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Political Language & Its Disrepair

WHY IS political language so antiquated? The question is itself old. Marx had little in common with Lord Acton, but he made a remark either of them could have made when he complained of “the borrowed language” men use to conduct their political debates. “The tradition of the dead generations”, he warned in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, “weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. . . .” By a usual irony, it is now Acton and Marx who weigh upon us. Political man, and not least political intellectuals, walk backwards into the future, their eyes on past controversies and their mouths full of ancestral jargon; and they often look better prepared to fight the last battle than the next.

It is no wonder, then, if terms like “liberalism” and “socialism”, “capitalism” and “public ownership”, thwart and distort an understanding of where, near the end of a violent and bitter century, our best choices now lie. We find it hard to understand how *little* we can learn from the past, except that the past is different. As extremists try to turn Ireland back into a 17th-century War of Religion, so do those in advanced industrial nations—the Anglo-American “New Left” of the 1960s, say, or the Baader-Meinhof sympathisers in West Germany—indulge in the make-believe that we can return to an early 19th-century world of nascent industrialism and the theories of class war it provoked. Our revolutionaries are far more reverent of political tradition than are our conservatives. (In fact it is hard to get a Conservative to talk about any past event earlier than the strikes that ended the hopes of Mr James Callaghan’s Labour government in the winter of 1978–9.)

What we can hope to learn from the past, I suggest, is why our political terms are as misleading as they are. Why, for example, do we still think of “revolution” as pre-eminently left-wing? For reasons remotely connected with our recollection of two great 18th-century revolutions, it seems likely: the American and the French. But Acton, who was

younger than Marx, could see that reform changes and revolution often keeps things just as they are. It is a case of the young liberal seeing further than the old socialist. “*The object of revolution is the prevention of Revolution*”, he remarks in his notes. The point is still little understood. The fact is that Gladstonian liberalism thought socialist dogmas old-fashioned, as the liberalism of Keynes and Beveridge has done since, because tied to an antiquated doctrine about the violent seizure of power. But there is *nothing* radical—necessarily, or even commonly—about a violent seizure of power. Revolution can easily be conservative: a quick transition from the Bourbons to Napoleon, from the Czars to Stalin, from the Hohenzollerns to Hitler. That is the essential truth that the reforming mind has brought to the problem of power. It is a truth known to Acton, to Gladstone, and to more recent prophets’ like George Orwell. And it is a truth we are now witnessing the consequences of, in the Iranian revolution of 1979 and in Ireland too, as well as in much of Black Africa. The slow conversion of official Communist parties in Western Europe away from revolution shows that even Marxists are not too old-fashioned to learn it, though it takes time. The next step is for conservatives to see it too.

I WANT NOW to consider how our political terminology works. I do not just mean the names of parties, though there are certainly many, since the general election of May 1979, who ask if the Conservative Party is anything less than radical in its objectives, and whether the labour movement enjoys more or less power under a Labour government nowadays than under any other. The problem I have in mind is much wider and deeper than that, and closer to Acton’s concern with the buried assumptions we make when we use words. It is about terms like Left, Right, and Centre. It is about

whether what we were brought up to call “capitalism” and “socialism” are, in fact, genuinely contrasting systems; and about the direction in which radicalism, in the age of the mixed economy, can now be said to lie.

Left and Right are not traditional terms in British politics: they entered the stream of ordinary debate as recently as the 1920s. Before that, terms of linear description like these were used in English only to describe continental political systems, notably the French and the Prussian. Westminster before the First World War, rather like Washington today, was felt to be distinct from all that: “Either a little Liberal, or else a little Conservative . . .”, as the policeman sings in Gilbert and Sullivan; and there were plenty of qualifying terms like “moderate” and “advanced” to make those party labels supple and variable.

