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The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914; Trade and the Empire

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Alan O'Day

This is a very welcome paperback edition of Euan Green's monograph originally published in 1995. The enviable task confronting the author is to write a further book of a similar quality; expectations are certain to be high for *The Crisis of Conservatism* is not simply an outstanding account but to use an overworked word, a seminal book. In a well-written, clearly organised text he examines the context of British Conservatism from the 1880s to 1914 and then in perceptive concluding remarks compares its position to that of the European Right during the same period. Green argues that British Conservatism was beset by the paradigm of adapting to fundamental changes in the economy when it was also adjusting to the demands of democracy. Political enfranchisement necessitated programmes, slogans and appeals to the mass audience. He describes the process succinctly, demonstrating that mainstream Conservatives responded rationally, if not very successfully, to their predicament. Within this context he assesses several interrelated questions, notably Conservative attitudes to class, to imperialism, to economics, to ownership of property and to the rise of socialism. His comments on the key role of tariff reform are integral to the case as well as being original and persuasive. Green suggests that tariff reform in particular offered a coherent answer to Conservatives need to devise new strategies in the face of the economic crisis. Above all he demonstrates that Conservatism possessed a vision, an ideology, to deal with the threat of Britain's economic and international decline. For him Tories did not simply react *ad hoc*, devising pragmatic solutions for immediate circumstances but took a hard-headed look at the situation. In this sense he does for Conservatives what H. V. Emy, Michael Freedon, Colin Matthew and his mentor Peter Clarke did for the Liberals though Green's work now is an incremental step above these earlier works. It is a nice reminder that the standard of modern scholarship continues to advance. Some of his ideas have been in the academic

arena through academic articles but the published book brings these into a coherent package. His concluding chapter draws the various threads of the study together.

Green usefully observes that biographies of leading political figures of the period, especially of Conservatives leaders, significantly exceed monographs about the party and institutions. In his opinion this has distorted and obscured understanding of Conservative ideology. Also, he notes that the approach tends to leave the reputation of Arthur Balfour tarnished, especially when his leadership is compared to that of Lord Salisbury and Andrew Bonar Law. Green proceeds to a major and generally convincingly rehabilitation of Balfour's performance. Pertinently, he queries whether the poor record of the Edwardian party can be laid at Balfour's door, concluding that his problems as leader were the outcome of circumstances beyond his control. Comparisons with Salisbury and Law, Green maintains, are misconstrued. According to him, Balfour continued to implement Salisbury's successful techniques of party management and policy with skilful panache but they simply no longer worked for him as they had for his uncle, mainly, it seems, because the tensions with Conservatism had increased to breaking point. As Green asserts in defence of Balfour, the Liberals were no longer the fissiparous grouping that Salisbury confronted between 1886 and 1902 when he resigned. Salisbury, he points out, avoided problems, leaving to his nephew a legacy of postponed questions along with an electoral strategy based on containing a divided and ineffectual opposition. Balfour's decision to resign in December 1905 rather than call an election is defended on the grounds that there was amply reason to believe, as the party leader did, that if the Liberals were obliged to take office, they would swiftly quarrel and splinter. In fact, this proved incorrect but the decision was, as Green contends, made from sound motives. He concludes that neither Balfour's nor the party's problems were the consequence of poor leadership. His successor Bonar Law made little headway before 1914 in resolving the party's dilemmas. According to Green, the party was running scared over the land campaign, divided over social reform, tariffs and split on how to deal with Ireland. It was, he points out, one of the rare times in the past century when the Conservatives were opposed by a dynamic, well-led, thoroughly organised cohesive opposition. 'Rather than speaking of the failures of Conservatism in the Edwardian period it is perhaps more accurate to speak of the success of Liberalism, the Progressive Alliance and Irish nationalism'. (p. 310)

Green's spirited championship of Balfour and the Tory party is commendable if a touch exaggerated. He himself recognises that there were many contemporary Conservative critics of Balfour's leadership and that his resignation in 1911 was greeted by nearly universal relief from mainstream Tories. He may also underestimate the achievements of Salisbury and Law. This analysis raises a point examined more completely below, that the party was running scared. In fact, the electoral position was recovered in the two general elections of 1910; Liberals found themselves mortgaged to the Irish party or to cite J. L. Garvin's memorable depiction of John Redmond, the 'dollar dictator'. Liberals were far from united on how to reform the House of Lords; they were yet more seriously divided over Lloyd George's land campaign; and, if Conservatives were of several minds on Ireland, Liberals were on the verge of open internal warfare over the issue. Green's thesis for all its attractiveness necessarily under-plays the Conservative strategy of forcing a general election or at least a referendum on Ulster, which both its leaders and the Liberals, believed they would win and thereby bring the Asquith government down.

