

## 4. Political culture

The result of the struggles of 17<sup>th</sup> century England, was a transfer of power from the Monarch to Parliament. The compromise produced what is called a “Constitutional Monarchy”. The rituals and symbols of this settlement obscure the important changes that have occurred since. The struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century opened up popular participation and transformed how government really works. They created what may now be called a “Parliamentary Democracy”.

This means that Parliament is sovereign. It is an assembly of representatives who have some autonomy, but are accountable to the people in periodic elections. It is also a focal point for lobbyists, campaigners and journalists. It has the feel of an old-fashioned gentleman's club, which encourages mutual understanding and pragmatism, often to the disgust of reactionaries and revolutionaries.

Parliament thrives as long as it can absorb the conflicts of society, represent the plurality of interests and produce stable management of the economy. While the atmosphere is as old as ever, its values have changed to reflect those in society. What is normal, what is acceptable to say and what ideas are realistic have all changed dramatically over the past 300 years. This essay will suggest that this change can be thought of as kind of dialogue through time. It will begin by looking at how government worked before the reforms.

### Whigs and Tories

The settled compromise between Parliament and the King, achieved in the 1680s, gave rise to two factions in Parliament. The initial moment of division was whether Parliament should have any control over who becomes King, or whether it should happen by hereditary succession. Few people in Parliament welcomed the accession of a Catholic King in 1685, despite his promise not to change anything. Only a few however, were prepared to defy the hereditary principle and try to stop him.

A prominent MP called the Earl of Shaftesbury, tried to block the accession. He got little support however, and his efforts failed. Then, in 1688, at a low point in the King's popularity, the mood changed. Shaftesbury and his supporters successfully moved to depose the King and replace him with the joint monarchy of William and Mary. This series of events, by the way, was known as the “exclusion crisis” and its conclusion was called the “Glorious revolution”. It is a sign of how significant deposing a King was felt to be, that it should be called a “revolution”.

Shaftesbury's group in Parliament became known as the Whigs, and after its victory, life got difficult for supporters of the deposed King James. Some would make attempts to restore the old King, and then, 30 years later put his son Charles on the throne. These were the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. Because they started in the North of Scotland they are sometimes associated with Scottish nationalism. They were however, Monarchist uprisings based on feudal clans in the remotest part of the British Isles. At least as many Scottish people fought against them as for them.

Their defeat strengthened the Whigs, who became a powerful Parliamentary oligarchy, that is to say, a group of wealthy and well-connected men, keeping positions of power amongst themselves. Their famous leader in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was Robert Walpole. He is notorious for rewarding loyalty with Government jobs. During his long tenure the British state became increasingly staffed by Walpole's friends and relatives.

Meanwhile, other MPs saw this concentration of power as little different to a Monarchy, although without the good part: the splendour, nobility and tradition. If you are going to give someone so much power, they said, isn't it better to have a proper King than someone chosen in secret by a

conspiratorial group of wealthy MPs. This was the basis on which a Monarchist opposition developed in Parliament, who would become known as the “Tories”.

Their story begins with a name. The word “Tory” originally meant thief and was used as a term of abuse during the Civil War for Royalists. Then it was used again for MPs who were loyal to King James II in 1685. It came to mean someone of little intelligence who impulsively defends the Monarch. The Whigs were therefore obliquely alluding to the losers of the Civil War and the “glorious revolution” when they called their opponents in Parliament, Tories.

A man called Henry St John, 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount of Bolingbroke, (or just Bolingbroke for short) was the first MP known to have accepted “Tory” as a neutral description. He was happy to be thought of as a strong defender of the Monarchy, and was a Jacobite in 1715. After the failed uprising he was exiled, returned and was pardoned. He supported the government against the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jacobite uprising of 1745.

A collection of Bolingbroke's works was published in 1754, not long after his death. The King at that time, George II, described himself as a big fan. It's not too difficult to see why. One of Bolingbroke's most influential ideas, which clearly spring from Walpole's time, is that the leader of Parliament must not usurp the proper role of the Monarch. Bolingbroke's second significant idea is that it is the job of an opposition to hold the Government to account. This is the founding idea of the “Two-party system”.

It is significant that the next important figure to shape Toryism as it would later evolve, read Bolingbroke at an important stage in his early career. Edmund Burke's first published essay, in 1756, was written anonymously because it publicly attacked Bolingbroke, yet you can see his influence on Burke's thought, particularly in his later ideas.