It was the advent of Labour as a principal party of state after 1918 that made all that look inadequate, and in the last half-century a determined effort has been launched to make the continental jargon of Left, Right and Centre work for British politics: to see Conservatives on the Right, Labour on the Left, and the Liberals in the Centre. It has never worked very well; it worked remarkably badly in the election of May 1979, with the Conservatives in favour of free collective bargaining by trade unions; the Liberals against; and Labour divided, in the middle; and it is now an open question whether anyone but a few obstinate intellectuals will ever want to describe British political debate in these terms again. The language of our politics is in disrepair, and it is doubtful if anything less than a new system will do. It has been tinkered with again and again until it is incapable of performing any useful function.

Some of the difficulties of terms like Left and Right are in no way confined to British politics; and they are making Europeans in general wonder whether assumptions universally accepted fifty and even twenty years ago were ever justified. I say universally, because the propositions I wish to question now are scarcely partisan; they are in no way characteristic of one party rather than another, whether between the wars or since 1945. They have been widely seen as axiomatic. And one of the reasons why our political debate is as fluid and unpredictable as it now is lies in the fact that they no longer look axiomatic, or even true.

FIRST, socialism was widely seen as “anti-capitalist.” That, one might almost say, was

the whole point of it, irrespective of whether you were for it or against. It was widely supposed to be a way of dismantling the power that goes with large accretions of capital investment.

We now know that it is not. If one were to ask who the biggest capitalist on earth is, one would surely have to answer in terms of the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It owns and controls practically the whole of Russian industry and agriculture, and much besides. The capital power of the government of the USSR, backed as it is by armed might, is enormously bigger than that of General Motors in the USA or of any American capitalist; and it makes Imperial Chemical Industries here look like a corner drug store.

Other Communist governments would follow in that list. It now seems clear, in fact, that the biggest capitalists in the present age are the socialist states themselves. And the biggest in the Western world are great public corporations like British Steel—state monopolies or nationalised industries. It now looks very hard to argue that more socialism means less capitalism. On the contrary, the state is the biggest capitalist that there is; and nationalisation, or public ownership, makes it bigger still.

AGAIN, socialism once meant “more power for the workers”: or so many believed, whether socialist or anti-socialist. The plainest answer to that is the present contrast between the two Germanies, of East and West. If worker power means trade unions free to practise collective bargaining, then it needs to be said that such unions are totally characteristic of the capitalist West. They exist in the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, and not at all in the German Democratic Republic. No socialist state on earth allows collective bargaining; none looks like doing so; none could do so, surely, and remain socialist. None practises the co-ownership, *autogestion*, or *Mitbestimmungsrecht* characteristic of some parts of Western economies.

It may not be quite the paradox it first seemed, then, if British Labour in office opposed collective bargaining, and if the Conservatives now in office support it. An old argument has been stood on its head; or on its feet, rather, since this is where it should be. We can now see that the connection between socialism and worker power was a mistake. But it was not only, or even mainly, socialists who made that mistake.

AND THIRDLY, nationalisation or public ownership was once thought to mean “more power for

government.” I once listened to a broadcast where a number of passers-by in a London street were asked if they wanted “more nationalisation.” Most of them did not. But the most striking thing about those interviews was that *everybody* believed that the nationalised industries and services were actually run by the government; and the chief argument offered against more nationalisation was that governments are just not very good at running things. In other words, nobody seemed to be aware that the state is not the same thing as government, but a far wider thing. And the nationalised industries are run by the state, not by the government, as a surprisingly large number of people have yet to notice. They are independent bodies that can ignore government advice, and sometimes do—subject, of course, to legislation and various economic controls (but then so are private firms). It is a matter for interesting debate whether, by and large, the great public corporations are more or less biddable by Ministers than the private sector.

