GRESHAM COLLEGE

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THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

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1ST in a series of lectures on the party system. I shall also be giving a one-off lecture on 7th November on the American election one year on – a lecture on Donald Trump and populism.

This first lecture will be on the Conservative party. In future weeks, I shall talk about the Liberals and Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party, minor parties and nationalist parties. I shall do my best in these lectures to be fair to all of these parties, and to be non-partisan. But of course, there are few if any propositions in politics which command universal agreement.

I am not myself a member of any political party. But I have voted in every general election since I reached voting age. I shall regard these lectures as successful if you, the audience, are unable to tell how I have voted in recent general elections!

Let me begin by making a few general points on the British party system. If I had given this lecture 50 years ago, my emphasis would have had to be on the factors of stability and continuity. 1945 had seen the beginning of a two party battle between the Conservatives and Labour, and it seemed that little would disturb it. Not only that, but identification with the two major parties was strong, and large numbers of people belonged to them. In 1951, no fewer than 3.5 million – around 10% of the electorate – belonged to the Conservative or Labour parties. In the immediate postwar period, the Liberals were very much a minor party, while, in the general election of 1966, the nationalist parties did not win a single seat. In fact, only 2 MPs were returned who did not belong to the three major parties, and there were just 12 Liberals –oddly enough, the same number as were returned in the recent general election. So in 1966, 616 of 630 MPs were Labour and Conservatives, and these two parties between them won nearly 89% of the vote. Just 8.5% voted for the Liberals and just over 1% voted for any of the other parties.

Curiously, that result in 1966, apart from the success of the nationalist parties, does bear some resemblance to the recent general election in June at which the two major parties won around 84% of the vote between them while the Liberal Democrats once again won 12 seats. But what changes – convulsions indeed – we have seen in the intervening years – with the rise and fall of the Liberal Democrats, the rise and fall of Nationalist parties, and the development of a completely separate party system in Northern Ireland. These will be the subject of future lectures in this series. But, for the moment, it is simply worth pointing out that our assumptions of the continuity, stability and slow evolution of the party system, have taken a hard knock over the last 50 years.

Parties of course play a fundamental role in a parliamentary system. Disraeli, whom I will try to show has a claim to be regarded as the founder of the Conservative Party, said in the 19th century that `Without party, parliamentary government is impossible'. A great German sociologist, Max Weber, said the same thing more portentously. Parties, he said, live in a house of power. What they both meant was that in a parliamentary system parties compete for the chance to gain executive leadership, to govern the country. In Britain, Parliament, after the Glorious Revolution of 1689, wrested power from the king and Britain became a parliamentary monarchy. But then the question arose – what should parliament do with these new powers which it had won? How should the country now be governed? To that question, two answers were given- the Tory answer and the Whig answer – to be replaced in the 19th century by the Conservative and the Liberal answers – and then in the 20th century by

the Conservative and Labour answers. Normally, one of these parties formed a government following a general election, the other formed the opposition and sought to remove it, not perhaps through a vote in the House of Commons, but at the following general election. There was, in other words, a battle between the ins and the outs.

The minor parties seek to change the parliamentary system. The Liberal Democrats seek, as its predecessor Liberal party did, to change the electoral system to one of proportional representation, which would almost certainly fragment the party system, creating a permanent multi-party system, and no doubt coalition and minority government as occurs in much of the continent. UKIP has sought to take Britain out of the European Union, an aim that it seems to have achieved. The party, however, intends to maintain a watching brief to make sure that what it regards as the establishment parties do not backslide but carry out the peoples verdict given in the referendum held last year.

The nationalist parties seek to change the system in a different way. They do not seek to win power at Westminster. Instead they go to Westminster to emphasise that they do not wish to be there. They seek to win sufficient electoral support so as to cut loose from Westminster. Of course, they want to form a government, but not at Westminster. They want to be in government in Edinburgh or Cardiff, in their own countries once independence has been achieved. Perhaps, if independence were to be achieved, they would break up as the Irish nationalists did after Irish independence in 1922. Perhaps there would be a Scottish nationalist party of the Left contesting elections against a Scottish nationalist party of the right. We do not know. But what is clear is that the primary purpose of the nationalist parties is not to form or even sustain a government at Westminster, but to use Westminster as a forum to achieve independence. Rather like the Irish nationalist party in the 19th century their purpose in coming into Westminster is to say in a very loud voice – we do not belong here. Only time will tell whether they will be successful or not.

Political parties developed long before the age of mass suffrage. Indeed, some historians have traced them back to the 17th century, to the battles between the king and parliament. The colloquial terms used for the Liberal and Conservative party in the past – Whig and Tory – the term `Tory' is of course still used to describe the Conservatives – do in fact derive from the 17th century and they are not complimentary. A Whig was a Scottish cattle driver and used to describe Presbyterian rebels who sought to exclude the Catholic James II from the succession to the throne. A Tory was an Irish Catholic horse thief, and the term was used to describe the supporters of James II, and then the Jacobites.

