



# BRITISH CONSERVATISM

THE POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY  
OF INEQUALITY

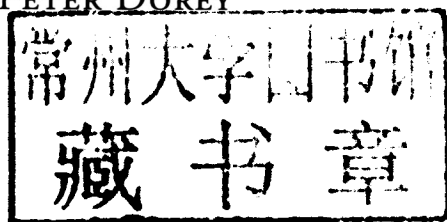
PETER DOREY

I.B. TAURIS

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of Inequality

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Needless to say, any deficiencies which remain are entirely my own, for which I accept full responsibility.

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# INTRODUCTION

In his 2005 study, Kevin Hickson noted that, among many writers who have sought to identify the key elements of Conservative philosophy, the crucial importance of inequality has often been overlooked or insufficiently emphasised (Hickson, 2005: 178). This apparent oversight might be because although the core belief in the inevitability and necessity of inequality is invariably subsumed within other aspects of Conservatism, on closer inspection, it can be seen as a connecting thread or common characteristic permeating virtually all of them. Indeed, it may be that inequality is so deeply ingrained in Conservative philosophy and politics that it is virtually taken for granted, and thus not normally deemed to warrant particular consideration; it is the other elements of Conservatism which have attracted most scholarly attention. One Conservative writer, Maurice Cowling, claimed that ‘The Conservative conception of a social structure not only assumes that marked inequalities are inevitable, but also declines to justify them because their inevitability makes justification un-necessary’, although he did concede that ‘To decline justification of the principle is not to say that there cannot be discussion of the content’ (Cowling, 1978: 11).

Occasionally, though, the Conservative belief in inequality is ascribed such importance that it is actually acknowledged to constitute the key or defining difference between Conservatism and other ideologies, most notably socialism. Thus, for example, David Willets has asserted that ‘The intellectual battleground between conservatives and socialists is over economic inequality – differences in income and wealth’ (Willets, 1992: 111). Elsewhere, Bennett, King and Nugent (1977: 9) argue that in politics generally ‘The Left is egalitarian, the Right is elitist’ and, as such, ‘We tend to find not only *anti-egalitarianism* on the Right, but also the associated ideas of hierarchy, leadership, elitism.’

Indeed, the centrality of inequality to the politics and philosophy of Conservatism is such that Hickson suggests ‘Rather than seeing the Conservative Party as being *about* statecraft’, as some academics have tended to do, ‘it would be better to see it as being marked by an underlying commitment to inequality’, with statecraft being ‘better seen as the way in which the Conservative Party has successfully pursued its ideological objectives at any one time’ (Hickson, 2005: 183–4). Elsewhere, two other academic experts on British Conservatism have suggested that:

Conservatism may be deemed the intellectual justification of inequalities in society and the preservation of the privileges that such inequalities entail ... This is the essence of the Conservative Party’s role – to formulate policy that conserves a hierarchy of wealth and power, and to make this intelligible and reasonable to a democracy.

(Norton and Aughey, 1981: 47)

Not dissimilarly, the Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton has noted how ‘Conservatives instinctively incline to the belief that resentment [of the rich by the less well-off] is appeased, not by equality, but by the “validating” of inequality’ (Scruton, 1980: 100). Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, even before she became Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher’s emphasis on maximising liberty was causing some apprehension for Peregrine Worsthorne, because he believed that what Britain really needed was greater authority, order and stability. This, he explained, derived from an urgent need

to ensure enough stability and continuity to prevent tomorrow’s aspirants to power pushing themselves upward so fast that nobody can rule in an orderly and civilised fashion. In other words, Conservatism is about resisting over-speedy renewal of the ruling class ... This is a difficult task since this involves winning popular support for inequality; establishing the fact that some people should have more influence over public affairs than others and that it is necessary to sustain an economic and social system to make this possible ... Conservatism has ... to admit the truth – that they are about satisfying the needs of the strong.