But the true interest of this point is far wider than a verbal distinction between state and government. The events of recent years have proved utterly mistaken those of many parties who hoped, or feared, that nationalisation must mean powerful government. We live in an age of weak government. There is no lack of state ownership in Britain today: more than half the workers now affiliated to the Trades Union Congress are employed, directly or indirectly, by the state. And yet British governments have never in human memory looked so hard pressed in their struggle to control the economy, above all in the field of pay and prices. The urgent domestic problem of most Western industrial states today is to defeat inflation. It is a task that the Victorian state Lord Acton knew, owning as it did almost nothing of the economy except the Post Office, readily achieved; and one that the heavily nationalised economies of the present age finds infinitely elusive and unsure. Victorian Britain was a private economy, and almost totally inflation-free. One certain fact about nationalisation, then, is that it does not of itself increase the power of government. It merely enlarges the role of the state.

AND LASTLY, socialism was once supposed to mean “more state welfare”; and much of the argument engaged in by our parents and grandparents was about just this. It was their unquestioning assumption that more socialism must mean higher social welfare, just as anti-socialist governments were supposed to encourage self-reliance and thrift.

Never a very convincing argument in Britain, where it was a Liberal government that first legislated for a welfare state; and where the Beveridge Report some thirty years later was drafted by a Liberal, Sir William Beveridge, and supported by all three political parties in the election of 1945. But it was a view widely held, none the less, and not only by socialists.

Now we know better. In the mid-1970s the city of New York was threatened with bankruptcy. At the heart of its impoverishment lay two causes: high wages and salaries, on the one hand, in the public sector; and big welfare payments on the other. Nobody doubts that New York is a “capitalist city.” But it is not always noticed that Moscow and Peking do not pay pensions or other welfare provision to their public officials on the same massive scale. So public over-spending can be a “private-enterprise folly” rather than a socialist one.

Or consider universities, which are a form of welfare expenditure to the extent that they are subsidised by the taxpayer: an overwhelming extent, even in Britain. Many nations in the Western world are now over-producing graduates, to an extent unknown in the socialist world. In capitalist California most school-leavers now go to college, largely at the cost of the state: an unimaginable situation in any nation east of the Iron Curtain. Extravagant welfare spending today is something very far removed from socialism, as a matter of ordinary observation. In fact socialism now looks like an efficient way (and some would say the only efficient way) to keep welfare spending under strict control.

IT IS NOW widely accepted that our language of politics is misleading; but not everybody thinks it matters much. Some are content with a passive, spectator-like view of all this, and find it natural that words should mean whatever most people take them to mean at any given time. We may call this the Shirley Williams view of political language, since Mrs Williams, on losing her seat as a Labour MP in May 1979, announced in a newspaper (“Why We Lost—How to Win”, *Observer*, 13 May 1979) that socialism really meant a number of propositions that Liberals and moderate Conservatives had been advancing for years.

The trouble with the Williams view of language is that it leaves us in the power of those who are active with words. To manipulate as feebly as this is to be out-manipulated by others. We all know

that socialism isn't about "more adult education" or a certain kind of commitment to the European Community: you can believe in all that and belong to any British political party, or none. Our use of language needs to be, if not convincing, at least plausible. But the trouble goes deeper than that.

Suppose it really were true, as I have just argued, that socialism in the familiar, state-centred sense of the word means *less* welfare, and *less* power for ordinary people: a more rigidly controlled and more conformist social system, where party leaders behave in staid, dignified fashion and are not to be found jogging raggedly in public. If that is indeed what it means, then you would expect conservatives, in the traditional sense of that word, to want more of it—and perhaps some of them do, in a secretive way. Guy Burgess's traditionally minded mother is said to have remarked, after her son's defection: "I think Soviet discipline is *good* for Guy. . . ."

But a debate conducted secretly or in occasional hints is a misleading debate. If it is really true, as liberals have long believed, that a competitive economy is more likely to prove radical or progressive in its effects than a controlled or socialist one, then the point needs to be openly put and openly discussed. When we call socialism "left wing", we are refusing to do just that. Above all else, we owe a duty to be clear—a duty to those about to choose, who need to choose in a knowledge of what choice means. That is why those who, like Shirley Williams, still call themselves socialists need to look more honestly at why they do so. There is a limit to the old game of making words mean whatever you want them to mean, and it is time Humpty Dumpty came off the wall.

