

TO WHAT ARE THE CONSERVATIVES CLINGING?

WHAT IS IT THAT THEY WISH TO CONSERVE?

'Power' is an easy response to the first question. The second question prompts thoughts about a stratified society that sustains the possessive individualism of a few at the expense of the many. The Tory trick is to persuade the peasantry who have benefited from Robin Hood to vote for the Sheriff of Nottingham. They can usually count on one quarter of the electorate supporting them. The three quarters that don't either do not turn up to vote or vote for a variety of other parties.

Compulsory voting and a form of proportional representation are not in the interests of the Tory Party. That is why during the recent referendum on changing our system of voting David Cameron campaigned so vigorously against it. History tells us that in the 1951 General Election Churchill's Tory Party beat Attlee's Labour Party. What history mentions less often is that in terms of popular vote Labour broke the record that year. Our first past the post system of voting often perverts the values of the electorate. Tony Blair was rather keen on changing the system until he won big in 1997. Rather than introducing a more democratic way of voting he preferred to take advantage of our undemocratic system.

And now

Yesterday Theresa May's speech at the Conservative Party Conference suffered a triple misfortune: a prankster, a coughing fit and behind her head while she was speaking the conference slogan began to peel off. Add to that her plagiarism of an American television series and Boris having to be told by a cabinet colleague to stand to applaud his party leader plus the failure of the Tory supporting press to control their urges to make fun of her and we have some idea of the mess our government is in. But still it clings.

Increasingly we are hearing from Tory backwoodsmen trotting out tired old phrases about the benefits of a free market economy and making a bonfire of regulations. Grenfell Tower clearly did not impinge on them. When Boris declared that Brexit was the opportunity for the British Lion to roar he seems to have forgotten Peter Sellers' film, *The Mouse that Roared*: much more appropriate.

I despair at the political illiteracy of people in the Labour Party: those Blairites that have never understood that politics is about the inclusive discussion of and consensual arrival at public values. It is not about the marketing of shiny policies in exchange for votes. It really is about participation. Right-wingers reduce participation. Left-wingers increase it. Too many people in the Labour Party misunderstand both of those labels.

But the Tory Party plumbs the depths. It has partly discarded its aristocratic assumption that it was born to rule and that the people should 'know their place'. In

return for good behaviour those people would be looked after. Jacob Rees-Mogg is thought to be a throwback to that era but really he is imitation.

It was the accession of Margaret Thatcher as leader of the party in 1975 that began a shift in its values. In 2002, in her conference speech as chair of the party, Theresa May used the phrase 'nasty party'. It very accurately described the effect of Thatcher's leadership, especially after she got rid of her 'wets'. There is no hiding its belief in greed although during the conference a ludicrous attempt was made to claim that it is the Conservatives we must thank for the NHS. In fact they consistently voted against its creation. The average age of a Tory Party member has gone up from seventy-one to seventy-two and clearly the party's collective memory is now dodgy.

Wearing a bangle designed by a supporter of Trotsky demonstrated no wit or sense of irony on the part of Theresa May. It was just a sign of ignorance. My old prof, Fred Ridley, used to say that it was easy to be right wing because all you needed was to combine ignorance with prejudice (my paraphrase) but it was hard to be on the left because you had to read lots of books with big words in them. Fred was being light-hearted but the picture is a strong one. I really do think that today's Tories are ignorant and lacking social empathy.

When Norman Tebbit came to Liverpool he told Bishop Shepherd and Archbishop Warlock of his passion for what Thatcher's government was doing. They suggested that he try compassion.

Cliff Jones 5th October 2017