It is not, however, entirely clear when the Conservative Party did actually begin. Until legislation passed in the year 2000, the parties were not legal entities – and so, with the Conservatives and Liberals at least, there is no obvious date at which it could be said that they had been formed.

Disraeli believed that the party had begun in the 18th century. After the defeat of his government in 1880, he wrote to a colleague that the Tory party `have existed for more than a century & a half as an organised political connection & having survived the loss of the American colonies, the first Napoleon, & Lord Grey's Reform Act, they must not be snuffed out'.

But the term `Conservative' was not used in Britain in a political sense until 1830. The term `Liberal' was also first used at around the same time. Both terms were used to describe political combinations which had arisen either in sympathy to or in reaction against the French Revolution. The term `Conservative' spread rapidly after 1830 to describe those who were opposed to radical changes such as Catholic Emancipation, and the Reform Act – it seemed a less negative description than anti-reformer. In the 1830s, the party began to develop constituency associations.

But in 1846, the party split on the issue of the repeal of the Corn laws. Those who supported repeal under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, broke from the party, and formed a separate group in Parliament called the Peelites, which eventually merged with the Liberals. In consequence of this split, the party was in opposition for almost the whole of the next 28 years, forming just three short-lived minority governments during this period. The split had a traumatic effect on the party, and is often invoked by party leaders determined to prevent it happening again. Lord Salisbury, PM at the end of the 19th century said that to act like Peel was to inflict `the heaviest disaster the party could undergo'. Salisbury's successor as Prime Minister,

Arthur Balfour, was faced, at the beginning of the 20th century, with a crisis over tariff reform. He was determined to hold the party together. He was forced to use ambiguous and delaying tactics to prevent a split, and was attacked by opponents for never making his position clear. One critic said that he had, `nailed his colours to the fence'. But he responded by saying, `I will not be another Sir Robert Peel'. In 1963, when, contrary to expectations, Lord Home became Prime Minister, rather than R A Butler, Butler' supporters pressed him not to accept the decision and to refuse to serve under Hone. But he refused to take this course, saying that the party split at the time of Peel was, for him, `the supremely unforgettable lesson of history', and that he would never under any circumstances risk that happening again. More recently, John Major, David Cameron and Theresa May have done all they could to hold together contending factions on the European issue in order to avoid a split. So far they have been successful – tho' perhaps only just.

But it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the strongest figure in the modern Conservative Party is the ghost of Sir Robert Peel.

After the 1846 split, the Conservatives did not really regain their strength until the 1860s, years which coincided with the extension of the suffrage. The extension of the suffrage meant that the parties had to develop modern organisational forms. They needed to develop machinery to link the party leadership with the members, with those who were to do the hard work of canvassing and taking voters to the polls. They needed to organise the new mass electorate and this could only be done by recruiting voluntary, unpaid party activists.

The Conservatives, as I have said, existed in an earlier form, as a parliamentary party long before the extension of the suffrage made it necessary to have an organisation in the country. But the extension of the suffrage made organisation outside Parliament necessary for purposes of canvassing and the registration of electors. The Conservatives were first in the field – though somewhat reluctantly – and strengthened their already existing electoral base. In 1867, a National Union of Conservative organisations was established whose task was to ensure that every constituency had a local association to select and support a Conservative candidate at the general election. Before 1867, constituencies had generally been supplied with candidates by the central party. But, in the future, constituency associations would choose their own candidates. In 1870, the Con Party opened a Central Office.

These developments in mass organisation were largely due to the influence of Disraeli who can, I think, claim to be the organisational founder of the Conservative Party. They were, I believe, crucial to the development of democracy in Britain. Where Conservatives embraced party organisation and had strong grassroots electoral support, they knew that they need have no fear of democracy. They would be able to win elections even under a democratic franchise. Therefore, by contrast, for example, with conservative parties in Italy or in Germany and some other countries on the Continent, they were under no temptation to resist democracy or seek to overthrow it by aiding far-right groups. Because there was already a conservative organisation before the arrival of democracy, democracy was secure. The radical right has hardly ever been strong in Britain.

Now 1867, when the National Union was founded, as well as being the year of the founding of the National Union, was the year in which the first vol of Karl Marx's Das Kapital was published. I leave it to you to consider which has had more influence in Britain – the book by Marx or the mass organisation of the Conservative Party. The Liberals rapidly followed the Conservative example with the formation of the National Liberal Federation in 1877, at whose inaugural meeting Gladstone spoke, although the real inspiration behind the Federation was the Radical mayor of Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain.