THERE IS ANOTHER and more fundamental reason to insist on a clear use of terms. There are now many who, with a battery of fashionable arguments, question whether political realities can be accurately described at all. Such fashionable arguments are by now very numerous: that all language is ideologically motivated, and political language not least; that it is class-conditioned, or genetically conditioned, or theory-laden; or that terms like "Left" and "Right" merely represent a structure or pattern of meaning which is elegant and satisfying in itself, and under no obligation to represent any reality outside itself. All these views are variants of what philosophers call knowledge-scepticism: the doctrine that it is impossible with

any certainty to know anything. No perception in that view is certainly false, or true either; commitment is a matter of free personal choice—a declaration about oneself, and little else. And those who expect political language to reflect what things are, or could be, are the mere victims of an outdated assumption about the possibility of judging objectively.

Knowledge-scepticism, in one version or another, is now so widely held that it helps to explain the surprising immunity of our political language from analytical debate: the deep conservatism of our terminology, its inability to reflect the issues of the day. To speak plainly, much of our commonest political language has nothing to do with the problems that we face. Left, Right and Centre will not help you to defeat inflation. The struggle between Left and Right to control the Labour Party has about as much to do with the problems of our ailing economy as the rings of Saturn or the moons that encircle the planet Jupiter. When we talk of such matters, we are merely talking about talking. No hungry man is fed, no homeless sheltered, by whatever it is that is supposed to divide Mr Jim Callaghan from Mr Tony Benn.

It is clear, what is more, that most ordinary people know that this is so. Indeed the ordinary man doubts the language of our politics far more thoroughly, and more justly, than our intellectuals do. To this day, such trivialising terms are more or less the mark of the intellectual in politics, and they are far commoner in academic debate than on electoral platforms or in the House of Commons. The "New Left", as it called itself in the 1960s, was essentially a university movement; it lived and died as that. And to this day no British political party has ever used the words Left, or Right, or Centre as part of its title. The inaccuracy of our political language is above all an intellectual inaccuracy, in the sense of being one commonest among our intelligentsia. Most people, it seems clear, busy themselves with more immediate questions than the difference between Capitalism and Socialism on the linear spectrum. They hold strong views on party leaders as personalities, seek action on pay and prices, and respond to local issues like slum-clearance or pollution.

The biggest mistake in our debates are abstract mistakes—mistakes made by highly educated people. We are here in a world of what an American journalist once called Educated Incompetence. "You would need to be an intellectual", I once overheard somebody say

(echoing Orwell, I suspect) “to believe anything as silly as that!” And this is not the first time we have been here. Forty years ago, after all, millions of ordinary men and women could see that Stalin was a mass murderer, and thousands of intellectuals like Burgess, Philby and Maclean—and Anthony Blunt, art historian—thought him the saviour of mankind. And we have watched mutations of the same misjudgment with Mao, Nasser, and Castro. Intellectual errors are very far from new, in politics and elsewhere; and there is no notion so absurd, as Cicero remarked 2,000 years ago, that it cannot be found in the writings of the philosophers.

KNOWLEDGE-SCEPTICISM can be answered, as it needs to be answered, in two ways. The first is that if all assertions are suspect on grounds of ideology, conditioning, and the like, then that suspicion must reach as far as the assertion that all assertions are suspect. . . . Dogmatic scepticism cannot claim to be miraculously exempt. If other views are no more than a matter of personal taste and personal opinion, then so too is this.

The other answer relates to the notion of commitment as free choice. Many intelligent people now believe that to commit oneself to Left or Right is a declaration of personal freedom, and that anyone who denies this is acting in an arbitrary way. We are even told that to demand sufficient evidence—or even lucid argumentation—is to deny the right of the individual to be himself or to do his own thing. To claim objectivity is somehow to injure personal freedom.

