

## Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain

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**Reviewer:**

Amy Whipple

It would be all too easy to cast aside Camilla Schofield's book, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, with an assumption that there is little new to say on the subject. The Conservative MP for Wolverhampton and his infamous 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech have long served, after all, as a potent symbol of post-colonial Britain: the moment at which popular prejudices and fears regarding immigration from former colonies to the British metropole exploded on the national stage.

Schofield pushes well beyond the obvious and the accepted, however, and situates 1968 in a broad but nuanced portrait of Powell's ideological development. Identifying his formative years as those spent in various locales of empire – Australia, North Africa, and India – she argues that Powell developed in his late 20s and early 30s a thoroughly Tory vision of Britain and the world, which he then sought to defend and preserve as global politics and Western society changed around him in the postwar period. In this regard, Schofield urges her readers to understand Powell *generationally*: a man born at a particular moment of time, into a particular set of beliefs and values about the social and political order, who then needed to confront and react to seismic shifts in national and international affairs. From this angle, Powell becomes more than the figure who voiced and thereby legitimized racist sentiment in 1960s Britain. He emerges as both member and spokesman for a segment of an inter-war generation that witnessed the unmooring of its nation from imperial strength and certainty. Powell addressed its fears and frustrations by posing a new conservatism, one which claimed to jettison the imperial past once and for all and instead refocused allegiance on the historical community of Britain itself.

A belief in hierarchy, Schofield emphasizes, was at the core of Powell's Toryism. Born into a lower-middle-class family, Powell was particularly attuned to the way in which specific historical institutions, such as university and then the army, created hierarchy, and thereby order, in British society at home and abroad. Race was every bit as central as class to Powell's conception of hierarchy, evidenced by his enthusiasm for imperial power in India, where he served from 1943 to 1946. Countering characterizations of Powell as a liberal committed to the eventual independence of Indians, Schofield notes his refusal to acknowledge either the ability of Indians to articulate a national community of their own or the reality of anti-colonial sentiment. Becoming a researcher for the Conservative Party after the war, Powell remained so committed to 'the unique and necessary role of the Englishman in India' that, when predicting widespread violence in the wake of independence, he recommended martial law as the means by which Britain could reassert authority over the subcontinent (p. 70).

While it is commonplace to note this wartime service in India as securing Powell's devotion to the British Raj, Schofield identifies his preceding stint in North Africa from 1941 to 1943 as an equally significant element of his 'imperial' war and his ideological development. Working amidst Americans, Powell became deeply apprehensive of United States power – specifically, the harsh duality of American foreign policy, casting countries as either free/unfree and American/anti-American. The British Empire did not fare well from this perspective, and Powell was shocked by the openness with which Americans spoke of seeking its end. The United States, he stated in 1943, would be Britain's next 'enemy'.

In this sense, it was not simply the altered geopolitical landscape that frustrated Powell in the decade following the war; it was also the domestic and international discourses that emerged to explain and govern that landscape. Labour's recasting of Britain's moral leadership to colonies and dominions via 'welfare, development and multiracial partnership' (p. 80) was a far cry from the blunt hierarchical authority Britain had asserted in the Raj. Moreover, Powell did not believe that any sort of unity in purpose existed across the Empire and Commonwealth to sustain this supposed partnership, and he became critical of the imperial project as a whole. The idea that Britain could simply plant its political ideals and system elsewhere was false: Parliament was 'the historical *embodiment* of British history and national values' (p. 90). He was no less disenchanted by the international discourse of human rights that took hold in the wake of the Second World War. He rejected 'human rights' as a mere abstraction, lacking the meaning and substance of rights developed within a national community over time. Accordingly, he was wary that initiatives to promote and defend human rights would challenge the sovereignty of nation-states.

By tracing Powell's responses to these discourses, Schofield also casts fresh eyes on one of his most memorable Parliamentary moments: his powerful denunciation of the beating of 11 Kenyans to death at the Hola Camp in 1959. Some have used the speech to challenge, labeling Powell as a racist, but Schofield convincingly argues that the speech was not really about the victims at all. Powell neither made an 'appeal to any universal principle of decency or justice' nor any indication 'of general opposition to state-led violence against colonial disorder' (pp. 127, 130). Indeed, just one year later, Powell would criticize the United States' condemnation of police violence against pass law protesters in Sharpeville, South Africa as an inappropriate interference in another state's affairs. Powell was instead concerned with denouncing the Hola episode as an abnegation of British political responsibility; Kenya remained a British colony, and the episode betrayed the standards of British rule. Ironically, then, Powell was able to praise Britain and its 'civilized' traditions by portraying the massacre as a shameful moment. 'Rather than a picture of decolonization as the British guard ordering the beating to death of a starving Kikuyu man', Schofield perceptively concludes:

Powell's speech offered a picture instead of moral outrage and moral rectitude back in London which asserted a divide between Britain's 'civilized way of life' and the actions of white and black Africans (p. 134).