Now, in both cases, the mass organisation of the parties developed outwards from parliament. The parliamentary party came first and then the party outside parliament. In the Conservative Party, in particular, the popular organisation of the party OUTSIDE Parliament was conceived of as subordinate to the party INSIDE Parliament. The purpose of the organisation was to secure the support of the newly enfranchised, and, in particular, the support of the working class – who were to be a majority of the electorate after the 3rd Reform Act of 1884. Conservative organisation was strengthened by the Primrose League, founded in 1883, two years after Disraeli's death. Because Queen Victoria sent a wreath of primroses for Disraeli's funeral, the primrose was widely thought to be his favourite flower. It was not in fact. But that did not matter. The Primrose League was a mass organisation which at its peak in 1901, claimed to have over one and half million members. Non-voting women could join and there was a Ladies Grand Council alongside that of the men. There was also children

over six in the junior branches who were called buds. The purpose of the League was to enlist mass support for canvasing and other activities, essential to the success of a modern political party. But it provided a great deal of entertainment for its members including music halls, conjuring events, dances, and cycling clubs. Political events and lectures generally took a back seat. Critics called the League vulgar, but Lady Salisbury, wife of the late Victorian Prime Minister, replied, `Of course it's vulgar, but that's why we are so successful'. The Primrose League marked the transition of the Conservative Party from an elite to mass organisation.

But, with the Labour Party, the development was to be the other way round. The Labour Party was founded in 1900 before it had any MPs and before it had the remotest chance of being in government. It was formed to give a voice to the working classes, who, although a majority of the electorate, were barely represented in parliament. So, with the Labour Party, the parliamentary party was an extension of the mass party. Indeed, the Labour Party makes a distinction between its parliamentary wing, called the Parliamentary Labour Party, the PLP, and the party outside Parliament. Both together comprise the Labour Party, and the task of the Parliamentary Labour Party is conceived by many as representing the members outside Parliament. Indeed we are at present seeing a debate between the parliamentary wing of the party, and the party outside parliament on the appropriate balance of power between them. That, of course, is linked with ideological factors. The party outside Parliament strongly supports the leader, Jeremy Corbyn. The Parliamentary party, by contrast, last year passed, by a large majority a vote of no confidence in him.

But today's lecture is on the Conservative Party. It is a remarkable party for two reasons. The first is that it has a longer continuous existence than any other major party in Britain, and almost certainly a longer continuous existence than any other major party in the democratic world. One book on popular conservatism begins by saying – Pugh - 1 – `Like the poor, the Conservatives are always with us. While their opponents divide and coalesce, expand and contract in provoking and exciting ways, they appear to remain the constant element in the British political system'.

The second remarkable feature is that it has what might be called a governing vocation. It has been called the natural party of government. Arguably, it is the most successful political party in the democratic world. It has tremendous ADAPTIVE power. A book published around 20 years ago on the 20th century history of the Conservative Party, to which I contributed, was entitled `The Conservative Century'. .

The great leaders of the Conservative party in the 19th century, Disraeli and Lord Salisbury, believed that democracy would prove conservative and not radical in its implications; and indeed the expansion of the franchise in the 19th and 20th centuries showed that popular feeling had strong conservative tendencies. After both the 3rd Reform Act in 1884 and the 4th in 1918 which provided for universal male suffrage and female suffrage for women over 30, there were long periods of Conservative rule.

During the 20th century, the Conservatives were in fact in government, either alone or in coalition, for two-thirds of the 20th century – 66 years. But, even when they were not in government, their opponents sometimes enjoyed only a small majority in the House of Commons or had to govern without a majority at all, in a hung parliament. In the 20th century there were just four governments of the Left in the 20th century with comfortable majorities – in 1906, 1945, 1966 and 1997. It was only after these elections that British governments could really do things that the Conservatives did not like. And when not in government, the Conservatives were, for the whole of this period, the official opposition, the obvious alternative government.

I said a few moments ago that the Labour Party was formed to give parliamentary representation to the working class. That class was during the 20th century a majority in the electorate. Had it voted solidly for Labour, there would have been Labour governments throughout this period. But, in fact, around one-third of working-class voters have generally supported the Conservatives, while amongst the self-employed and small business people, around 90% have generally voted Conservative. That class – which Marxists call the petit bourgeoisie – was in fact far more class conscious than the working class.

WHY did a large minority of the working class tend to vote Conservative? That is the puzzle which we have to try to answer. When Disraeli died in 1881, The Times obituary declared, `In the inarticulate mass of the English populace which they held at arm's length [Dis] discerned the Conservative working man as the sculptor perceives the angel prisoned in a block of marble'.

Disraeli and his successors understood that the working class was often conservative in the sense of being against change. In a speech in 1878, Disraeli said, `I look to the cultivation of public opinion, and especially in the working classes for the maintenance of the British Empire'. In the same speech he said `It is no light thing to belong to a nation where liberty and order co-exist in the greatest degree. That must benefit all classes and most particularly it must benefit the working men'. Disraeli's conclusion was that, `of all men, working men must be most Conservative'.

Modern social research shows that Disraeli may well have been right since it has been shown that many members of the working class are culturally conservative. As early as 1951, a social psychologist, Professor H.J. Eysenck, examined working class social attitudes. He discovered that his sample of the working class held much more socially conservative attitudes than his middle class sample. Amongst the views they held were support for flogging and capital punishment, opposition to interracial marriage, a belief that Jews held too much power and were not useful citizens, hostility to conscientious objectors and compulsory sterilisation of the hereditary unfit or disabled. Remarkably, working class respondents were MORE supportive of the institution of private property than middle class respondents.

