

Any colour, so long as it's left

The theory of democracy is that everyone's view is given equal weight. In practice, if no genuine alternatives are offered, the weight of each voter's view is zero. In a mediocracy, the political elite proceeds largely as it wishes, with the electorate's contribution limited to derision.

(Mediocracy: Inversions and Deceptions, p.66)

What should one do if an ideology, to which one does not subscribe, has become so dominant that one's own viewpoint ceases to receive significant representation? You could either (a) buckle under and change your views; or (b) accept you have become a minority which will be increasingly marginalised.

Or you could try pretending you have changed position, get into a position of power, then fight against the mainstream from the inside. More on this strategy in a moment.

I have often wondered why certain people claim that the British press is "right-wing". What they may mean is that much of the press has a long-standing preference for the Conservatives rather than Labour. However, if one thinks about the state of the Conservative Party, and their increasing adherence to socialist ideas, it is not clear whether the claim that the British press is right-wing makes sense.

According to Wikipedia's definition, the Right:

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE ELITES

generally regards most social inequality as the result of ineradicable natural inequalities, and sees attempts to enforce social equality as utopian or authoritarian.

Right-wing economics leans to decentralized free market economy and civil liberties, whereas left-wing leans to centralized control.

Let us assume that *The Times* represents, roughly, the centre of the British broadsheet spectrum. If the British press as a whole is biased in favour of the Right, we should expect to see right-wing views expressed in this paper.

In 2008 I could not recall seeing more than perhaps one or two articles in *The Times* over the preceding few years which argued that we should move in any of the directions indicated by the above definition, i.e. that we should:

- worry less about social inequality on the grounds that it is “ineradicable” or “natural”; or
- regard interventions to reduce inequality as authoritarian; or
- have freer markets; or
- increase civil liberties (as opposed to allowing them to be dismantled, for the sake of improving ‘security’).

Nor could I recall a member of the then Shadow Conservative cabinet making any of these arguments.

On the contrary, both *The Times* and Conservative politicians more often seemed to be making the opposite case.

By late 2008, the list of statements made by Tories which sounded like coming from the mouths of New Labour had become very long, and it could no longer be doubted that the Conservatives had carried rebranding close to the point of

THE 'RIGHT'

ideological inversion. The only question which remained was whether this was genuine, or simply a way of gaining power in the face of a 'liberal' hegemony, under which it had become impossible to advance the traditional Conservative arguments.

Here are some representative quotes from 2008, from members of the then Shadow Cabinet.

Michael Gove:⁴⁶

[Mr Gove will say today that] the Tories would invest in an enhanced universal health visitor service to offer advice on childcare and provide other services during the first months of a child's life. "It's because we want to nudge those who would benefit towards the services that Surestart provides that we're prepared to invest in an enhanced universal health visitor service [...] the government has an active role to play in delivering social objectives."

Oliver Letwin:⁴⁷

"Conservatives are leading the way on low pay [...] Conservatives have adopted the aspiration to end child poverty [...] A green paper on schools proposes policies to deliver root-and-branch improvement in education for the most disadvantaged [...] change is essential if we are to bring the least advantaged into line with the rest of us [...] It is one of the ironies of the political scene that the leading advocates of radical change to achieve progressive goals are now to be found in the Conservative Party."

David Willetts:⁴⁸

"Government can help society to pick between the many competing [social] equilibria which may be available [...]"

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE ELITES

If it wishes to shift on to new equilibria, it has some tools for creating new equilibria.

[Some argue] that you cannot legislate to change morality. But who can deny that precisely such a transformation has taken place?

The Government [...] must break down co-operation which it does not think is good.”

Andrew Lansley:⁴⁹

“It will become normal to be obese if we do not act now [...] what we really need is action – not gimmicks or one-off initiatives, but a sustained plan [...] The plan must start with nutrition in pregnancy and early years [...] My colleague in the European Parliament, John Bowis, earlier this year led a parliamentary initiative to ban synthetic trans fats in Europe.”

Some might argue that it is not the job of a political party to defend an ideology; its job is to try to win an election. But is that a good line of reasoning? Let us assume for a moment that the Conservative Party could not win an election without converting to a soft version of leftism. Nevertheless, should it do so?

The arguments against such a policy are (a) it is short-termist, since it permanently undermines the Conservative brand; (b) it contributes to the deterioration of genuine political balance; (c) it reinforces the leftist cultural bias, because it signals to observers that conservatism has now become so unacceptable that even its own party disowns it. As one senior member of Mr Cameron’s team said at the time, “We may win power, but for what purpose?”

Any colour you like – II

In 2008 the *Financial Times* carried an analysis⁵⁰ of the post-Blair ideological landscape, in which it got close to some of the key issues. Its argument that both main parties were trying to grab “the centre” was revealing. “The centre” was apparently an area where one is committed to very high levels of intervention – above and beyond minimum welfare, education and medicine.

“The centre” seemed to mean such things as: monitoring of families by the state; compulsory parental training; extension of compulsory education; and various interventions to bring about greater equality of outcome.

Some dubious analysis from Anthony Browne of think tank Policy Exchange was quoted in the article.