This is surely an odd view, though it helps to explain how a terminology as ramshackle as Left

and Right has survived. Odd, because it assumes that freedom derives from a denial of knowledge—although it is precisely the great dictatorships of the century that have denied knowledge. Communists and Fascists are both knowledge-sceptics, though on grounds sometimes distinct: Marxists believe that personal knowledge is socially conditioned. Fascists that it is genetically so. In the totalitarian view, truth is what State or Party propose, and those who suppose they can know it for themselves are the victims of a “bourgeois illusion.”

The contrast between the sceptical and the free is forcefully made by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There is a moment early in that novel where the oppressed hero stiffens his resolve and writes treasonable words in his notebook. His treason is against the totalitarian state he lives under, and what he writes is this:

“Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth’s centre. . . .”

And with the mind of one setting forth a mighty axiom, he then writes:

“Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.”

That is the sort of courage we now need—to say that stones are hard and water wet; that state capitalism is still capitalism; and that a one-party state is tyranny, whoever that party may be. Political language can do a lot more than describe the patterns of men’s minds, if we let it, and the consolations of their philosophy. It can tell us what the world is like, and how it could be different. We can deny all that, if we like, to preserve our political language as it is and keep it safe. But how safe, if we do, are we?

Robert Skidelsky

Exploding Certain Convenient Myths of the 1930s



THERE WERE two wide-spread reactions to the recent "Blunt Affair." The first need not detain us. This was the revulsion against Anthony Blunt in the name of the traditional loyalties which he betrayed. It was a mixed reaction whose emotional roots lie in tribal values, a

philistine distrust of aesthetic culture, and the populist hatred of privilege; but whose strength reflects the contemporary disenchantment with a left-inclining, tender-minded intelligentsia, whose alleged antipathy to patriotism, the domestic virtues, the work-ethic, and business profits is felt to have brought Britain to its present sorry pass. Analysis of this type of response can be left to the political sociologist of contemporary Britain. Here it is sufficient to say that the "simple" loyalties and virtues in whose name Blunt has been attacked have always been problematic to the thinking person, and never more so than in the aftermath of the First World War, when it was rightly seen that traditional, stereotyped, responses to new situations had inflicted on Europe a disaster unparalleled since the Thirty Years War.

The second reaction, that of survivors of the Marxist or the Communist generation of the 1930s (the two terms were much more interchangeable than they are now), deserves closer attention from the historian. It is surprising that no one—except Philip Toynbee—actually defended what Blunt was prepared to do. For on certain assumptions, which were shared by the whole Marxist generation of

that time, there could be no moral objection to spying for the Soviet Union. Moreover, it is clear from the published comment by some survivors of this generation on the Blunt Affair that many of their assumptions about that period are still vigorously held today. The facts which continue to define for Philip Toynbee the reality of the 1930s are "a group of heartless politicians . . . two million unemployed . . . appeasing the rampant Fascist régimes in Germany and Italy", and "rapidly expanding" Fascist sympathies in Britain (*Observer*, 25 November 1979).

Or take the letter to *The Times* of 23 November 1979 from Professor Eric Burhop (FRS; eminent scientist; Trinity College, Cambridge undergraduate; and Communist sympathiser of the 1930s). "Huge unemployment, malnutrition, the dole, means test, hunger marchers—these were the realities of the time." Capitalism "had failed." Nazism "appeared the most evil thing any of us had seen." The British Government was "hell-bent on appeasing Hitler." "The only force that stood staunchly against Nazism . . . was the Soviet Union and its Red Army." Given these facts it was hardly surprising that "the brightest spirits of our universities" turned to Marxist solutions. As James Hemming remembers it (*The Guardian*, 23 November 1979):

"the establishments of all central Europe were sympathetic to Hitler and Co. as the only means of checking communism and controlling labour. In Spain, a democratically elected government had been overthrown by the Franco-Hitler axis with barely a cheep from the Western powers. Italy was securely fascist under Mussolini. France was rotten with quislings. In the East End, the police were supporting the Mosleyites against the Communists. . . . Nor should we forget that the Soviet-German alliance was forced on Russia as a means of buying time