But the heart of Green's analysis is in his delineation of Conservative ideology. As he points out, the Conservatives are usually treated as a non-ideological party. Green deftly overturns the commonly held notion that, 'conservatism is not a political system, and certainly not an ideology' (p. 311) In contrast Green insists that treating Conservatives as lacking an ideology is 'radically fallacious'. (p. 312) He rightly observes that 'Conservatives always possess a clearly definable frame of reference which informs their vision of and response to issues and events. Without such a frame of reference there would be nothing to indicate what made their views, arguments and activities *Conservative*'. (p. 312) Sensibly, he comments that there was no a single uniformly accepted view held by Conservatives in the Edwardian era but that disputes were about the direction policies took. In his opinion the difference in the years immediately preceding 1914 was the intensity of the debate, a factor that threatened to fracture the party. The radical Conservative strategy stressed the organic structure of society, sought to prevent social conflict thereby

safeguarding existing social relations, refused to countenance abstract social and economic reasoning, and was committed to the preservation of property and Empire. (pp. 314-15) A key element in the debate has been the role of the state. With these principles in tact Green lucidly shows how adherents of a paternalist and libertarian view of the state though differing on particulars essentially have worked within the same agenda, parting company on its implementation more than over ideology. It is in this framework that Green places discussion of tariff reform, increasingly the touchstone issue in Edwardian Conservatism. His analysis is surely a *tour de force*.

Tariff reform has been treated many times and in illuminating ways. Green, however, considers it in a fresh and important light. He observes that the debate over it has immense significance for the social history and transformation of Conservative politics, at the same time accepting that there is a link between this movement and the *embourgeoisement* of the party. After pointing out that tariff reform can not be treated in an instrumentalist or determinist fashion, Green notes that this was not an industrial-urban policy or an imperial motivated panacea but part of a broader picture. He also outlines how the proposal and the debate on it shifted between 1903 and 1910. As he puts it, the tariff campaign was part of a fractured contribution to the wider discussion about British economic and social development, an attempt to grasp the problems facing the country. Though the decision to abandon food taxes in 1910 was, in his opinion, a step away from the historic association of the party with the agricultural interest, it did not spell conversion to an urban focus. The party may have re-oriented itself towards the towns but as yet there was uncertainty about which sector of the urban community was the new target audience. His comments on why the Tories failed to convert this analysis into an electorally appealing programme merits close attention.

In a final insightful section Green sets British Conservatism, particularly radical Conservatism, along side its Continental counter-parts. He cautions against facile comparisons, reminding readers that differences of experience and context are as important as similarities. Nevertheless, he locates useful parallels. Two problems were at the forefront. Green comments that one issue was whether organisations and structures created for elite politics could be adapted to mass democracy; second, whether these institutions could survive the onslaught of socialism. He sees the two questions as forming the crux of *vertical integration* - whether an effective top down appeal could be shaped that would secure mass acquiescence for existing power relationships. The crisis was that the economic slide in the late nineteenth century pitted separate groups of property holders against one another in the quest for state support. This competition constituted *horizontal integration*, that is construction of an appeal that could pull together the middle and upper echelons of society. In Green's analysis the situation giving rise to these two types of integration was at the heart of the crisis of Conservatism across Europe. In response Conservatives posited a number of common responses - imperialism, tariffs and nationalism. However, each contained the defect of generating tensions within Conservatism. According to Green, European Conservatism between 1870 and 1914 was an increasingly unhappy conglomeration. This problem was highlighted by dissension over how to come to terms with the new mass democratic communities. Tariff reform in Britain appealed especially to groups searching for a bridge to make the transition but it was no more successful than approaches tested out elsewhere.

Green provides a lucid, compelling and largely persuasive analysis which gives to British Conservatism a sustaining ideology while explaining its apparent limitations. It was not composed of a collection of 'die-hards' insistent upon retaining their privileged position as epitomised by the struggle over the House of Lords or ready to contenance violence as in the Ulster crisis. Conservatives were a diverse constituency, with the greater part actively seeking to resolve the dilemma of where a centre-right political movement fit into the future of a democratic Britain plagued by severe economic competition. Imperialism and tariff reform offered partial answers but these, as Green carefully outlines, created as many problems as they promised to solve.