Anthony Browne [...] agrees that Mr Blair’s decade in power convinced many in British politics – including an initially sceptical Mr Brown – that the state was not always the best answer.

“It was as if the Labour party needed to go through this massive expansion of public spending to educate the Labour party it wasn’t just about spending.”

If this meant what it seemed to mean – that key people in Westminster thought that Blairism had taught us that we needed to reduce the state – it was surely nonsense.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE ELITES

On the contrary, key players in the two main parties seemed to be agreed that the problems generated over the past ten years needed to be addressed with *more* state, or possibly the same size of state but differently deployed.

[Anthony Browne] says that while voters may be confused – or bored – by the similar rhetoric on choice and reform, Britain could benefit enormously from a period when politicians seem to agree.

“When you have that consensus, you know there will be reforms of public services. In that respect, this could turn out to be one of the most exciting elections. When we look back in history, I think we will see this as an extraordinary time of reform.”

This was a Panglossian take on the monotonous political scene which prevailed at the time.

The same could be said for the *FT*'s own explanation for the narrowing of debate. The authors of the article attributed it to

globalisation [which] has limited politicians' room for manoeuvre on economic policy: footloose capital can pick and choose between the most favourable tax and business environments.

The theory that competitive pressure results in *less* diversity is original, but hardly fits well with empirical data.

The authors got closer to what was likely to be the pertinent factor when they pointed out that

British politics has become more personal [...] It has also become nastier.

THE 'RIGHT'

Politics and political debate have become *mediocratised*. There is little room for genuine analysis, because most issues must have a single, instant and obvious answer, an answer that needs to be compatible with a dumbed-down electorate and a monolithic ideological consensus.

Any colour you like – III

The puppetmaster pulling the strings behind the Tories' bizarre ideological signalling, back in 2008, was (presumably) public relations expert David Cameron.

To give Cameron credit, he never himself (to my knowledge) made any noises quite as blatantly leftist as those of some of his colleagues. Indeed, he sometimes seemed on the verge of making statements that would traditionally be associated with the *Daily-Mail*-reading constituency. However, he never got as close as one might expect, and certainly not as close as his critics from the Left liked to suggest.

According to the *Guardian*, for example, Cameron had claimed⁵¹ that “the poor, obese and lazy spent too much time blaming social problems for their own shortcomings.” However, that looked like a bit of tendentious rewriting on the part of the *Guardian* since, as far as I could make out from other media coverage, what Cameron had actually said was that “social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make.”

The distinction between the quote and its misrepresentation is illuminating, since the people who blame ‘society’ for poverty, disease and so forth are not typically the poor themselves, but members of the cultural elite – e.g. *Guardian* journalists.

THE 'RIGHT'

Cameron, like some other right-wing commentators, spoke of a “broken society”, but it was not clear that he had grasped the core of the problem. He talked about⁵² Britain becoming a “de-moralised society, where nobody will tell the truth anymore about what is good and bad, right and wrong. That is why children are growing up without boundaries”.

But the problem may be not that Western society has *no* morals, but that its current moral ethos, while superficially based on ‘fairness’ and ‘rights’, expresses an anti-individual agenda. According to this, *collectives*, including the state and agents of the state, are respected. Meanwhile it is supposedly correct to take a dim view of *individuals* – particularly individuals taken to embody the values of capitalism.

The new ethos is often referred to as “egalitarianism”. However, it is not really about equal opportunities, but about *equalisation* – making everyone equally answerable to the collective. It is not even about political equality, since we end up with a more entrenched and powerful political elite than before.

43

Pod People

The Right has lost the culture war, some have argued. If true, it means the political Right has two credible options:

- (1) Try to do battle with the cultural elite, as the Thatcherites did. This is likely to have only short-term success at best.
- (2) Be prepared to embrace ideological dissidents.

Most dissidents, after several decades of 'liberal' hegemony, are likely to be socially positioned well away from the centres of cultural power. So it is not much good looking for support from the one or two established academics who are still prepared to express scepticism about left-wing ideology. That is rather like looking for pop stars willing to openly back conservatism.

The Right may have to accept they are cultural outsiders, and work with that – something the Left had to do for most of the first half of the twentieth century.

The only other option, and the one which seemed to be being pursued under David Cameron, is what could be called the *Pod People* strategy, i.e. imitation.

They ['Conservatives'] would replace the dominant species [socialists] by spawning emotionless replicas.

The original bodies [Labour politicians] would then disintegrate into dust once the duplication process was completed.

THE 'RIGHT'

The above quote (interpretations in square brackets are mine) is from the Wikipedia article “Pod People”, referring to the concept in the 1956 movie *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*.*

In 2008, I argued that even if this strategy could work in principle, it may not be attractive to those voters who have no great affection for the state. Unless there is some kind of reverse metamorphosis after the acquisition of power, one would end up with a situation that is worse, not better than under New Labour. Such a metamorphosis would make the Tories seem dishonest and untrustworthy.

* The phrase originally occurs in the novel on which the movie is based, *The Body Snatchers* by Jack Finney.