The essay was called “The vindication of natural society”, and its opposition to Bolingbroke is more to do with religion than politics. Bolingbroke was a “Diest”, which means he believed that humans can't know anything or say anything useful about God. Burke was terrified of Atheism, and felt that Deism was just Atheism in disguise.

The political point however, that Burke merely alludes to in his essay, has echoes of the old debate between Hobbesian and Lockean ideas (see essay 3). Bolingbroke was pessimistic about human nature, and saw the Monarch as a necessary focus of social order. For Burke, people are naturally good, and don't need to be beaten into submission by a Leviathan. Burke however, crucially adds to this argument. He says that our natural passions not only give us a sense of justice, but also attach us to social institutions, which can be fragile and need to be protected. Burke's thinking shows a kind of gentle slide towards an accommodation with Monarchy.

As a Whig MP from 1765, Burke was said to be a great speaker, particularly in his defence of liberal causes. He supported the American colonists in their campaign against taxation, although it is less clear whether he supported their armed resistance. Nevertheless, when it came to the revolution in France of 1789, he was unequivocal, and at his most influential.

## **The French Revolution**

In 1789, the people of France rose in revolt. The absolute Monarch and his Court was politically, intellectually and literally bankrupt. Its authority collapsed and was transferred to a National Assembly of “Radicals”. A wave of romantic optimism swept Europe. A free, just and rational world seemed within reach.

Burke was the first to break the spell. In 1790, he wrote his "Reflections on the revolution in France". His many liberal admirers cried betrayal. Yet as his book circulated his dire predictions seemed to unfold in plain sight. French society disintegrated into chaos. The absence of any effective authority, in an atmosphere of mortal paranoia, set factions violently against each other. The meltdown culminated in the "reign of terror" of 1793, during which the merest hint of suspicion that someone was a "counter-revolutionary" was enough to condemn them. Paris alone saw over 2½ thousand executions.

Burke's theory was that historic institutions, even those with evident defects, embody the wisdom of previous generations. Our natural reverence for them is good and we should only reform them very carefully. The "democracy" of revolutionary France was really "mob" rule that could only lead to a tyranny worse than the one it removed. Although Burke was a Whig, this idea was keenly embraced by the Tories, and became a cornerstone of British Conservative thought.

The ideas that fired the revolution itself can be called "Radicalism". The word "radical" really means a big change and the radicals certainly wanted that. Beyond that however, there is no clear political programme or method. "Radicalism" is difficult to define because it is an unrefined idea. Its slogan was simply "liberty, equality and brotherhood".

It is fair I think, to see the political ideas I will discuss in the rest of this essay as responses to the French revolution. More specifically, from this moment we see the evolution of ideas to achieve the goals of the revolution and to answer the question: Why did it go wrong?

If you think of political liberty as freedom more broadly; equality as social justice, and brotherhood as social cohesion (or a harmonious society), you can think of the evolution of British political culture as a long struggle to achieve these things. It is characterised by a "dialectic", that is to say, the simultaneous divergence and convergence of two ideas.

The first of these ideas is "Liberalism" and it starts from John Locke's idea that the purpose of Government is to protect life, liberty and property. It is also possible to see in its first manifestation a response to Burke's idea that historic institutions should be reformed carefully. By what principles should we make our deliberations?

### **The Utilitarian consensus**

In the same year as the French Revolution (coincidentally), Jeremy Bentham published his first book explaining an idea that would later be called "Utilitarianism". It argues that a government should not only judge its actions carefully, but, as far as possible, with scientific or mathematical precision. It should act, only when it's sure that its action will increase the overall happiness in society. In Bentham's words, only "when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than its tendency to diminish it." Later, Francis Hutchinson summarised the idea as "the greatest happiness for the greatest number"

Behind Utilitarianism is the assumption that human beings are calculating egos, that is to say, we choose our actions according to our interests; we seek pleasure and avoid pain. If a government could calculate the total amount of pleasure and pain that its action would have, it could make a clear, precise decision whether, how and when to act.

Bentham understood that measuring pleasure and pain wasn't simple. He noted the dimensions of intensity, duration, purity and certainty, and said that in theory it was possible to work these out. Besides, at least trying to measure them was preferable to just guessing what effects policies would have. You can see how this is not just a political but an ethical theory. Bentham believed that the morality of our actions could be a scientifically measured.