(Worsthorne, 1978: 141–3)

In similar vein, a non-Conservative academic writer has noted the extent to which Conservatism can be depicted as the ‘ideology of dominant social and political groups’ who are concerned ‘to make the existing authority

structure acceptable by representing it as a just characteristic of human existence (Eccleshall, 1977: 62, 66), while Leach observes that a key task of Conservatism has been 'to persuade the majority with little or no property to accept the existing distribution of property' (Leach, 1996: 117).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the vital importance of inequality within British Conservatism, both as a defining feature of Conservative philosophy, and also as a source of debate within the Party itself, mainly as to the degree of inequality which Conservatives ought to promote or permit. The role of inequality in Conservative philosophy, and the intellectual rationale and sources upon which Conservatives rely in justifying inequality, are delineated in Chapter 1.

The next two chapters then examine the manner in which this core belief has nonetheless underpinned debates in the Conservative Party over the degree of inequality which is permissible or necessary. Chapter 2 examines how One Nation Conservatives have been concerned to keep inequality within certain (albeit unspecified) limits, not least to facilitate social cohesion and political stability and to ensure that capitalism retains popular legitimacy among 'subordinate classes'. Chapter 3 focuses on the counter-arguments of those who we define as Conservative (economic) neo-liberals, for whom no limits are to be placed on inequalities arising from individual endeavour or corporate success, subject only to the rule of law. For Conservative neo-liberals, vast differences in incomes and concomitant disparities of wealth are not to be deprecated or viewed as problematic, but signify a healthy and vibrant market economy, and a society providing maximum individual liberty.

Of course, we are fully aware that not all Conservatives can be categorised as either 'One Nation' or 'neo-liberal'; many are what might be termed 'centrists' (see, for example, Garnett, 2005; Maude, 2005) or pragmatists, and often constitute a large proportion of the party. For example, in his study of the parliamentary Conservative Party towards the end of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, Philip Norton noted that those MPs and Ministers who could be categorised as 'the Right' constituted about 19 per cent of the party in Parliament, while 18 per cent could be classified as 'damps' or 'wets' (more or less the One Nation strand). This left 63 per cent of Conservative MPs and Ministers who were generally neither, and who were effectively 'loyalists' who would endorse whichever Conservative leader was adjudged most likely to ensure the party's electoral success (Norton, 1990). However, in intra-party debates over the degree of inequality which is deemed desirable, necessary or tolerable the main protagonists have aligned themselves primarily with one of the two 'strands' of Conservatism delineated in

chapters 2 and 3, and hence it is these two 'strands' who are the main focus of much of this study.

Chapter 4 explores the debates and developments in the Conservative Party since Margaret Thatcher's resignation in November 1990. It will be emphasised that initial expectations of a revival of One Nation Conservatism, raised when the seemingly more emollient John Major succeeded Thatcher, were not realised, for the party broadly persevered with a neo-liberal market-driven approach to politics. Only after a third successive general election defeat in 2005, followed a few months later by David Cameron's election as Conservative leader, has there been a more general acknowledgement that 'markets are not enough', whereupon a number of senior Conservatives have sought to devise a form of 'civic Conservatism'. This purports to be concerned to eradicate poverty and tackle social deprivation, both of which are acknowledged to have increased in Britain since the 1980s, but insists that solutions should be sought through promoting or reviving intermediate institutions, or what Edmund Burke termed society's 'little platoons', rather than expanding the role of government and the State.

Chapter 5 will consider why the British public has been so sanguine about the existence of considerable socio-economic inequalities, with the working class evincing little, if any, interest in socialist politics and Left-wing parties advocating equality. In this respect, we will address a crucial observation once made by Maurice Cowling (1978: 9–10), who noted that while Conservatives 'want ... the sort of freedom that will maintain existing inequalities or restore lost ones', it should not be overlooked that such freedom

is wanted not only by those who benefit from inequalities of wealth, rank and education, but also by enormous numbers of people who, while not partaking in the benefits, recognise that inequalities exist and, in some obscure sense, assume that they ought to ... it is something to which they are accustomed.

This chapter will examine particular aspects of working class and lower middle class acceptance of socio-economic inequality, as well as more general reasons why British society has often tolerated poverty and major inequalities of earnings, and thus eschewed more radical political doctrines and parties promoting equality. This of course, has been enormously advantageous to the Conservative Party, and has often enabled it to claim that its opposition to egalitarianism and socio-economic equality is widely shared by many, if not most, British people.

