

One more Analysis of Britain

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Just as pornography has almost succeeded in making sex boring, so the great tide of gloomy analysis of Britain's ills has almost succeeded in making politics a bore. The prospect of sitting down yet another evening with a group of house- and car-owners, eating very good food and drinking wine, and hearing about how poor they all are because the Trade Unions are now running the country is as disenchanting as having to hear for the fourteenth time about someone's gall-bladder operation. To read in newspapers, not for the fourteenth but for at least the four hundredth time, that the country is being wrecked by socialism, scrounging and threats to freedom from the extreme Left, is no longer funny, or even horrifying, but just unbearable, like the dripping of a leaky tap.

It would be a good deal less exasperating to have to read, and listen to, endless disgruntlement if the complaints were based on reality. Tiresome though it may be to get an exhaustive account of someone's hospital operation, one can still have genuine sympathy with the teller because, after all, the operation did happen and was no doubt pretty unpleasant. The really desperate feeling comes on when you have to listen to someone's account of unreal misfortune: the slightly dotty landlady who thinks her tenants knock on the water-pipes every night to annoy her, when in fact they spend their evenings creeping round on stockinged feet so as not to provoke her wrath, and what she needs is not new tenants but a visit from a plumber.

Complaints about plutocratic coal-miners, suggesting that they are the sort of people who go out in Rolls Royces running down the starved and downtrodden middle classes, and about the dangers of Communism, which is actually weaker in the United Kingdom than in any other European country, are far harder to take even than such a landlady's fears. She is a lonely and vulnerable character, after all; whereas the political complainers are not lonely or vulnerable at all. They are the regular political columnists, the feature writers, the television interviewers, the shareholders, the employers—in short, the rich, influential and powerful. They do not of course consider themselves to be so; they write for the almost exclusively conservative Press saying that socialists want to ban freedom of speech; they close down factories saying the workers nowadays have total power; they sit on upholstered chairs in committees complaining that the trouble is nobody now wants to work with their hands and create real wealth.

A lot of the trouble is that such people inhabit mentally closed worlds—and often physically closed too. Some of them have never actually met a real-life miner or shop-steward; those who have, seem to lack the powers of observation and imagination required to see such human beings as different from the pre-conceived stereotype. The kind of unreality they live in was well exemplified by Mr. Edward Heath's wrath, some years ago, when the car carrying him from Downing Street to the House of Commons (a distance most cardiac patients could walk without difficulty) was held up in a traffic jam. He was so incensed at this delay that he telephoned the leader of the Greater London Council, who happened to be at a meeting of civic leaders in Tokyo at the time, and asked him what he was going to do about it. Now no doubt Mr. Heath would admit, if pressed hard, that it was true that some millions of people in London wait daily in uncomfortable queues at bus-stops, sometimes grasping a folded push-chair and two small children and being rained on and worrying about how to afford new shoes, but this knowledge obviously had not impinged on the way he saw the world. Yet, to do him justice, he is not one of the chief band of complainers; he actually writes articles in the Press sometimes about China or western Europe, providing evidence that there is an outside world and indicating that he finds it worth thinking about, whereas many of the doom prophets appear to be quite unaware that other countries exist at all, except as shadowy targets for the British export trade, or as the homes of unsavoury wops and Asiatics who, unfairly, make cheaper cars than British Leyland.

Complaint is not, of course, universal. There is the hearty brigade of "Let's-make-Britain-great-again" merchants, who try to buck us up with pictures of smiling business-men, and heroic old grannies who have warded off burglars with a rolling-pin, demonstrating that we are still a bulldog breed. The winning of a swimming medal, or a year's embroidery work to make a present for the Queen, is evidence to these cheerful optimists that greatness still holds and the traditional values of hard work and loyalty are not dead. But there is a darker side to this cheerful philosophy. Its holders dislike the knockers and moaners, but they also dislike layabouts (students) and subversives (anyone to the left of James Callaghan); most of all they dislike foreigners—Arabs luring our football coaches away with foreign gold, faceless bureaucrats in Brussels forbidding us to grow Allington pippins, and African statesmen who dare to think they can run their own countries.

