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CONSERVATISM

By LORD HUGH CECIL, M.A., M.P.

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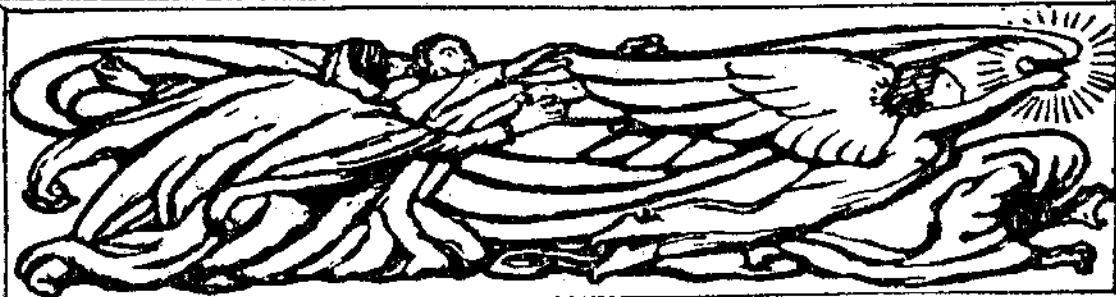
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CONSERVATISM

PART I

PRELIMINARY

It is difficult to determine the extent and limitations of the subject of this book. Considered as the creed of the political party which is known by the name of Conservative, it may be made to cover all topics of political interest or partisan controversy. And these topics might be discussed with any degree of particularity, so as to extend this small volume far beyond its prescribed limits and to turn it into the likeness of an encyclopædia. Yet in escaping from this danger, political matters even of a controversial character must not be avoided if anything like a sufficient sketch of modern Conservatism is to be given. The reader must therefore be indulgent if, in the effort to reach the right mean between a vague and abstract philosophic treatise and the contentious particularity more proper to a newspaper, the book

sometimes seems too indefinite and sometimes too partisan and often lacks proportion.

A small additional difficulty must also be noted. Conservatism may be understood in two senses. It may mean the tenets of the Conservative Party, or it may mean a natural disposition in the human mind not by any means confined to those persons who vote on the Conservative side in party politics. To diminish the confusion that arises from this ambiguity I have endeavoured, when the word is used in the second sense, as what may be called pure or natural conservatism, to write it without a capital letter. When it is used in the more particular sense as the faith of the Conservative Party, it is written Conservatism.

The Conservatism of the Conservative Party, modern Conservatism, as we may say, is of course largely recruited from and dependent on the natural conservatism that is found in almost every human mind. It will be proper, therefore, to begin with some discussion of that pure or natural conservatism.

CHAPTER I

CONSERVATISM IN GENERAL

NATURAL conservatism is a tendency of the human mind. It is a disposition averse from change; and it springs partly from a distrust of the unknown and a corresponding reliance on experience rather than on theoretic reasoning; partly from a faculty in men to adapt themselves to their surroundings so that what is familiar merely because of its familiarity becomes more acceptable or more tolerable than what is unfamiliar. Distrust of the unknown, and preference for experience over theory, are deeply seated in almost all minds and are expressed in often quoted proverbs: "Look before you leap," "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," "An ounce of fact is worth a pound of theory,"—these are sayings that express a well-nigh universal conservative sentiment. Novelties, at the first sight, are regarded as new-fangled and either futile or dangerous by the great majority of men. They frighten and irritate, they fatigue and perplex those who for the first time seek to understand them. Human

nature shrinks from them and is wearied by them. Men feel that they live in the midst of mysteries; they dwell in the world like children in a dark room. Dangers from the unseen spiritual world, dangers from the unfathomed passions of other men, dangers from the forces of nature:—these all haunt the minds of men and make them fear to change from whatever experience has proved to be at least safe and endurable. And change is not only fearful, it is tiring. As men try to perceive and judge a new plan, the effort tires and overtakes their powers. The faculties of judgment and discernment ache within them. Why depart from the known which is safe to the unknown which may be dangerous? None would be so mad as to run the risk without much search and scrutiny. And this means perplexity, effort, confusion of mind, weariness. Why not let it alone? Why be weary instead of at rest? Why rush into danger instead of staying in safety? “I was well,” says the often-quoted epitaph of an Italian tomb; “I would be better; I am here.”

To all men considerations of this kind are urgent and powerful. Not a day passes but we are swayed by them. The post arrives in the morning and brings us a prospectus of a company offering attractive terms for an investment. But we do not invest in it. We

are aware that such companies are often unsound and their offers delusive; we know little of the merits of this one, and it would cost us much trouble to look into them; we are satisfied with our existing investments. Why change? It is wiser to let it alone. Presently we take up the paper and see an advertisement of a remedy for some ailment from which we suffer. But we do not buy it. These drugs are often useless and sometimes dangerous. We know too little of medicine to judge whether this particular stuff is a genuine cure or an unwholesome quackery. We are accustomed to another remedy which is not indeed perfect, but does fairly well. Why change? It is wiser to let it alone. In the same paper we read an account of an accident to a flying machine in which the aviator has been killed. It seems a foolhardy affair to us; how can men trust themselves so recklessly among such dangers? For our part we do not mean to go flying till there shall have been a great deal more experience of these machines. We do not understand how they work or what their strength or weakness is, and we have no leisure to learn. Plainly they are dangerous at present. We will let flying alone; a motor-omnibus is fast enough for us. And so in a thousand other cases, the ordinary prudent man distrusts what he has neither

tested by his own experience, nor knows to have been tested and found satisfactory by the experience of others. He prefers what he knows, even though it be imperfect, to any untested novelty however seductive it may seem. It has been impressed upon him from the days of infancy. The nursery story of the little girl who played with the matches and was so burnt to death, is but an illustration of the wisdom of distrusting the unknown.