# HOW CONSERVATIVES EXPLAIN AND JUSTIFY INEQUALITY

As we noted in the Introduction, Conservatism can readily be understood as a philosophy which is largely concerned to offer a defence, or even advocacy, of socio-economic inequality. In so doing, it seeks simultaneously to justify the fact that a small minority enjoys far higher incomes and wealth than the majority of the population, while convincing the population that they too benefit, indirectly at least, from living in a society characterised by a highly unequal distribution of wealth, even though their own incomes might be very modest. In so doing, Conservatism is concerned to depict inequality as natural and inevitable, a fact of life which cannot be altered, and which should therefore be readily accepted, rather than viewed as a problem to be eradicated. Of course, as we will note in chapters 2 and 3, Conservatives disagree slightly over whether or not the gap between rich and poor should be subject to some kind of limit to ensure social cohesion and political stability, but regardless of such differences, all Conservatives are emphatic that inequality *per se* is both desirable and necessary.

In so doing, Conservatives readily cite a wide range of normative, historical and empirical factors by way of explaining and legitimising inequality of incomes and wealth, and thereby strongly refute the egalitarian claims of their socialist critics and adversaries. Ultimately, Conservatism seeks to convince 'the people' that equality is undesirable and unattainable, and that any attempt at creating an equal society would be doomed to fail, albeit causing immense misery and suffering in the process. Indeed, a starting point for many Conservatives is the premise that equality is incompatible with human nature itself.

### Human nature

Although all political philosophies and ideologies are predicated upon particular assumptions about 'human nature', it has been argued that 'Conservatism is more directly a theory of human nature than either liberalism or socialism' (Berry, 1983: 53). However, whereas liberalism and socialism both derive from an optimistic view of human nature – the former deeming people to be rational and capable of developing reason (or capable of behaving rationally if social or structural impediments are absent) and a capacity for peaceful self-government, and the latter assuming humans to be social or co-operative creatures, but who are made to behave selfishly, and thus corrupted, by capitalism and its intrinsic inequalities – Conservatism entails a more pessimistic or, its proponents would argue, 'realistic' view of human nature, one which eschews the liberal and socialist optimism that societies are moving (or capable of moving) ineluctably towards an improved state of affairs. As one Conservative MP explained relatively recently:

Liberals are committed to the idea that because man is essentially rational, unfettered and unrestrained, he will, for the most part, act rationally. Conservatives know that this is not so. We appreciate that man is fallen, frail and faulted ... Which is why law and authority ... are so important to Conservatives – they are all that separate us from anarchy.

(Hayes, 2005: 5–6)

Consequently, Conservatism does not share the teleological conception of societal development or human progress subscribed to by liberals and socialists. Instead, Conservatives would generally endorse Michael Oakeshott's claim that 'In political activity ... men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place *nor appointed destination*' (Oakeshott, 1967: 127, emphasis added).

If ideologies such as liberalism and socialism do believe in such a teleology, Conservatives maintain, then it is because the adherents of such ideologies have an overly optimistic or dangerously naive view of human nature. Furthermore, liberals and socialists are deemed to advance visions of how they believe society *ought* be reconstituted, thereby implying that current arrangements are somehow wrong or need to be changed. This is not to say that Conservatives completely reject the potential for societal development and improvement, but when these occur they are the natural and spontaneous consequence either of individuals voluntarily pursuing opportunities which entail new inventions or ways of creating wealth, or of

unforeseen circumstances; they are not predestined or shaped by an ideological blueprint, nor do they derive from an assumption that the status quo is inherently deficient or defective (see, for example, Boothby *et al.* 1927: 11–12; Bryant, 1929: 2). Hence the Conservative conception that social change occurs, or ought only to occur, organically and incrementally. This apparent Conservative eschewal of abstract theory in favour of pragmatic empiricism – broadly accepting what *is*, rather than what *could* or *ought* to be – and its role in defending and legitimising inequality by rejecting egalitarian doctrines, will be returned to below.