Most importantly, I think, Utilitarianism establishes the idea that the government is there for the good of its people. It might be hard to imagine in retrospect, but before modern times, states were in many ways the personal instruments of Monarchs. Their role was conceived in terms of duties and service to a person with a mystical bond with, and hence whose interests were identical to, his people. Utilitarianism answers the first question of the modern state. If the state is there to serve its citizens, how do we work out how to do it?

One problem with Utilitarianism can be illustrated through the life of one famous Liberal. Bentham had a close friend called James Mill, who had a son called John, or John Stuart, or J.S. Mill (as he would later be known). Young J.S would provide these men with a kind of experiment. They put him through a “hot house” Utilitarian education. Instead of being taught general moral rules, he was taught to carefully consider all his actions in terms of the pleasure and the pain they would cause.

It was, by some measures, very successful. J.S became a great Member of Parliament, historian, campaigner and writer. By another measure however, it was a disaster. J.S reported his own “mental breakdown”, by which he meant a period in his life when he lost motivation, didn't want to speak to anyone and was troubled by his own thoughts. J.S himself suggested that this was due to the mental burden of Utilitarian thinking.

Humans are social animals, and our brains have evolved ways to deal with social situations. Whether these ways are right or wrong is not the point. To try to ignore them and carry out an accurate cost/benefit analysis of every decision is just too burdensome. Besides, we won't always get it right. When Utilitarian calculation comes out wrong and intuitive “common sense” comes out right, it is bound to cause a deep crisis of confidence in someone brought up to think that way.

Mill overcame his crisis to become a great Liberal thinker. He learnt that precise calculation of pleasures and pain is too much for individuals under the real stresses and strains of everyday life. Nevertheless, he believed, it remains a valuable principle of government. When Conservatives accused Utilitarians of making people selfish, Mill responded with a book in 1861, simply called “Utilitarianism”. In it he argues that the principle is not about individuals, but about guiding Governments to make the best decisions.

Crucially, Mill says that Government is not there to make people happy against their will, that is to say, to impose its ideals on them. He said, “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over a member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others... his own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.”

To sum up Utilitarianism as a principle of government I'd say that it is: Don't rely on your instincts but carefully think about the consequences of your actions; Don't try to construct an ideal society, it is not the government's job to make people happy; and, don't rely on general, abstract moral principles, but instead ask: Is this what people want and would support, and will it increase the sum of happiness?

### **The Social Liberal critique**

Mill's life and work crosses the turning point between Classical and Social Liberalism. While one says that government restricts liberty, so the less of it the better, the other says that it's more-or-less meaningless to talk about liberty if you are stuck in poverty, squalor and ignorance. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a drift toward the idea that Government can be used to improve the conditions of the poor and working people. A government that spreads opportunity through social security, sanitation, health care and schools, is actually increasing liberty, and not against anyone's will.

Some of the most effective voices for Social liberalism have been journalists and novelists, and some have combined the two with well-researched, realist fiction. Charles Dickens is the most famous example from British history (the US equivalent, Upton Sinclair, was also read in Britain). It's understandable why Social liberalism is coupled with journalism and realist fiction. It's all about a simple twist of reasoning.

If you start with the idea that Governments should not go against what people want, and what they want is their own happiness, you might assume that only people's personal interests matter. If however, you show people the struggles of others, they feel sympathy. At least some of their own happiness depends on the happiness of others. By shifting the culture to a more sympathetic one, you can have Governments give people what they want by helping others who are struggling.

Classical liberalism is like a manual for government, which is passive with regard to the will of the people. Social liberalism accepts the same manual of government, but is active in exposing reality, nudging the culture along and influencing the will of the people. For this reason it has been inspired by journalists and novelists. It found its clearest political expression in the works of writers such as Leonard Hobhouse, whose seminal work, *Liberalism*, was published in 1911.

The rise of Social Liberalism in Victorian times, that is to say, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, may help to explain the moral ethos of the age. Conservatives accused Social Liberals of encouraging laziness, and the Social Liberals, to some extent, conceded. The argument goes that if Government looks after people it takes away their incentive to work hard and look after themselves. To compensate for this, society requires a stronger moral message against laziness. In Victorian Britain there was a very strong emphasis on the morality of work.