The cultural conservatism of the working class is shown particularly in attitudes towards immigration. In the 19th century, there was working class hostility to Irish immigration, and later to Jewish immigration. In the 1960s, there was hostility to immigration from the Caribbean and from the Indian sub-continent. More recently, there has been hostility to immigration from Eastern Europe, a major factor, of course, behind the Brexit vote in the referendum last year. In the 19th century, significantly, Lancashire, where Irish immigration was heavy, was a Conservative stronghold. The same was true in Glasgow. Indeed, until the 1960s, in both Liverpool and Glasgow, the party division ran on religious rather than class lines – the division between Conservative and Labour was in reality a division between Protestant and Catholic.

It is, I think, a mistake to characterise such hostility to immigration as racist. Immigration is, for many people a culturally disturbing element, one that they find it difficult to cope with. But, however it is characterised, hostility to immigration has caused many working class voters to support and identify with the Conservative party rather than with parties of the Left which sometimes do not seem to take their concerns seriously.

The view that it is natural for the working class to support a party of the Left assumes that there is a united working class. But, in the 19th century, the working class was divided, both by region, and, even more important by religion. Indeed, in the 19th century, the key factor dividing voters was less class than religion, by whether one was church or chapel, whether one supported the Anglican Church – sometimes called the Conservative party at prayer – or one of the Nonconformist denominations.

If one looks for example at the six elections between 1885 and 1910, the average Conservative vote in Wales was 39%, while in inner London, in the area of the old London County Council, it was 53%. Now no one would suggest that Wales, much of which is rural, had more working class people than inner London. But Wales was predominantly Noncomformist, while London was Anglican or secular. In London as in Lancashire, Conservative support was based in part on hostility to immigrants – Irish in Lancashire, Irish and Jewish in London. Religion and attitudes to immigration divided the working class, as today attitudes to immigration and towards the European Union divide the working class – in Scotland there is in addition attitudes towards Scottish nationalism and in Northern Ireland there is of course the religious conflict.

The working class is also divided by the nature of its employment. Employment in large scale industry was always strongly associated with membership of a trade union, and a likelihood of Labour voting. But in small scale industry, in agriculture, or in personal service, trade unionism was weak, and members of the working class were more likely to be in close contact with their employer than with other members of the working class. For those employed in small scale industry, there was little sense of working class community, and therefore a smaller propensity to vote for a party of the Left.

A further factor helping the Conservatives, paradoxically perhaps, has been female suffrage. Next year, we are due to celebrate the centenary of women being given the vote. In 1918, women over 30 were given the vote, and in 1928, women over 21 were given the vote on the same basis as men. From the time that women were given

the vote in 1918 until the 1980s, women were more inclined to vote Conservative than men. Indeed, if women had voted in the same way as men, Labour would have been continuously in power from 1945 to 1983; while if, in the 20th century, only women had been able to vote, the Conservatives would have won every single general election except for the three Left-wing landslides in 1906, 1945 and 1997.

Part of the reason for this was that the interests of women were, during this period, very different from those of men. Women were much more likely to be church goers than men, and for much of the 20th century, churchgoing was associated with Conservative voting.

The Left – the Liberals and then Labour – tended to be geared to the interests of men at the workplace. Female interests were presumed to be equivalent to those of the male breadwinner. For, until the last quarter of the 20th century, the majority of women, and certainly the vast majority of married women, were not part of the labour market. They were therefore far less likely to belong to trade unions than men; and those who were in the labour market were less likely to be unionised. In their role as housewives, women saw themselves as consumers rather than as producers, and were perhaps more concerned with the dangers of rising prices from excessive wage demands, than with higher wages. During the postwar period of Labour government, there was a system of rationing and subsidies to provide fair shares for all. But many female consumers were opposed to this, and formed a body called the Housewives League, calling for its abolition. That was achieved primarily under the Conservatives in the early 1950s. In 1955, Attlee, the Labour leader, made the following very revealing comment. He said that the `Conservative government, by the abolition of subsidies, has brought about untold difficulties. I realise that the rationing of foodstuffs was not popular, but at least it enabled people to obtain fair shares at reasonable prices. Nowadays --- the shops [are] filled with articles at prices which the ordinary man and woman cannot afford'. BUT – most women were not opposed to the abolition of rationing. Instead, they welcomed the greater variety of food in the shops.

The social class system, then, was cross-structured by a gender system which cut across it. The Conservatives were more skilled than parties of the Left in appealing to women. They were also more skilled in appealing to the young. They appreciated more than parties of the Left did that the vast majority of people are not particularly interested in politics or in attending political meetings. They therefore organised social occasions with minimum political content. For women whose husbands had gone out to work, there were coffee mornings and wine and cheese parties – social occasions with no political content - at which they could meet friends. For the Young Conservatives in the 1950s, there were social occasions – dances, tennis matches and the like. In a famous comedy programme in 1961 called `The Blood Donor' starring Tony Hancock, the hero tells the nurse he has decided to do something for the benefit of the country. `What should it be, I thought, become a blood donor or join the Young Conservatives? But as I'm not looking for a wife and I can't play table tennis, here I am'.