If both the gloomy and the hearty are convinced that a powerful and dangerous Left Wing force looms over the United Kingdom, the fault may lie with uncritical reading of assorted Left-wing periodicals. These are often written from inside a small world too, a very different world where revolution is only just around the corner, where the workers have the power to smash the bosses,

where the women's movement is organising workshops and where working-class publishing co-operatives are producing material to tell schoolchildren about how they are exploited. People inside small radical organisations give so much time and effort to their work, and tend so frequently to meet ever fewer people from outside them, that they often come to believe their own movement to be much more powerful and important than, in hard fact, it is. Even if observation shows that 80% of their fellow-workers in a factory are supporters of Enoch Powell, they hold fast to the belief that the workers, as a whole, will bring about a revolution from the Left. They often convince themselves; they sometimes convince leader-writers on the "Daily Telegraph", that a massive threat to the established order exists, but there is no evidence that they have attracted more than a minute fraction of the population at large.

Somewhere under the muffling unreality there is a real country and there are real political issues. The difficulty is to recognise and judge them, free of the preoccupations of the communications industry, and of politicians who often rely on the Press and television to tell them what public opinion is concerned about. We are not just an agglomeration of consumers, battered wives, football fans, hooligans, management, one-parent families, holidaymakers and disc-jockeys. We are certainly not one culture, nor two nations, but a collection of individuals most of whom live in fairly restricted worlds, all very different from each other and often rigidly divided by powerful class barriers. Mobility between social classes has always been a feature of English life; it has never affected the strength of the class system itself but has probably reinforced that strength. People are more concerned to maintain and defend their own position in the complicated class structure just because that position is not stable. Accent is a sign, education a weapon, in the class battle; in comparison with these, money and political affiliation are relatively unimportant. Distressed gentlefolk with lower incomes than factory workers remain both separate and superior. Rich business executives who have worked their way up, and vote Labour out of family habit, find that the country mansions they have bought place them firmly in the landed gentry for certain practical purposes; they are expected to open their grounds to the annual British Legion flower show and to give money to local good causes. Even in big cities, people live in strictly local communities: Stockwell is not Brixton, and both are, for most purposes, as remote from Fulham as from Edinburgh. Television beams the same messages to millions, but the mass audience is not a mass at all; it is extraordinarily varied, and represents a dozen different layers of history in its moral attitudes, recreational preferences, ideas about work and conceptions of the place of Britain in the world. The divisions in our society are not

at all the same as the divisions devised by sociologists into socio-economic groupings, or by "Times" leader-writers into middle classes and Trade unionists. The divisions are very numerous and subtle: the gulf between a young black Londoner and a middle-aged Bengali in Bradford is very wide indeed, though both get classified as "immigrants"; so is the gap between the nattily-suited salesman drinking canned beer in a first-class railway carriage and the serviceman's widow tending her herbaceous border in Gloucestershire, though both are called "middle-class".

Where generalisations are possible, observation shows very different characteristics from the ones the Press harps upon. Most people are completely indifferent as to whether the balance of payments is good or bad. Although grumbling about prices is endemic, there is far more concern about non-economic issues than leading politicians seem to believe. Xenophobia is the real national disease; the rapid erosion of the Commonwealth ideal has been accompanied by a general dislike, growing all the time, of every kind of foreigner. "Immigrants" are resented for coming from poor countries, Arabs for coming from rich ones. The Common Market is disliked because we are in it, the rest of the world because it behaves as though we were not there. Tourists are resented for spending so much money and being so numerous, and particularly for talking their own languages in Oxford Street, which for some reason gives deep offence. Rich countries despise us; poor ones ask for handouts from us; everyone's against poor old Britain.

It is in this atmosphere that Right-wing organisations like the National Front have increased recently in power and influence, with their hatred of all kinds of international Communism, and their especial hatred of black people and Jews in Britain. It is in this atmosphere that Northern Ireland is often thought of as a separate country of people who would be better left to kill each other off without involving "our" boys in the Army.

The conventional contemporary way to see British politics is as follows; there are three groups of decent moderates in the middle, the Conservatives, or anyway most of them, the Liberals, and the right wing of the Labour Party. On the edges are some rather dangerous characters, especially the left wing of the Labour Party on one hand and Sir Keith Joseph on the other. Then, out beyond altogether, are the Extremists of Left and Right. These are: first, the Communist Party, the Trotskyites and other assortments of Marxists; second, the National Front, the National Party, the British Movement, Column 88 and so on. Both sets of extremists are equally unpleasant and dangerous.