### **New ideologies and new critiques**

In 1958, Isaiah Berlin, who was a childhood refugee from the Russian revolution, gave a lecture at Oxford University called *Two Concepts of Liberty*. The two concepts are “positive” and “negative” liberty. Positive liberty is described by Berlin as “self-mastery” or “self-determination”. In simple terms it is the freedom to do something. Negative liberty is the freedom from control by other people or institutions.

The mistake people often make is to thoughtlessly equate their own positive liberty with freedom in general. People tend to express their positive liberty by forming groups: Parties, Governments, etc., to create ideal societies. Berlin said “Freedom for the Pike is death for the Minnows”. In other words, powerful people celebrate freedom and use it to construct their ideal world. In doing so they control, and hence kill, the freedom of others.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet another sense of “liberty” grew. Modern societies after the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war, ended up with large state-owned companies, welfare systems and social services. Some people argued that this led to too much dependency on the state. Social Liberalism had become its opposite. On top of that, regulation of the market inhibited economic development, negatively impacting on everyone's happiness.

This idea became known as “Neo-liberalism”, and in Britain it was taken up by a group of Conservatives known as “Thatcherites”. Their inspiration, Margaret Thatcher, was British Prime Minister from 1979-1991. She said that her mission in government was to “roll back the state”, including the “nanny state”, that is to say, the social security system. She argued that too many people relied on handouts rather than working hard to escape poverty.

Finally, Social Liberalism itself has changed. As extremes of poverty have fallen, its emphasis has

shifted from social justice to freedom. At the same time, whereas freedom used to be all about the participation of working people, which radicals championed and conservatives resisted, now it is about the clash of positive and negative liberties. The journalist and film-maker, Adam Curtis, for example, sees the new battles in the world as between people with different ideas of what “freedom” means.

When, in 2003, the United States and Britain invaded Iraq, Curtis argues, they did so in the name of freedom (it was an act of positive liberty). Their idea of “freedom” was the free market and representative democracy, but it was not one most Iraqis shared. Markets dominated by huge, multinational companies do not feel free; institutions saturated by “Western” norms do not feel free. When the Iraqis began to fight for “freedom” (an act of negative liberty) it sent the country into a spiral of sectarian conflict.

Like the Social Liberal journalists of the past, Curtis is not putting forward a distinct political philosophy. While his Victorian predecessors were concerned with social justice and sought to expose the poverty of urban workers, Curtis is concerned with the power games of States tied to the interests of multinational corporations. In both cases they are uncovering hidden truths, nudging the culture along and trying to influence the will of the people.

### **From visionary communities to a new society**

In 1813, a mill owner by the name of Robert Owen persuaded Jeremy Bentham and several others, to invest in his cotton mill. He promised them a lower rate of return than they would get from other investments. The idea was that his mill would treat its workforce with dignity. It wouldn't, like other mills, inflate its profits by squeezing everything out of its workers, but would return a reasonable profit, while building a good working and living environment around the mill.

His mill, at New Lanark near Glasgow in Scotland, was a success. It made a profit and all the reports of visitors were positive. Owen invested in other communities, and developed an idea that all cooperative communities could link up in a kind of federation, and the whole of society could be organised that way.

He believed that people are shaped by their environment. You are the way you are because of all the people you've met and things that have happened to you. It's how society treats you that forms your nature. So, by treating people well, and providing them good education in good communities, Owen believed that human nature itself would change. This is how we will make a better society.

Owen regarded himself as a Utilitarian, but the more he learnt about how the business world really worked, the more he began to think that just changing how Governments make decisions wouldn't be enough. After a while he began to refer to himself as a “socialist”, a word imported from political thinkers in France.

Today, if you google “socialism”, you find an awful lot of young Americans using their YouTube channels to rant about its evils. Listen to them for a while and you'll notice that they define “socialism” as abolishing private property and paying everyone the same. They will explain, often a little too arrogantly, that people don't want to and shouldn't have to share their property, and if everyone was paid the same there would be no incentive to work hard, innovate and improve yourself.

This reasoning, I think, is quite sound. In fact, it makes you wonder how so many intelligent people throughout history have fallen for Socialism; its flaws seem so obvious. The problem lies, not with Socialism as such, but with its critics, who are using a definition no advocates would recognise. This definition of “socialism” is in fact, a “straw man”, that is to say, a false version of an argument

that is easy to discredit.