Most young people in their late teens or early twenties would certainly prefer the social occasions arranged by the young Conservatives to what was being offered by the Young Socialists - earnest seminars on nuclear disarmament, the problems of the nationalised industries or the future of the welfare state. In this way, people who were on the whole perhaps not very interested in politics would be drawn into the orbit of the Conservatives. Interestingly, in the first election held after the vote was lowered to 18 year olds in 1969 – the election of 1970 – the young disproportionately supported the Conservatives. Many thought of the young of those days as radical students. BUT – at that time the vast majority of young people were not at universities, but in the labour market – working perhaps in building sites or secretarial offices – and had little sympathy with rebellious students in elite universities. Today, of course, the Conservatives seem to have lost their magic touch in appealing to the young; and in recent elections, and in particular the election held earlier this year, the young have voted very disproportionately for the Labour Party. That is a serious problem for the Conservatives which they have to resolve if they are to remain as a party of government.

The Conservatives have been most successful electorally when voters have been frightened. Lord Davidson, a former chairman of the party, said in 1961. `If you look at the history of the Conservative Party, you will always find that it is when the country is scared of wild-cat schemes and wants safety that it turns to the Conservative Party'. Their first long period in office – of Tories before the term `Conservative' came into existence - was during the aftermath of the French Revolution, from 1812 to 1830, when voters were frightened of revolutionary upheavals in Britain similar to those that had occurred in France. Their second long period of

office came after 1886 when Gladstone had proposed Home Rule to Ireland. British voters reacted against what they thought of as a surrender to terrorism and the break-up of the United Kingdom. Their third period of success came in the interwar years when voters were frightened of the growing Labour Party, which they equated, however absurd it might now seem, with extremism, and even with Communism. In the post war years, the Conservatives had a period of success after 1951, when voters felt that the Labour Party could not be trusted with the economy; and then, after 1979, when, following the winter of discontent, voters were frightened of trade union power.

Fear of the radical Left has led to defections from the Left to the Conservatives not only by voters from the Left but also by leaders of the Left. Indeed, Conservative dominance has been greatly assisted over the past 130 years by the defection to them of leading figures of the Left – in 1886 of Joseph Chamberlain, who was opposed to Irish Home Rule, in 1918 of Lloyd George when he formed a coalition with the Conservatives. Both Chamberlain and Lloyd George were dissident Liberals - and then in 1931, Ramsay MacDonald, a dissident socialist, when he formed a National Government in the middle of the slump. These men helped the Conservatives win landslide election victories in the general elections of 1900, 1918 and 1931. The politics of Chamberlain, Lloyd George and MacDonald have been described in many and various ways, but no one has ever suggested that they were Conservatives. Yet they helped secure landslide majorities for the Conservatives in three general elections. The Conservatives in the 20th century were to prove far more flexible and adaptive in attracting dissident elements than the parties of the Left; and this was one of the reasons for their success. Harold Macmillan who was Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, mischievously suggested that, `The last purely Conservative government was formed by Mr. Disraeli in 1874 --- it is the fact that we have attracted moderate people of Liberal tradition and thought into our ranks which makes it possible to maintain a Conservative government today'. [1] That process of attracting `moderate people of Liberal tradition' began in 1886; and it prefigured Conservative electoral success in the 20th century. It also weakened and divided the forces of the Left, blunting their radicalism.

Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister at the end of the 19th century, expressed this view of Conservative success to his daughter, Lady Gwendolen Cecil, when she was preparing his biography. He used to insist, so she says, `that the forces which make for the defence of institutions as well as the principles bound with them, are immensely powerful and sufficient in themselves to win adherence to any party that is able sincerely and loyally to place itself at their service --- He used to declare --- that Mr. Gladstone's existence was the greatest source of strength which the Conservatives Party possessed --- He did not shrink from the fact that according to his views the success of his own party was dependent on the existence of the other'. `I rank myself no higher in the scheme of things than a policeman – whose utility would disappear if there were no criminals'. Conservative success, therefore, was gained as it were by default.

The same point was made in more popular form in the 1920s in a children's story of the period by a writer once popular – but perhaps almost forgotten today - a writer called Richmal Crompton who wrote books about a young scamp called William. I certainly remember enjoying the William books when young, although I don't know whether they are still read today. In 1930, Richmal Crompton wrote a book of stories called `William the Bad', and one of the stories in that book is called `William the Prime Minister'. In this story, William and three of his friends decide to hold a mock election. William explains the differences between the parties.

`There's four sorts of people tryin' to get to be rulers', he says. `They all want to make things better, but they want to make `em better in different ways. There's Conservatives an' they want to make things better by keeping' 'em jus' like what they are now. An' there's Lib'rals an' they want to make things better by alterin' them jus' a bit, but not so's anyone'd notice, an' there's Socialists, an' they want to make things better by takin' everyone's money off' em, an' there's Communists an' they want to make things better by killin' everyone but themselves'. One of William's friends, Henry, is the Socialist candidate, but another boy says that Henry's proposal to take the money of others is sinful. Another friend, Douglas, is a Liberal who promises presents to anyone who votes for him. But William, the Conservative, wins the mock election unanimously.

