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Conservative Governments, Morality and Social Change in Affluent Britain, 1957-64

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In July 2004 Tony Blair attacked the 'liberal consensus' of the 1960s, claiming that it had helped to undermine respect for law and order in Britain. It was hardly the first time that Blair had borrowed an argument from the right wing of the Conservative Party, but this speech set new standards of audacity. It was the last piece of patchwork in Blair's blanket condemnation of 'Old Labour', implying that the party had achieved nothing of note between 1951 and 1997. There was a personal aspect, too; clearly Blair had not been deterred by the prospect that his speech would be interpreted as an onslaught on the legacy of Lord Jenkins, his recently deceased mentor and friend whose name is invariably associated with social reform in the 1960s.

Blair has never been a stickler for historical detail, and would probably have clung to his thesis even if Mark Jarvis's book had been available in July 2004. However, anyone who really wants to understand the relationship between politics and social change in contemporary Britain will profit from this well-written and perceptive study. Not the least of its virtues, indeed, is the extent to which the book subverts the artificial distinction between social and political history. The author acknowledges the work of other scholars in this field, notably Martin Francis and Andrew Holden; but a book-length study of a relatively short period is a new departure, which opens fresh perspectives on what remains a controversial topic. Using unexploited archival material, Jarvis demonstrates that Labour was not alone in promoting the 'permissive revolution', and that the chief responsibility should be shared between Jenkins and R. A. Butler. Indeed, his findings suggest that the attempt to identify permissiveness with specific individuals or parties has been misconceived. He shows that, for the most part, politicians were merely responding to perceived social

developments, rather than trying to generate changes in society. On this view, the 'liberal consensus' was the product of post-war affluence, to which politicians of all parties were forced to adapt.

For the Conservative Party between 1957 and 1964, evidence of a general improvement in living standards was distinctly double-edged. On the one hand, it could be cited in support of Conservative economic policies. The party could claim that Britain had benefited from the removal of socialist controls, and that a change of government would put these gains in serious jeopardy. At the same time, though, many Conservatives were disturbed by the thought that traditional moral standards were being eroded by the swelling tide of prosperity. Crime was increasing fast in the late 1950s, and 'juvenile delinquency' was a headline-grabbing headache for the party leadership. If affluence was breeding lawlessness, the Conservatives were faced with the prospect that one half of their electoral strategy would undermine the other; they could only retain their popularity as guarantors of economic progress at the expense of their reputation as custodians of social stability.

Despite the relative brevity of his book, Jarvis discusses a wide range of themes, including gambling, drinking and pirate radio as well as crime and sexual issues, and provides a persuasive account of the varying responses to social change. Some senior figures within the Conservative Party were clearly divided on ideological grounds, between those who wished to accommodate new trends and others who hoped to resist them. By contrast, the evidence on this subject provides new insights into Harold Macmillan's habitual opportunism. In June 1959, for example, he suggested to the government's Steering Committee that a programme of social reform should be presented as a recognition by the Conservative Party that individuals were capable of making decisions for themselves: 'like children growing up we can all now be trusted to do more of what is right.' It was this approach which had allowed Macmillan to introduce premium bonds during his earlier spell at the Treasury, while Labour had denounced them as another form of gambling. However, Macmillan was still frightened that the grown-up children might make the wrong choices at election-time if reform on sensitive issues was badly timed. Thus in 1961 he argued against proceeding with a Bill to change the law on suicide, even though the existing legislation was indefensible in the contemporary context. Even more cynical was the party's treatment of commercial television, which it had introduced in 1954. While Conservatives railed against the effects of other media output (particularly pornography), its reliance on vested interests meant that it refused to countenance any evidence that independent broadcasting was undermining traditional moral standards.

On the most charitable view, Macmillan's attitude to social reform could be described as 'pragmatic'. But Rab Butler genuinely believed that there should be a relaxation in laws which he once described as 'Victorian corsetry'. Whatever one thinks of the permissive period, the principled nature of Butler's stand deserves wider recognition; after all, it did him no good at the time, bringing him into regular conflict with Macmillan and causing serious difficulties during his annual speeches to the Conservative conference. As Jarvis shows, Butler was heavily influenced by the liberalising arguments of the Bow Group² in keeping with his habitual desire to monitor the thinking of younger people. While his own reform agenda was relatively limited, the long-term effect of his five-year tenure of the Home Office (1957-62) should not be underestimated. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the outlook of the department was transformed in that time, so that the Home Office became willing to recognise social change rather than trying to repress its symptoms. His two immediate successors (Henry Brooke and Labour's Frank Soskice) were far less innovative, but they failed to shake the new ethos. Although Roy Jenkins felt it necessary to restructure the Home Office when he arrived in December 1965, he would have encountered more institutional obstruction if Butler had never held the post.

When the Conservatives were beaten in the 1964 general election, Butler was entitled to feel vindicated. Indeed, he might have felt that he had not gone far enough, since a key factor in his party's defeat was the sense that Conservatives were out of touch with modern Britain. This impression, however, was most effectively symbolised by Alec Home, who had become prime minister in 1963 largely because Macmillan was determined to block Butler. But Macmillan himself had seemed hopelessly adrift from modernity during the Profumo scandal, which seriously damaged his project of moulding a changing electorate into a lasting vehicle for Conservative victories.

From this perspective, Jarvis's book gives rise to interesting speculations about the likely course of events if Butler, rather than Macmillan, had taken the leadership in 1957. While Butler himself was hardly at the cutting edge of sixties society, he would surely have been better equipped to handle the Profumo affair than Macmillan proved to be. Equally, though, it can be argued that the Conservative Party would still have faced serious dilemmas on social issues. One might even say that it owes its survival as a serious electoral force to the fact that none of its post-war leaders have paid serious attention to the underlying causes of social change in Britain. Thanks to their historical blind spots, Mrs Thatcher and John Major were able to portray the Conservative Britain of 1951-64 as a place of social harmony; for them, as for Blair, sin had been invented when Labour returned to office. In opposition since 1997, the Conservatives have finally been forced to re-examine the complex relationship between economic and social freedom. But their ageing membership still acts as an effective obstacle to clear thinking of these crucial issues. Thus Jarvis's book has significant contemporary resonance, as well as marking a valuable contribution to historical scholarship.

The author would like to thank Dr Garnett for his review; at present, he has no further comments.

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