

“THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE TORY”

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The mass political parties of the twentieth century commanded an extraordinary loyalty from their members. This loyalty is difficult to communicate to a generation that has grown up after the decline of such behemoths. I grew up as a member of the Conservative Party in England. My parents were Conservatives as were 95% of identifiable relatives on both sides of the family. I acquired a Party card at the age of sixteen. Actually I was fifteen but rather like First World War volunteers, I cheated in order to get in young. With a gentle hand your party conditioned your reading and your social life. In the 1950s the Young Conservatives had more than half a million members. As a political activist at school and university you watched your friends rise inside the Party – its student wing, its youth wing, its candidates list, its parliamentarians and eventually its ministers. You and your friends made your career in it. Your skills were relevant to it. This shared experience, this bonding of values, this mutual creation of an interlocking self-image formed the shared experience that enabled you to stand on a platform and command all the tiny details of political discourse which defined you as “one of us”. Party loyalties in the twentieth century were “tribal”. Breaking away from these loyalties causes extraordinary pain. I am fortunate to be blessed by a happy marriage but I have watched friends go through the trauma of separation and divorce. Leaving one’s Party causes a kind of grieving with the phases of denial, anger and depression following each other. For ten years now I have watched my friends sadly leaving the Conservative Party. Each year I have wished for my Party all those “re” words. A recovery. Maybe a rebirth? And now with increasing depression a resurrection. The only stage beyond this is reincarnation!

Perhaps one should not struggle too hard against the death of a particular political party. Like all human institutions they rise and fall. The history of democracy in the last hundred and fifty years shows parties in terminal decline or marginalised irrelevance in all political systems. From the country I know best, the classic case study is that of the decline of the Liberal Party in the first decades of the twentieth century. My grandmother’s family were Liberals until 1911 and the struggle over the powers of the House of Lords. I once asked her, with the innocence of youth, why the family changed from Liberal to Conservative, expecting some great philosophical statement. “Well my dear”, she said, “the Duke changed and the County went with him”. With that went any serious possibility of a Liberal-led government for most of the twentieth century. I recall the look for complete bewilderment on the face of a Communist Party member in Romania in 1990. I had accompanied a Romanian exile back to the family apartment in Bucharest. The comrade in question recalled twenty years earlier dangling my colleague by his feet over the stair well. He had been

placed in the house to keep tabs on this family of former bankers. He looked despairingly at me and said "I cannot believe that all my service to the Party has ended in this". Similar stories can no doubt be told about how the dominance of Democrazia Christiana degraded into the collapse of recent years as yet another political monolith became just a site of political archaeology.

Some political parties have a "near death" experience. The British Labour Party in 1983 must have begun to see flashing lights at the end of a dark tunnel and heard ethereal music. But despite the split on Europe and the attacks of the Militant Left it found the will to live. D66 in the Netherlands exhibits a life cycle similar to that of the cricket which only infests the east coast of the United States every seventeen years. Other political cycles of life and death are longer. I well remember the alphabet soup of new parties that followed the Portuguese revolution. But out of the chaos two parties (the PSD and the CDS) survived and grew. On closer inspection their roots went right back into traditional regional divisions inside the Portuguese Right from fifty years before.