Another of the stories in a book called `William the Fourth' published in 1924, is called `The Weak Spot'. William's much older brother, Robert, joins a Society of Reformed Bolsheviks. He buys a red tie, and says that

[1] Macmillan, *The Past Masters*, pp. 18-19.

he supports the redistribution of wealth, the equalisation of incomes, and the freedom of the working classes. But William and his friends form a junior branch of this Society and take Robert's watch, purse and bicycle. Robert then abandons Communism. He explains to his father, `It's all right when you get your share of other people's things, but when other people try to get your things, then that's different'. `Ah', observes the wise father, `That's the weak spot. I'm glad you found it out'.

So the culture of childrens stories at that time – and perhaps at other times as well – seemed very much in sympathy with the Conservative cause. Writing a little later, George Orwell lamented the Conservative implications of childrens stories – he mentioned specifically the Billy Bunter stores set in a public school called Greyfriars, and said that these were forms of concealed propaganda giving working class children the idea that the existing social hierarchy was both stable and beneficial. He made a plea for Socialist stories for children. But that plea has not yet, I think, been answered. Perhaps it never will be.

But these childrens stores do imply something rather interesting. People on the Left tend to assume that it is natural for the working class to be on the Left, and that anyone from the working class who is NOT on the Left is somehow deviant. But – perhaps the examples from these childrens stories shows that the fundamental culture of the country is so much in congruence with that of the Conservative party that it is the Left-wing voter, whether working class or not, who is deviant. So, on this view, it is natural for a member of the working class to support the Conservatives, and what needs to be explained is not why a minority of the working class vote Conservative, but why the majority do not.

But, despite the evidence of the childrens stories, and despite what Lord Salisbury said, the Conservatives have not always relied on an entirely negative appeal to the people. They have also had a positive conception of government to put before the voters. In Disraeli's novel, Sybil, written in the 1840s, a novel still well worth reading and which, together with its companion volume, Coningsby, provide an excellent account of the author's political beliefs, he declared that the Tory party `has its origin in great principles and in noble instincts'. One of those instincts was `to announce that power has only one duty – to secure the social welfare of the people' – the word `people' written in capital letters. The quotation in the book about the two nations is no doubt too well known to bear repetition, but the following one is less well known. It is perhaps a little melodramatic. The hero of the novel, Egremont, the Earl of Marney, is talking to a leader of the working class Chartist movement called Gerard. Egremont says `a great family, rooted in the land, has been deemed to be an element of political strength'.

> `I'll tell you what', said Gerard, `there is a great family in this country, and rooted in it, of which we have heard much less than they deserved, but of which I suspect we shall very soon hear enough to make us think a bit'.
>
> `In this county'?
>
> `Ay, in this county, and every other one. I mean the PEOPLE'.

And the novel ends with Egemont marrying the daughter of Gerard, the Chartist, symbolising the union between the aristocracy and the working class which Disraeli hoped that the Conservative Party would be able to achieve.

Disraeli believed that Conservatism did not and must not mean mere blind adherence to the status quo. It must also mean social reform. He was the first leading politician in Britain to put legislation to improve public health on to the political agenda. In a speech delivered when in opposition at Manchester in 1872, he spoke about the need to `increase the well-being of the working classes of this country', and insisted that `public attention' `ought to be concentrated upon sanitary legislation. ---- Pure air, pure water, the inspection of unhealthy habitations, the adulteration of food – these and many kindred matters may be legitimately dealt with by the legislature'. He then added, rather whimsically, that there was a great mistake in the Scriptures – for, instead of the phrase - vanity of vanities, all is vanity – vanitas vanitatum, Omnia vanitas - `the wise and witty king' had really said Sanitas, sanitatum, Omnia sanitas'. Disraeli was in fact the first PM to bring the needs of public health to general attention. `It was', he said, `impossible to overrate the importance of the subject. After all, the first consideration of a minister should be the health of the people. A land may be covered with historic trophies,

with museums of science and galleries of art, with universities and with libraries: the people may be civilised and ingenious; the country may be even famous in the annals and action of the world, but, gentlemen, if the population every ten years decreases, and the stature of the race every ten years diminishes, the history of that country will soon be the history of the past'.

But, of course, the problems of the Conservative Party are very different today from what they were in the late 19th century. Traditionally, the Conservative Party saw itself as the party of the nation, and also the Empire, which it championed even in the postwar world. The 1951 Conservative manifesto declared, `The Conservative Party, by long tradition and settled belief, in the Party of the Empire.' But, in the postwar world, the Empire was coming to an end and the nation seemed in decline. Britain no longer seemed one of the world's great powers. The Conservative Party had also seen itself as the party of religion, but religion too seemed in decline, as Britain was becoming a more secularised society. In addition, the growth of social mobility and an adversary culture was challenging traditional Conservative ideas on hierarchy and order. This was shown in the transition to a new and different kind of Conservative leader – one whose credentials were based on merit rather than birth.