But examination of actual political policies and behaviour shows this conventional view to be seriously misleading. What has happened over the last fifteen years has been a massive shift to the

Right on the part of everyone in politics except the Left organisations outside the Labour Party. The Conservative Party has come more under the influence of its hangers and floggers and free-market economists, and is willing to make use of openly racist propaganda in by-elections. Its economic policy, which favours international capitalism and membership of the Common Market, is completely opposed to the National Front's economic policy of withdrawal and self-sufficiency, but its other policies are not so very far removed from the extreme Right. (Mr. Macmillan would look a real pinko these days.) The right wing of the Labour Party, that is the wing effectively in power, has adopted Conservative monetarist policies in economics, and has preferred to permit large-scale unemployment and massive public expenditure cuts on welfare and education than to maintain a traditional Labour position. On immigration, it tries strenuously to show that it can be as tough as anyone else in refusing permission to wives from Bangladesh and husbands from Pakistan to join their spouses here; it has produced a huge Race Relations Act and a moribund machine to operate it; and it has never used the original Race Relations Act of 1965, with its provision forbidding incitement to racial hatred, against any of the Right-wing organisations who consistently pour out racist propaganda. The Left wing of the Labour Party wants more nationalisation; it also wants import controls and withdrawal from the Common Market. Its attitudes often look dangerously close to a right-wing form of populism; the anti-Common Market line is a powerful appeal to popular xenophobia. Some Labour Left-wingers have been outspoken in favour of racial equality, but many have not; large numbers of so-called Left-wingers voted in favour of the 1968 Immigration Act, which effectively removed the rights of nationality from thousands of British nationals on racial grounds, and only a handful supported the rejection of the incredible new Immigration Rules on marriage introduced early in 1977, which give the Home Secretary the power to deport any non-British man whose marriage the Home Secretary does not consider valid, regardless of whether civil or religious law holds it to be valid. The Liberals have been the only surviving internationalists and anti-racists in Parliament, but their economic policy is strongly against further nationalisation. The Liberals share with the various Marxists on the far Left, beyond the Labour Party, an internationalist and anti-racist policy, but in all other respects their policy differs sharply from that of the Marxists. Marxist internationalism does not, however, include the Common Market; Communists and Fascists have been equally opposed to membership throughout the seventies, while Liberals, and the dominant sections of the Conservative and Labour Parties have been in favour.

Thus the most obvious characteristics of contemporary British

politics are a strong trend to the Right and a disgruntled isolationism—for even the champions of the Common Market spend a lot of their time trying not to make it work, as with the deliberate delay, on the present government's part, in providing for direct elections to the European Parliament, and in the consistent attempt to get money out of the other Common Market countries (for regional development, education etc.) without putting anything much in.

Most lacking of all is any clear sense of future objectives, or of what is politically desirable for the country in the long term. A white man's country with a good balance of payments, low inflation and decreasing unemployment seems to represent the summit of the moderates' ambitions. A stronger police force and fiercer punishments represent the non-economic hopes on the Right; withdrawal from the EEC and greater control by the government of the economy dominates the hopes of the Labour Left. Some Conservatives, Liberals and people on the Left have favoured the introduction of a Bill of Rights to guarantee civil liberties; but other Conservatives, many Labour Party members and others on the far Left, have opposed it because they believe the courts are conservative institutions or that Parliament is the best guardian of our liberties—an odd view, when one looks at what Parliament has done to our liberties in its flood of statutes and statutory instruments over the last century and more. Nowhere do the conventionally accepted dividing lines coincide with divisions on major political issues. And nowhere is there a clear idea of what kind of country we should be trying to build for the future. The confusion of purpose here has been very evident in the recent so-called Great Debate on Education, which has been a triumph of non-communication and a remarkably effective way of producing no policy whatever after a great deal of work and discussion.

What is the voter to do who would like to see full employment, racial equality, an adequately-financed health service, a class-free education system offering a high quality of instruction to all, less bureaucracy, more safeguards for individual liberty, legal remedies without delay or great expense, constitutional reform to curb the powers of the executive, plenty of cheap rented housing, less pornography, repeal of the abortion law, cheap public transport and the development of new non-nuclear energy sources? It would all make quite a reasonable and decent programme, but there is nobody at all in politics offering it. It sounds, against the background noise of politicians' regular debates, absurdly remote and unreal. But perhaps the time will come when the hope of a humane and just society for interdependent equals will seem a proper political objective. I just wish it would come soon.