy. Even when the Labour party was persuaded to advocate unilateral nuclear disarmament, the case had to be presented on pacifist, rather than pro-Communist, grounds.

Adherents of the British Labour party have also had to admit that recent events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have confirmed the conservative thesis that nationalized economies do not work and that a free market is a necessary instrument of free politics. The Labour party has been anxiously explaining that its form of socialism is a mixture of public and private ownership and not a totalitarian system of the kind that has collapsed in Eastern Europe. The peculiar suggestion of American liberals that Gorbachev has somehow vindicated their sympathy for the Stalin-Brezhnev regime by repudiating that regime is not one that is heard in British progressive circles. Far from being accused, with American conservatives, of being obsolete by their opponents, the British conservatives are admitted to have been ahead of their rivals in understanding the international situation, Mrs. Thatcher having been the first leader in Western Europe to recognize that Mr. Gorbachev was about

to revolutionize the Soviet system.

Opponents of Mrs. Thatcher have to concentrate on policies where her government is on the defensive: domestic affairs and the economy. Her economic policies have not had the success of those of the White House in America, although she achieved much in her first few years in office to reinvigorate British industry and commerce. Debates in the House of Commons are now televised, and it is my belief that television favors the opposition, since its spokesmen have not the responsibility of office and can say anything they like to entertain and charm the viewers.

The Thatcher government nonetheless enjoys a friendlier press in England than either the Reagan or Bush Administration has had in America. The British TV chains are fairly impartial, and among important London newspapers only the *Observer*, the *Guardian*, and the *Daily Mirror* are more favorable to Labour than to the government. The newest and most interesting London paper, the *Independent*, is critical of but not hostile toward Mrs. Thatcher. The rest of the press is fairly enthusiastically behind her. This may give a false impression of her strength. For although her government has introduced a substantial measure of economic freedom, the economy is still "mixed," and the mix is not a wholly satisfactory one.

British trade unions, for example, remain extremely powerful, and by their strikes they have pushed up inflation in Britain to the highest level in several years. And although several industries have been privatized, there is a growth of industrial and commercial monopolies that is undermining competition. Mrs. Thatcher has been unlucky in having inherited from previous governments a bureaucracy that is unable, or unwilling, to work out successful schemes for the reform of education, health services, and local government. The "poll tax" to be introduced this year has much to be said for it, but it looks unfair, and the opposition will have no difficulty in making people hate it. One way and another, I do not think the prospects of Mrs. Thatcher winning the next election are especially good. This is partly because the center parties have collapsed, and more center supporters may vote next time for Mr. Kinnock than for Mrs. Thatcher; but it is also because British conservatives, like American conservatives, are often prone to shrink from the unpleasantness of current controversies, to dream nostalgically of the days before urban decay and drugs and uncontrolled crime and hijackings and hostages and hooligans and kids, and then take Voltaire's advice to turn away from the world altogether and cultivate their gardens. □



Piotr Brozyna and Mark Lilla

DISMANTLING SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY (II)

Now that the Poles are free to be capitalists, their government must play the leading role in creating conditions that will allow business and trade to flourish on a Western scale. Without strong public institutions, Polish capitalism won't have a chance.

In our previous article on the present Polish situation (see February *TAS*) we reviewed the postwar intellectual transformation of Polish economic opinion from an anti-capitalist consensus of Catholics and Communists to a new, if somewhat resigned, agreement on the principles of free-market liberalism. It is our impression that no rival economic theory now challenges that new consensus, and that whatever political arrangements or compromises the Poles make in the near future—on taxes, subsidies, the welfare state—there is little doubt that they are all capitalists now. As more than one social democrat has remarked over the past few years, even those Poles who dream of a Swedish-style welfare state now recognize that Sweden is a capitalist country, not a socialist one.

Since we wrote that article, the first phase of the economic “shock” plan drawn up by Harvard professor Jeffrey Sachs has begun under the watchful eye of Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz. It has been . . . well, something of a shock. Previously controlled prices now float with the market and the *zloty*, creating a revolution in relative prices that will take some time to stabilize. Prices of natural gas and electricity, always kept artificially low and now only partially decontrolled, have quadrupled in a month; gasoline and insurance are now so expensive that more than 10,000 automobile owners have turned in their license plates; lines for previously rationed items have shrunk drastically since few can afford what they once waited hours to buy. But on the supply side there is also movement. Farmers have begun carting their own produce to nearby towns and have been selling it on the streets, undercutting the arthritic state stores, and there is an unprecedented variety

of meat and poultry now available for those who can pay. More important still, the hyper-inflation that once reached 1,000 percent has already slowed to 70 percent in January and was predicted to fall even further to nearly six percent in February as the debt-inflated Polish economy grinds to a halt.

Yet despite these unsettling changes to a once predictably deteriorating way of life, the Poles seem to have found new reserves of “solidarity” to manage them. Representatives of some peasant and workers organizations have complained that their members bear an unfair burden during this transition, and one farmer even chained himself to the gates of parliament recently in a gesture of protest. But by and large the Poles seem to accept the necessity of suffering through these additional hardships. There is no way of predicting whether this willingness can persist, especially since the inevitable layoffs

and plant-closings will not begin for a few months. Poles are used to making do without meat or gasoline, but they have never before faced the unsettling prospect of losing protected jobs and supporting families during long periods of unemployment. The government's nightmare is that, as the layoffs begin, disgruntled unemployed workers will join with frightened small farmers to form a parliamentary coalition to block the necessary “shock” reforms. Such a reaction could only work to the advantage of ambitious demagogues on the Catholic-agrarian right and the nomenklatura robber barons of the Communist (now “Social Democracy”) party, both eagerly awaiting the Mazowiecki government's collapse.

However serious this threat may be, it is a short-term one: in the next twelve months we will know whether the “shock” was too large to be handled. Thereafter the Poles will enter the

medium term, where the challenges will be of an entirely different sort and equally formidable. As we noted briefly in our previous article, the medium term will be dominated less by purely economic and political reforms than by *institutional* ones. The Western press has been virtually silent about these institutional reforms and seems not to understand why Poland's economic future will depend on them. The day-to-day crises are interesting and distracting enough, to be sure. But Western observers also seem to be under the libertarian illusion that a free market will grow up naturally in Poland so long as there is no active government or union interference in the economy.

This is simply not true in Poland—or anywhere, for that matter. Every advanced capitalist economy in the world depends on the support of strong public institutions that capitalism by itself does not create. Businesses need ample public utilities, postal services that function, unbribable customs officials, honest tax collectors, university-trained professionals, and so on. Westerners take these institutions for granted because their governments are stable and their political customs deeply rooted, and they are often shocked to discover countries where these assumptions cannot be made. Thus, when Western firms abandon underdeveloped nations because “things don't work there,” they do not usually mean that laws of economics fail to operate in tropical climes. What they really mean is that the necessary public institutions that support economic activity are nonexistent, dysfunctional, or hopelessly corrupt.

Poland is not an underdeveloped country. It is, as one journalist joked, a “formerly developed” nation. There is an important truth buried in this quip: because Polish Communism blocked the restoration of free political and economic institutions that once ex-



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