Recent US Democrat Presidential contender, Bernie Sanders and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, are both socialists. Neither believes that all property should be held in common or that all people should be paid the same. They would agree that the ubiquitous internet definition is a straw man, yet disagree significantly on many other things. The key to the idea of socialism must lie in what people as diverse as Sanders and Xi have in common.

It is in my view, simply this: the people who own capital have too much power in society. Capital by the way, means the things that generate wealth: machines, factories, means of transport, mines, offices, shops, etc.. Socialists believe that Government can be used to curtail that power. There is potentially, a better society of the future, in which power is evenly distributed because capital is owned in common.

In the aftermath of France's post-revolutionary descent into chaos and terror, some people identified the problem as the private ownership of capital. Capital makes profit, profit buys loyalty, loyalty wins power and power is necessary to make profiteering legal. Manipulation and violence are an integral part of this cycle. From this observation sprang "Socialism".

### **The coming of Marx**

Some socialists, like Robert Owen, believed that if you bring up children in a world of meanness and competition they will grow up mean and competitive. In a world of reason and cooperation they will grow up rational and cooperative. This raises a difficult question: How can you change a mean and competitive world? Owen's thinking implies a "top-down" approach: Governments must make the changes that will change human nature.

Then, in the summer of 1849 another young liberal-turned-Socialist turned up in Britain. From his home in London, this German exile produced an idea that would transform the world. His name was Karl Marx, and while he admired Owen's goal he felt his method was "utopian". Owen hoped that powerful property owners, like himself, could be persuaded of the merits of Socialism. Marx said that Socialism wasn't in the interests of property owners, but it *is* in the interests of workers. A "bottom-up", rather than "top-down" approach was needed.

Marx agreed with Owen that people are shaped by their environment, but in a more subtle way. Rather than the simple dichotomy I have used so far in this essay; that views of human nature are either "optimistic" or "pessimistic", it is necessary to think a little deeper to understand Marx's view.

Humans are animals, but conscious and highly social animals. We would not associate with strangers if it didn't ultimately serve our material needs. How we think, even our moral and political views are, consciously or sub-consciously, influenced by those needs. It is not surprising that the idea of Socialism has arisen in history just when there are millions of workers without property. It is not surprising that property owners, who make money from money, prefer a society that allows them to do that.

This means that in practice, there is no point appealing to the reason or morality of property owners. Working people must somehow take the lead. Marx nevertheless believed that slavishness, selfishness, tribalism and ignorance were not human nature but symptoms of a perverse society. He also agreed with Owen that human nature would change in the harmonious society of the future. He argued however, that this would gradually become clear to workers, who with nothing to lose, would fight and seize power for themselves.

In the early days, Marx's ideas blended with some local traditions in peculiar ways. One eminent Marxist at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Henry Hyndman, argued that British imperialism was a positive force in the world. He led the Social Democratic Federation, which contributed to the formation of the Labour Party in 1900. Hyndman's group left to form its own Party when Labour refused to adopt its revolutionary programme. Hyndman went on to support the British involvement in the First World War, and became increasingly nationalist.

Another Marxist of note was William Morris. He was a poet, novelist, artist and designer. He is credited with the invention of wallpaper. Morris believed that ordinary working people should live in decent, comfortable, well-decorated homes, and sought a cheap way of providing that. Hence, cheap, beautifully designed paper you could stick to your walls.

Artistically and literally, Morris was a fan of medieval themes. He's often cited as having inspired the modern fantasy genre, which has since become extremely popular. In one of his novels a heroic character from England's past, John Ball, travels in a dream to his future, which is our present. In another novel "News from Nowhere" a man in the present, dreams of the future.

These novels contrast the lifestyles and morality of the past, present and future. While the present is dominated by the morality of greed and competition, and people's lives are a constant struggle with each other and with nature, the past and future, are different. Neither have overcrowded cities and a countryside trapped in poverty. People and prosperity of evenly spread. In the past, workers were called "masters". They were respected, rewarded and made products of high quality. In the future, there is no money or business, but the free enjoyment of work.

In both the past and the future there is what some historians have called a "moral economy", that is to say, one in which exchange isn't just a simple monetary calculation, but one in which moral norms are important. One way to understand this is to think of the difference between a "fair price" and a "free price". One is governed by a sense of what things are really worth, the other by a crude calculation of gain.