Of the first four Conservative Prime Ministers after the war,
Churchill was the grandson of Duke, and the son of a Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Anthony Eden was the son of baronet and his second wife was Churchill's niece.

Harold Macmillan was the son in law of a Duke, who had been a Conservative Cabinet minister in the 1920s.

Alec Douglas- Home was a 14th earl.

These four were succeeded by products of the meritocratic revolution.

Edward Heath was the son of a builder and a lady's maid.

Margaret Thatcher was the daughter of a grocer.

John Major was the son of a trapeze artist in a circus, who then became a manufacturer of garden ornaments.

William Hague was the son of a soft drinks manufacturer. Later, Michael Howard was the son of a Romanian Jewish immigrant who became a shopkeeper in South Wales.

With David Cameron, we were back perhaps to a more traditional style of leader. BUT – Theresa May has more in common with leaders such as Heath, Margaret Thatcher and Major. Her father was a vicar in a small Oxfordshire parish, and she was educated at a state school. She is, indeed, the first Prime Minister to have attended a comprehensive school.

In the postwar years, the symbols associated with the Conservative Party – Empire, patriotism and religion – seemed no longer relevant. Further, the wartime coalition and the growing consensus on policy in the 1950s made it much more difficult to characterise Labour as insurgent or revolutionary party. Churchill had tried it in the 1945 election campaign when he had said that a socialist state could not be introduced without some form of Gestapo, but it appeared absolutely ridiculous to compare the Labour Party which had governed with him during the war to the Nazi party, and the mild-mannered Attlee to Hitler or Himmler.

Moreover, voters demanded much more from government than they had in the past. The public had growing material needs and a belief that the government should meet them – in particular, successful management of the economy – the preservation of full employment, rising living standards, and a developing welfare state. In the 1950s, therefore, the Conservatives came to justify their title to power by their success at managing the economy, which they contrasted with the supposed errors of the post-war Attlee government. The party of the nation transformed itself into the party of successful economic management. But that too seemed in difficulty by the 1970s, when it appeared that the British economy, like Britain's great power status was in decline.

The trouble was that both major parties were raising expectations of economic growth which could not be met. The problem of raising the rate of growth seemed intractable. The first response under the Conservatives, led by Harold Macmillan in the early 1960s was a greater degree of state intervention – a National Economic Development Office to encourage growth and a National Incomes Commission to develop an incomes policy. Hopefully, the Conservatives could work with both sides of industry to improve Britain's economic performance. The trouble with this approach, however, was that it brought the Conservatives into conflict with the trade union movement when Conservative governments tried to restrict the growth of wages. Under Edward Heath, Prime Minister from 1970 to 1974, an Industrial Relations Act was passed to bring the trade unions within the framework of the law. But the trade unions refused to cooperate with it. And the Heath government was brought down by the trade unions following a miners strike in the winter of 1973-4 and the `Who Governs?' election of February 1974 which brought Labour to power.

The failures of the Macmillan and Heath governments ended the implicit assumption that the Conservatives could manage the postwar consensus better than Labour. It was becoming much more difficult for the Conservatives to pose as the party of efficient management. But, in any case, the policies that had been adopted by Conservatives to control inflation and encourage economic growth involved a much greater degree of government intervention than most Conservatives thought was desirable. There seemed to be a kind of ratchet whereby each Labour government increased the power of the state without it being reversed by Conservative governments. But Conservatives, so most members of the party believed, were not there merely to accept an enhanced role for the state. They were there to ensure that there was a smaller role from the state.

There was, moreover, an important Conservative constituency which had not shared in the benefits of the post war consensus, built in part upon a concordat between government and the trade unions - people on fixed economics - pensioners, the self-employed and small businesses – a natural Conservative constituency. It was this constituency which had suffered the most from inflation. It was this constituency which believed that, instead of the trade unions being recognised as a grand estate of the realm, their role should be lessened. It was this constituency which believed that the welfare state had got out of hand, and was subsiding the feckless and irresponsible. This constituency was hostile to many of the changes of postwar years – the enhanced role of the trade unions, the inflation which followed in its wake, the increase in immigration and crime and the growth of welfare dependence. But this constituency seemed to have been ignored by the postwar leaders of the Conservative Party – Churchill, Macmillan, Heath – desperate to conciliate the unions.

It was this constituency which came to recognise Margaret Thatcher as the true representative of their hopes and fears.

What this constituency demanded was less intervention, and a renewed emphasis on patriotism and nationhood. Enoch Powell, who was in many years the John the Baptist of the new regime, of Thatcherism, declared, `Nationhood, with all that word implies, is what the Tory Party is ultimately about'. The Conservatives should become again the party of the nation, not the party of the state.

The essence of Thatcherism was the abandonment of the attempt to resolve Britain's economic and social problems outside the framework and institutional constraints of the postwar consensus - a consensus which Margaret Thatcher saw as basically social democratic and not conservative. She sought to challenge the role of the public sector, the mixed economy and the immunities of the trade unions, to reduce their bargaining strength. by setting a new legal framework for industrial relations. She sought to encourage individual responsibility and to lower expectations of what the state could do. She sought to recreate the spirit of enterprise which she believed had been weakened by excessive state control. The market would be given an enhanced role as a MEANS to the creation of a more ordered and responsible society. `Economics are the method, the object is to change the heart and soul', Margaret Thatcher said in 1981.