For Conservatives, inequality is ultimately rooted in human nature itself, and manifests itself in two discrete ways. First, Conservatives point to the way in which individual characteristics and qualities, such as ability, ambition, aptitude, intelligence, strength and so forth, are unevenly distributed throughout society. It is deemed axiomatic that individuals ‘are not equal in strength, cleverness, creativity, character or interest. Nor do they have equal needs or requirements’ (Allison, 1984: 77). On the contrary, David Willetts has referred to ‘the fundamental inequalities of the natural order: inequalities in looks, in intelligence, in talents ... We are not equally good singers or runners. We have different aptitudes’ (Willetts, 1992: 111). As such, Conservatives have consistently maintained that the ‘inequalities which socialists regard as accidental are the natural result of the inequalities of human nature’ (Mallock, 1898a: 372). Conservatives are therefore adamant not only that inequalities in wealth and material possessions reflect ‘a natural and just distribution determined by effort, achievement and ability’, but also, as a consequence, that ‘inequality in possessions is not to be deprecated, but to be accepted as natural, even desirable’ (Norton and Aughey, 1981: 35).

With some people innately possessing more ambition, intelligence or talent than others, for example, so will the unequal distribution of such characteristics inevitably result in an inherently unequal society: ‘Since some people have more ability and a greater opportunity to acquire property than others, there are bound to be economic and social inequalities ... because success brings inequality’ (Conservative Party, 1976: 17–18). Or as Chris Patten expressed it: ‘The unequal distribution of property is in part a result of the unequal distribution of talent among individuals, in part of the random operation of chance and in part of heredity ... human beings do not have equal abilities’, and thus ‘Conservatives do not believe that absolute equality is attainable’ (Patten, 1983: 12). Similarly, Timothy Raison emphasised that ‘absolute equality will be elusive as long as men persist in having markedly different talents and abilities’ (Raison, 1964: 38); by ‘as long as’, he evidently



meant in perpetuity. Meanwhile, Keith Joseph and Jonathan Sumption (1979: 51) observed that 'Inequality is a state of affairs which results when the aptitudes of men are allowed to manifest themselves in natural differences', while Harold Macmillan emphasised the extent to which 'Human beings, widely various in their capacity, character, talent and ambition, tend to differentiate at all times and in all places' (Macmillan, 1966: xviii).

This strong emphasis on the differing abilities and varying attributes of human beings is also a reflection of the methodological individualism which underpins much Conservative philosophy, whereby society is viewed as the manifestation or product of the millions of individuals within it, because 'individuals are prior to societies. A society of autonomous individuals is the natural condition of mankind' (Joseph and Sumption, 1979: 100). Hence Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion (although very often, only the first part is quoted) that 'there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families' (*Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987). Furthermore, this Conservative conception of human nature also constitutes a form of 'biological essentialism', where inequality is attributed, ultimately, to people's biological, physiological and mental composition: 'nature, or genetics, are extremely important in determining people's capacities' (Allison, 1984: 77). Thus, Eccleshall explains, Conservatives are convinced that inequalities are a natural consequence of differing human attributes and characteristics, and, as such, 'do not signify the exploitation of the poor by the rich: they simply mirror the immutable facts of human biology' (Eccleshall, 1984: 90).

Of course, this perspective is the exact opposite of the more materialist conception, particularly associated with Marxism, whose structuralist perspective views individuals as 'products' of their society, as 'agents' who are 'bearers of relations', and which therefore underpins the Marxist conviction that if the socio-economic structure can be changed, then so too can human conduct and relationships, thereby making equality a feasible objective. Needless to say, Conservatives totally reject such a premise as a dangerous illusion, the pursuit of which will inevitably result in tyranny and totalitarianism.

Second, Conservatives hold that individuals are motivated primarily by acquisitiveness and self-interest. It is thus deemed entirely natural that most individuals, most of the time, desire to increase *their* incomes or wealth, own property, and obtain more material possessions with which to imbue their lives with greater enjoyment or comfort: 'the desire of acquisition is still the dominant incentive of human enterprise and human labour' (Boothby *et al.*, 1927: 17). Or as Keith Joseph and Jonathan Sumption observed over