Morris's past and future are split by the capitalist aberration, in which economy and morality are divided. Morris's fight for Socialism is both for something new and to recover something old. This reflects a peculiar form of nostalgia found in many aspects of British politics. Throughout much of history, British people seem more willing to struggle for a lost (perhaps imaginary) past, than for an untested (perhaps dangerous) future.

## **Socialism in Parliament**

Perhaps it is the newness of its vision that prevented Marxism from inspiring mass movements in Britain, as it did elsewhere. While there are relatively few people who would call themselves Marxists, there have been millions of Socialists who would acknowledge the influence of Marx. One prominent example was Tony Benn. In British politics the word "Bennite" means combining Socialist values with a patient, pragmatic and Parliamentary approach to realising them.

Born in 1925, into an aristocratic family, Tony Benn nevertheless served as a Labour MP for 47 years. He was a Government minister several times and came within a handful of votes of becoming deputy-leader of the Labour Party in 1983. He was also an incredible diarist, recording his entire active life in politics. These diaries provide an extraordinary insight into how British Government works from the inside. Thankfully, Benn also wrote a very brief summary of his political views called "A future for Socialism", which explains the key points I want to get over here.

Benn, like many British people, was brought up in the Protestant Christian tradition. He believed that the moral teachings of the early Christians were a kind of socialism. Their key values he says



were “reason, solidarity and cooperation”. These, I think, can be thought of as corresponding to two of the three (modified) radical ideals I mentioned earlier. Reason resolves conflict to produce “fairness”, while solidarity and cooperation make for a “harmonious society”.

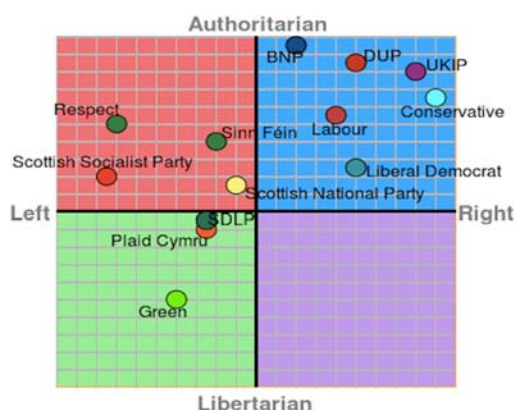
The other radical ideal I mentioned earlier; “freedom”, is realised in the moral cause of democracy, which is simply saying that the owners of capital are made accountable to everyone. This passage from Benn’s book shows how this works in practice:

“this accountability to society at large is far more straightforward than people imagine. Indeed, I have spent much of my political life negotiating with transnational companies, such as ITT, Shell, Ford, IBM, and the like – many of whom are bigger in assets than many nation-states. In my discussions I would acknowledge that they are looking after their shareholders, but would point out that I am equally looking after my electors. There is some common interest in extracting the oil, producing the cars or whatever; in the event of a conflict of interest, the electors' interests must prevail.”

Benn credited Marx with the important discovery that there is a conflict of interests between the owners of capital and the workers. Whereas for Marxists this implies an economic struggle, for Benn the cause must always be a moral one. A democratic Parliament is what gives Government the moral weight to assert itself. He says “At first, I imagined that [Multinational companies] were more powerful than Government, because we depended on their investment. But soon I realised that they were far more dependent on our markets and our good will.”

For Benn therefore, it isn't necessary to convince the owners of capital of the morality of Socialism, as Owen implies, nor is it necessary to confront them by force, as Marx and Morris would argue. It is only necessary to understand your power and to assert it in the interests of society as a whole. He adds however, that the financial sector *does* have real power that makes a mockery of democracy. For Socialism, Governments need to control financial services.

## Dogmatism and Pragmatism



This is a two dimensional version of the so-called “political spectrum”. In this one, someone has estimated the positions of 13 British political Parties, big and small. It rates “Authoritarian” tendencies, that is to say, how much power you think Governments should have, against “Libertarian” tendencies, which is how much personal freedom you would allow. This is the “Order” axis.

It then rates “Left” or “Right” tendencies, which are primarily about economics. If you think businesses should be free to buy and sell with little regulation, you tend to the Right. If you think they should be regulated or controlled by Government you tend to the Left. This is called the “Economic” axis. In normal political discourse this is the only one used, hence it is commonly

thought of as a linear “spectrum”. It is assumed to correlate with other social attitudes.