With reference to other scholarship, Schofield notes that Powell's speech also made leaders in his party cognizant of the ongoing political liabilities in the remaining colonies. The Hola Camp murders would not, in other words, be the last incident to transgress the supposed standards of British rule. But even as Macmillan subsequently encouraged the 'Wind of Change,' Powell pushed further than his Conservative colleagues to end definitively any sense of British authority or responsibility in former colonies. The Commonwealth was meaningless: Britain had not produced nation-states which mirrored her own political traditions and practices, and they would not be looking respectfully and loyally to her for guidance.

Schofield is not, of course, the first to highlight Powell's critique of the Commonwealth, but she does again offer new insight by explicitly connecting his stance on foreign policy in the 1960s to his developing domestic agenda. As he cast aside the Commonwealth as a delusional grasp at continued global significance, she argues, Powell simultaneously sought to construct a 'new patriotism' that turned inward to celebrate British national identity and, in particular, its 'entrepreneurial spirit'. The free market was central to his vision, and he criticized economic planning as just as much a sign of governmental delusion as the Commonwealth. Powell accepted some social welfare as standing respectably within the tradition of Tory paternalism, but he rejected faith in economic policy as a way to produce a better, more equal society. Humanity was imperfect, and inequality was natural; no economic policy could change those basic realities. He therefore posited the free market as an ideologically-free community, shaped only by national tradition and custom, which allowed an organic social hierarchy to exist. Moreover, morality was rightly understood as an arena of individual choice and behavior in this community, and the government could make no claims to pursue moral action itself via progressive social and economic policy.

Schofield demonstrates that Commonwealth immigration and, more pointedly, race relations legislation antagonized Powell in the 1960s because it perpetuated both the delusion of a meaningful post-colonial community and the delusion that government should, much less could, regulate the moral behavior of its citizens. In this regard, Powell saw the whole postwar consensus falling apart: the ruling elite no longer acknowledged the limits of Tory paternalism and was responding to demands that were beyond its ambit of power. The state thereby became the enemy for Powell, and he contributed to a new narrative of recent history in which the 'People's War' was retold, not as a resolution of the class war of the interwar years, but as an assertion of self-reliance – "the people" against the liberal state' (p. 210). According to this narrative, the wartime sacrifices of the British people had been for naught: after fighting valiantly against foreign enemies, they were now being attacked by their own government. It was not a story, Schofield notes, that struck a chord among very many when Powell discussed economic policy alone, but it appealed to many more when deployed as an excoriation of the governing elite's support for racial and cultural diversity. With substantive use of the correspondence Powell famously received in the wake of the Birmingham speech, she demonstrates the ways in which many supporters echoed this narrative. Many referred to familial sacrifice and loss borne during the war as a way to express frustration with a governing elite that did not represent their interests anymore. They were angry at immigrants, Schofield observes, but also angry at the elites who were now asking them to cede the very homes and communities they had fought to protect in the war. Immigrants did not, in other words, just represent the colonial past to Powell's supporters; they represented the perceived failure of the governing elite to rule on behalf of the people, as promised by the post-war consensus.

As his stance on immigration and race relations legislation sidelined him in the Conservative Party, and as the threat of student protests led to cancellations of his speaking engagements at universities, Powell became increasingly obsessed with the political protests of the 1960s and 1970s as a threat to national authority and order. Ultimately, he perceived the 'politics of protest' – be it the student movement, Black Power, or the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland – as a perversion of the appropriate relationship between the state and the individual. The 'modern, liberal state' had produced a generation that believed the government was its 'servant'; individual wants and needs were now demanded as rights (p. 275). Schofield observes how those making or supporting such demands – students, left-wing clergy, the media, political elites – coalesced into one monolithic 'enemy' for Powell by 1970. This enemy was threatening national authority and order, and he identified 'race' as one of its primary weapons. While this enemy demanded racial equality and

envisioned racial harmony, Powell himself saw race as ‘itself carrying the seed of disorder,’ with ‘ethnic communities’ serving ‘as the corrosive agent which broke down the old forms of social life’ (p. 287). The ‘new patriotism’ of which Powell had dreamed was not, from his view, compatible with Commonwealth immigrant communities. They would never be British; they could never share in the common heritage and traditions that provided the foundation of the nation’s unique social order and political authority.

Schofield identifies Powell as a key figure in shaping the right-wing political discourse of the late 1970s and 1980s, but she is also careful to distinguish between Powellism and Thatcherism. Powell did contribute, she argues, to helping the public make sense of the social ‘crisis’ of the 1960s and 1970s in new ways that challenged the existing political order and shifted the language of class politics to a more populist rhetoric. Thatcher drew on these changes, but she also diverged from Powell in that her emphasis on the free market reflected the political moralism of the post-war world that he so completely rejected. Classical economic liberalism was, Schofield argues, a moral crusade for Thatcher: a means by which the government could make Britons better, more virtuous citizens.

This is an engaging, thought-provoking book – but also a dense one that will not be easily digested by a reader unfamiliar with Powell’s full career. Schofield is to be commended for bringing a fresh approach to a subject often associated with a single event. Her account of Powell situates him firmly in the international and domestic matters of the post-war period as a whole and demonstrates the ways in which he came to articulate the fears and anxieties of those equally disturbed by a changing nation and world.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

#### **Other reviews:**

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