But Thatcherism raised its own problems. The primary problem was that it tended to the creation of a society based on instant gratification and the immediate satisfaction of consumer needs. The appeal of Thatcherism was less to the values of individualism, responsibility and self-reliance than to the material benefits – in particular the tax cuts, capital and home ownership. People accepted these while ignoring the sermons about discipline, effort and self-restraint. In the late 1980s, the Lawson boom was less about saving and investing, more about borrowing and spending.

Were Thatcherite entrepreneurs really heroes? Or did they not symbolise a cash nexus, a feeling that human relationships could be reduced to calculations of interest, and that individuals had no sense of responsibility for each other. That was precisely the opposite of what Margaret Thatcher had sought to achieve.

In the 1930s, Harold Macmillan, who was to be a bitter opponent of Thatcherism, declared, - Star 25 June 1936 - `The Conservative Party has become dominated by money and the City'. And he went on to say that `a party dominated by second-class brewers and company promoters – a Casino Capitalism – is not likely to represent anybody but itself'.

An unkind critic said that Margaret Thatcher had sought to create an economy in the image of her father, the thrifty grocer and Methodist lay preacher who always put aside money for a rainy day. But, instead, she had created a society in the image of her son, a get rich quick businessman.

The trouble was that the market economy was a distinctly unconservative force, undermining and subversive of established values. It undermined the status quo – the landed gentry, the church, the traditional family, the local community, even the nation itself as a result of the pressures of globalisation. And globalisation meant cooperation with Europe. The Conservative commitment to Europe was made in the 1960s when it was believed that Europe held the secret of a higher rate of economic growth, a secret that had eluded British politicians. In 1977, Margaret Thatcher, as Leader of the Opposition, went so far as to say, `We are the European Party in the British parliament and among the British people and we want to cooperate wholeheartedly with our partners in this joint venture', remarks which might lead to her being expelled from the party today! For the European cause always sat uneasily on Conservative shoulders, for the Conservatives were, after all, the party of the nation not the party of globalisation.

There has been a reaction against Thatcherism, even in the Conservative Party; and that reaction reached its climax in the election campaign earlier this year when the Conservative manifesto declared that `We must reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right' – thus implicitly equating Margaret Thatcher and perhaps also David Cameron with Jeremy Corbyn - `and instead embrace the mainstream view that recognises the good that government can do'. Later the manifesto said `The government's agenda will not be allowed to drift to the right'. Theresa May is as distant from Thatcherism as Jeremy Corbyn is from Tony Blair.

Traditionally, Conservatives were deeply concerned with the bonds of community. Today, they face a fundamental CONFLICT between economic liberalism on the one hand and a stable society on the other. It is clear that a moral framework is needed if markets are to work effectively.

The very real achievements of Thatcherism raise a key problem for Conservatives, a problem which no government has yet been able to resolve. How do we reconcile the values of community, of trust, of responsibility with a dynamic private enterprise society which seems to brush these values aside. This is perhaps the main problem, apart of course from Brexit, which Conservatives need to resolve.

Still, despite all the changes, there are unchanging themes in Conservatism, linking the party today with its founders in the 19th century. Indeed, the sort of person who is likely to vote Conservative today is probably the same sort of person who would have voted for the party in the 19th and 20th centuries. What, then, is Conservatism about? Let us go back again to Disraeli.

`The Tory party', he declared in 1872, `unless it is a national party, is nothing'. He meant three things by that. The first was that it must seek to represent all parts of society, not just a particular class. `It is', he said `a party formed from all the numerous classes in the realm – classes alike and equal before the law, but whose different conditions and differing aims give vigour and variety to our national life'. It is because the Conservatives have always seen themselves as the party of the nation, that they have always been so uneasy with the commitment to Europe. Secondly, he saw the party as a party of the United Kingdom as a whole, a Unionist party. For this reason the Conservatives always resisted attempts by Home Rulers or nationalists, whether from Ireland or Scotland, to disintegrate the kingdom; just as they resist what many see as the attempt by the European Union to undermine the nation. Finally, the Conservatives see themselves as the party which stands up for Britain in the

international arena. A Conservative tends to the belief that, on the whole, Britain is more likely to be in the right in international affairs than in the wrong.

In domestic policy, a Conservative believes in the importance of private property, as a means to personal independence and as creating a counterweight to the power of government. A Conservative is inclined to distrust government, and is suspicious of too much active government. A Conservative tends to distrust theories of government, believing that experience and practical wisdom are far more important in running affairs than political doctrines. An ounce of practice, a Conservative will believe, is worth more than a ton of theory.

There is, therefore, a considerable degree of continuity in Conservative beliefs – or perhaps I should say instincts. A Conservative today believes in the same sorts of things as his ancestors did in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Whether these instincts and beliefs are sound or not, I leave to you to decide.