In my view, while the box is better than the line, it is still an over-simplification. Firstly, it encourages people to fix themselves and others on the matrix, and then lumps ideas together into packages associated with grid positions. Secondly, it encourages people to affiliate with others who occupy the same position on the matrix. The overall effect is to discourage the dialogue that enables ideas to evolve.

The crudeness of the model is shown by some of the questions it uses. I tried an online version and saw this question: Do you believe that religious organisations should be given the same access to public funds as secular, or non-religious, organisations? I found this very difficult to answer because it strongly depends on whether the organisation was or wasn't using those funds to promote its religion. I am sceptical as to whether answers to questions like these can really quantify a political position.

The standard spectrum (whether grid or linear) encourages dogmatism, which is a tendency to fixate on ideas. In essay 3 I mentioned the 19<sup>th</sup> century English civil servant, Charles Trevelyn. His career is a perfect illustration of this corrosive tendency. As a young man Trevelyn was an energetic humanitarian. He promoted liberal values in India, helping to eradicate “Suttee” for example, the practice of burning widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands. As an older man he became attached to the ideology of Classical Liberalism. He ended up notorious for condemning many India and Irish people to starvation by his refusal to interfere with the free market.

This free market fixation, by the way, was revived by the so-called “Neo-Liberals” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously refused to allow the surplus butter produced in Europe, to be given to starving people in Ethiopia. This episode shows that Parliamentary Democracy does not make Britain immune to dogmatism.

The opposite of dogmatism is pragmatism. It says that rather than define yourself and affiliate, it is better to engage in dialogue so that ideas can evolve. Rather than only talk amongst people close to you on the spectrum, it is better to rationally challenge your own ideas. It is easy to be drawn in by ideologies built on purity, revelation and emotion, which tend to develop jargon, symbols and gurus. Pragmatism is all about overcoming these things, focussing on goals and taking practical steps toward them.

## **Conclusion**

So what is the goal of Government? In my view, the radical ideals of the French revolution: “liberty, equality and fraternity” can be modified and expressed more clearly as freedom, fairness and a harmonious society. The latter I think, can be more helpfully broken down into peace and prosperity. Thus, we can identify four cardinal values: freedom, fairness, peace and prosperity. The dynamic force of British political culture has been Liberalism and Socialism, and their dialectic (distinction and converging evolution) has been driven by the underlying force of these cardinal values.

Utilitarianism begins with a rejection of purely abstract moral principles, such as duty, honour, authority, allegiance, etc., and instead considers only the effects of actions on well-being. Robert Owen was a young Utilitarian, but he began to see how the social environment shapes people. Supportive communities he believed, in which people are treated with dignity, can reshape human nature. This was the earliest idea to be called “Socialism”.

To the extent that people care about each other, helping others is a condition of their well-being. Social Liberals sought to build a consensus in society for the common good, so Government can do

things to help the poor while still acting according to the will of the people. But why should Governments do this? As Marx pointed out, money makes power and power makes money. Vested interests deny freedom, fairness, peace and prosperity for working people.

In Government, Socialists have rested on the moral authority of Parliamentary Democracy to assert the interests of the people as a whole. This can be seen as gradual progress, through consensus and example, toward a better kind of society in the future. Nevertheless, on common ground with Social Liberals, they have achieved many things, such as social security and the National Health Service.

While this dialectic shows progress, it is important not to idealise the system. There remains a valid Liberal critique (like that voiced by Adam Curtis) against the power of vested interests, such as the giant Multinational Corporations. There is also a specifically Socialist critique against the power of private financial institutions (like that voiced by Tony Benn).

In essay 3 I discussed how Parliamentary Democracy works. Combined with a strong Civil Society (which I will discuss in essay 7), participation is reasonably widespread so that over time, the values of Government come to reflect those of society as a whole. This reflection is far from perfect; historic compromises and vested interests still intrude. Nevertheless, a relatively high degree of responsive and open Government has been achieved.

The system focusses sovereignty on the House of Commons, whose workings are scrutinised and whose members are renewed in elections open to everyone. The system is adversarial, to force the expression of alternative opinions. It has forced a historic dialogue between Liberalism and Socialism, marginalising dogmatism. British political culture, for now at least, continues to evolve.

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