So what am I to make of the strange near death of my own Party? Depending on how you count it has more than two hundred years of existence, an organisational tradition dating from the 1860s and it dominated government in the United Kingdom throughout the twentieth century. The existence of the Conservative Party is as central to the definition of Englishness as the Church of England. It is used to the ebb and flow of success and failure. Its mystical roots lie in the work of Edmund Burke, a country party with a sense of duty and a genius for continuity. It has merged, flirted and re-formed with other political streams both from the Liberals and from the Right. It has been the party of England, the party of Empire and in the 1970s "the Party of Europe". It has had a continuing suspicion of those who seek power combined with a comfortable sense that it was uniquely equipped to exercise power. So how has the majestic Conservative Party that governed for eighteen years and spoke with certainty of "the last Socialist government" and "the need to kill Socialism" declined to its current state? Given the concentration of power in the British system, all Prime Ministers go mad after ten years. Perhaps all Parties go mad after eighteen years. They begin to believe that they have a divine right to govern and they reward themselves with the blood sport of infighting. The explanations crowd in and focus on the split over the British role in Europe. Foreign press barons are to blame? There has been some form of betrayal? Any one who makes the European case is "a traitor". As party membership declines those left are unrepresentative of the electoral coalition necessary to form a Conservative government. In the dying days of mass parties, William Hague endowed the Conservative Party, which used to believe in magic circles, with a glossy McKinsey-inspired constitution that entrusts the selection of Party leader to the membership. This is the same membership who find it difficult to make contact with the centre ground of politics. It is impossible to form a Conservative government without the two million voters who, like me, believe in a strong role for Britain in a United Europe. The Party cannot bring itself to come to terms with this simple fact. It is therefore an easy victim for the Blair magic which always leaves a juicy European issue for the Conservative Party to fight over. Last year the euro, next year the Constitutional Treaty.

Every leader since John Major has gone through the same dreary cycle. Elected from the Right, the newly minted leader heads back towards the centre ground until the

Party's euro-sceptic funders call them to heel and financial pressures take them back to a euro-scepticism that must condemn them to electoral defeat. How extraordinary that the Party of Disraeli and Churchill and Thatcher should find that the press at their conference want to interview provincial businessmen with money rather than potential cabinet ministers with ideas. In the latest twist the Conservative Party is once again paying the Danegeld . Euro-sceptic parties of the Right threaten to damage Conservatives in marginal seats and, in return for not standing their candidates, are rewarded by an electorally deadly shift to the Right. The extraordinary fact is that both in the case of the Referendum Party and now the UK Independence Party the weak kneed leadership of the Conservative Party has managed to pay a heavy price in credibility without achieving an electoral deal.

Tony Blair understands the Conservative Party and is therefore its most deadly opponent. Robert Kilroy Silk does not understand the Conservative Party and therefore is an irritant not a terminator. His call at the UKIP conference to "kill the Conservative Party", will be seen in retrospect as the moment that the UKIP threat went into decline. Parties as old as the Conservative Party cannot be killed, but they can lose the will to live.

Those on the mainland should pay close attention to the struggles of the Conservative Party, however tempting it is to avert their gaze from such unpleasantness. The fight for life in the Conservative Party will continue to define the position which the United Kingdom takes on the euro, on the Constitutional Treaty and on the future direction and extent of the European Union. If that moment of hubris at the UKIP Conference gives me confidence, I must also remember another defining moment. Such is the pull of tribal loyalty that I stayed up late on European Election night until the declaration of the count in the East Midlands constituency, which contains my former euro-constituency of Derbyshire. Unusually the television cameras stayed long enough to record the thank you speeches of the top four candidates. The cosmos seemed to have ranked them in inverse order of humanity and likeability. Roger Helmer topped the poll for the Conservative Party and took to the microphone with an hysterical abandonment of the official Party line about staying in the European Union. The willingness of the Conservative Party to put up with the sheer strangeness of Roger Helmer speaks volumes. Next to the microphone was the real victor of the night, Mr Kilroy Silk, all tanned self importance and personal mission exchanging viciousness with Roger Helmer. Philip Whitehead of Labour came third with the weary sigh of a decent man who has fought off extremists in the Labour Party, only to see the politics of the East Midlands reduced to this hysteria in blue and purple. The fourth and last speaker was Bill Newton Dunn. Three times Bill was elected as a Conservative member of the European Parliament. Incapable of sustained hypocrisy on an epic scale he crossed the floor in the last Parliament and here he was being re-elected as a Liberal Democrat. Conservative politicians wondering how to be trusted once again by the British could do worse than to model themselves on Bill's composure that night. It breathed decency and courtesy and faith in the democratic system. For those of us who insist, against the odds, in believing in the destiny of the Conservative Party and its essential Englishness, it will be a long and lonely wait until people like Bill once again believe that the Conservative Party is the natural home for their hopes and values.

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