But while to distrust the unknown in a certain degree is a matter of the simplest prudence, such distrust may exist in so extreme a form as to bar all progress. So it has been with the Chinese. For a long time the Western world was to them only the realm of foreign devils, and the inventions of modern science only infernal arts. Engineering works in the earth might stir the wrath of dragons who dwelt there. A railway train or an electric telegraph might offend some evil spirit. The terror of the unknown, of the unknown foreigner and his ways, of the unknown spiritual world and its presumed hatred of novelties,—these fears long obstructed, and to a great extent still obstruct, even the most moderate progress in China. And what is pre-eminently true of China is in some degree true of all uncivilised peoples and of ignorant or prejudiced men even in

civilised communities. The distrust of the unknown among such men is extravagant. The dread of railways at their first introduction in England is a notorious instance. And it is one of the difficulties in the path of industrial progress that workmen will often set themselves against a new machine or tool or process of manufacture with an obstinacy that is hard to overcome. The moderate prudence of the wise man who will not too lightly trust himself beyond the teachings of experience, may be intensified to the hopeless inert timidity and apathy of the barbarian and the ignoramus. It is strictly a question of degree. Progress whether in science or in the arts of government or of social life, requires a certain readiness to go beyond experience and to try novelties. Yet if that readiness be reckless and unbridled, disaster is certain. Desire to move forward and try what is new must be harmonised with distrust of the untried and fear of the dangers that may be lurking in the unknown. Wisdom is not so anxious for progress as not to be afraid of novelty; not so afraid of novelty as to be contented without progress. The two sentiments of desire to advance and fear of the dangers of moving, apparently contradictory, are in fact complementary and mutually necessary. The restraints of conservatism

are the indispensable condition of the security and efficiency of progress in all regions of human activity from Parliament to a motor-car. In both a brake is necessary to safety. And restraint is not only essential to hinder what is foolish, but also to guide and control what is wisely intended and save movement from becoming vague, wild and mischievous. Progress depends on conservatism to make it intelligent, efficient and appropriate to circumstance. Without conservatism progress may be if not destructive at least futile. The expansiveness of steam and the explosiveness of petrol are only useful when they are boxed up. A cartridge without a gun is a futility. And it is only when a man is controlling his wish to get forward with a strong sense of the risk of entering the unknown that he is likely to make wise and effectual progress.

The second great element in natural conservatism, besides distrust of the unknown, is the preference of that to which we are accustomed because custom has actually assimilated our nature to it. Human beings are so adaptable that what they are used to is, for that reason and no other, pleasant to them. This feeling of liking for the familiar constantly co-operates with distrust of the unknown and is easily confused with it, but is really distinct. Its power is most evident in matters of personal habit; such as eating,

or furniture, or dress, or religious worship. In respect to church services you may see both elements in conservatism very plainly at work. An innovation in ritual excites distrust; it is thought Popish even when in fact it cannot be connected with Popish theology; but a change in the service is also vexatious merely because we are not used to it, because it substitutes the unfamiliar for the familiar. Every one is acquainted with the irritation caused by the singing of a familiar hymn to an unfamiliar tune. This is not caused by distrust of the unknown. We are not afraid of untried dangers in the new tune. But our ears are expecting the old one; we long for the accustomed impression, and every note of the new melody disappoints us and has almost a discordant ring. But perhaps the strongest instance of the power of familiarity is in dress. Nothing disturbs people more than unfamiliarity in their own clothes, or even in the clothes of other people. The consequence is that about matters of dress even the most progressive Western peoples are intensely conservative. We speak indeed of the rapid changes in the fashions of women's dress. But in fact these changes are within very narrow limits. Any really important change is difficult and only very slowly and gradually made. Arguments in favour of wearing a divided skirt may be

good or bad, but they are ineffectual against the iron resistance of custom. And if any lady appeared in an Indian dress or in that of a lady of ancient Rome, she would be thought to be either jesting or insane. And among men the case is even stronger. No considerations of health or beauty would suffice suddenly to change the settled customs of men's dress. Artists think the dress of the fifteenth century beautiful; Dr. Jaeger has published a description of dress designed on the principles of hygiene. But no man could appear, except for fun, dressed after the manner of the fifteenth century, or after the plan of Dr. Jaeger, without creating so general an impression of insanity as gravely to imperil his right to make a will and possibly even his personal liberty. For to persons of normal mind it would seem incredible that any sane man could overcome the sense of discomfort, mental and physical, induced by wearing an unfamiliar dress. Yet it is quite possible that the more artistic or hygienic dress would, apart from familiarity, be as comfortable as ordinary clothes. But its strangeness makes it repulsive. By power of adaptation human nature loves what it is used to and cannot suddenly depart from established custom without pain.

This love of the familiar operates, as has been said, with the greatest force in respect to

matters of intimate personal habit. But it is not without power in politics. Institutions to which a country is accustomed derive great strength merely from their familiarity. Republican government, even if acceptable on other grounds, would be disagreeable to most Englishmen because we are used to Monarchy. And some political changes directly affect the personal habits of ordinary citizens. Perhaps the most formidable obstacle in the way of universal military service is that to enforce it very many people would have to submit to interference with their usual way of life.

I have endeavoured in this chapter to consider natural conservatism as a tendency of the human mind operating generally on all sorts of interests, and not merely on politics. It is important that we should at the outset have a clear and vivid idea of conservatism in what may be called its pure form as a mental disposition, before we go on to consider it in combination with other motives as the composite political Conservatism which is the topic of this book. With the same purpose it may be well to review briefly the import of conservatism in relation to some lines of human progress other than politics.

It has already been pointed out that though conservatism seems at first sight to be the direct opposite of progress, it is an essential