This is a truly impressive synthesis but should it be endorsed unequivocally? Certainly not without some caveats. It is not obvious that the institutional, structural and economic changes which in Green's estimation afflicted Conservatism impinged no less on British Liberals. He might be accused of something like tunnel vision. In fact, it might be argued more convincingly that Liberals in the late Victorian years underwent far

more trauma over them than did Conservatives. The issues of denominational education and free trade, surely old Liberalism, rather than an adoption of collectivism, underpinned the party's revival after 1903 but they did not answer the crucial questions faced by British society any more confidently than did Conservative responses. This did not auger greater adaptive powers on the part of Liberalism but precisely the reverse. Though the Conservatives lost three general elections on the trot, the two contests in 1910 saw the party fortunes revive and the Irish Nationalist representation, exaggerated in relation to population by not less than thirty seats, distorted the arithmetic of the House of Commons. In fact, the first past the post electoral system inflated the pan-Liberal numbers just as it had the obverse effect in the 1980s. Conservatives expected to win a general election in 1915 and were eager to force the Liberals to the polls over the Ulster question. Green's assertion that opposition to Irish Home Rule no longer united Conservatives is partially correct but the question splintered Liberals even more. If some Conservatives lost their taste for outright rejection of Home Rule with a number increasingly drawn to federalist ideas as a means to settle the problem, few entertained doubts about the justice of the Ulster Protestant cause. The by no means inconsiderable difficulty was how best to meet this claim. Dissension arose over the methods of defending the Ulster claim, not about the intrinsic legitimacy of refusing to join an all-Ireland Parliament. This portion of the Home Rule solution created far more havoc in the Liberal, Labour and Nationalist camps. The Irish or Ulster case illustrates a limitation of this finely textured study. Green is excellent in dealing with ideas and context, less assured when treating matters of party organisation, constituency affairs, electoral tactics and the mundane intrusions of personalities. It is the latter factors that previously dominated the literature; his invaluable contribution draws attention to the other side of political coin. Green's consideration of the Irish problem is perhaps the least assured portion of his case. He does not explain why it continued to occupy so central a place in Conservative politics nor how party leaders proposed to resolve it. It is over Ireland that Law's undoubted qualities for leadership came to the fore. Law was not an ordinary Conservative figure, especially where Ireland was concerned, but a determined figure who committed the party to defend Ulster Protestants in a way that Balfour would have found inconceivable. Law and Balfour held quite different views of on Ireland which deserve more careful attention. Neither man welcomed Home Rule in any guise but whereas Balfour and traditional British Unionists saw the threat very much from a southern Protestant vantage-point, Law's fundamental perspective aligned the Conservatives with the claims of northern loyalists. In Green's defence it must be said that Ireland is not his forte though more attention to it could bolster his contention that the Conservatives were an ideology party. Law and no doubt a majority of Conservatives held views that were consistent and based on a clear, if not always admirable, conception of Great Britain in which Ireland played an integral part. They may have been mistaken, as apparently they were on other topics, but Green demonstrates that to be wrong is not irrational.

In the 1970s and early 1980s many historians, particularly younger members of the profession, were seduced by so-called 'high politics' analyses in which political action was governed not by ideology and principles but the quest for personal power. This has sometimes been called 'conservative' history if only because its proponents were often supporters of the modern-day Conservative party. This approach was a reaction against an older historiography that put emphasis upon ideals and selfless action. Green is not a disciple of either school but brings to his study a hard-headed, common-sense outlook that depends of thoughtful and usually convincing analysis not gimmicky. His book, so subtle and illuminating, is a response to the 'high politics' mania though he does not descend to a critique of it. No one can be unappreciative of his emphasis upon ideology or principle as the chief element in political discourse. If the Conservatives got it wrong, they did so out of genuine concern for the future of the nation. After Green's study, they can not be put in the dock for indifference to the country's fate. He might have explored in greater depth the reasons for Conservatives failure to convince the country of their message, especially on tariff reform. It is by no means irrelevant to ask whether agricultural protection could have preserved the Union between Great Britain and Ireland. Ireland disproportionately suffered the consequences of cheap food imports. It was primarily an agricultural economy. Protectionism held the prospect of salvaging her economy, admittedly at the expense of the British working class, and tying the Irish to the Union. Curiously, few nationalists adopted this logically conclusion; it did not feature significantly in Conservative thinking either. If Green leaves some matters unresolved, he is to be congratulated on a job superbly executed. Discussion of Conservative politics, indeed, of political ideology in the late Victorian and Edwardian era must now take account of his

book. This is political history but political history with a difference; it firmly roots politics in a world of ideas contingent upon social and economic life. Green not merely makes the case for the study of political culture but impressively advances an understanding of that culture.

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