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Conservatism Self-Contradictory?

James Alexander, "The Contradictions of Conservatism", *Government and Opposition*, April 2013, pp. 1–22

Dr Alexander is very good at the kind of philosophy that aims at elucidating concepts, teasing out ideas, "unpacking". Sometimes this results in making comprehensible what may seem an impossibly complex or involved collection of notions, as in his recent essay classifying all human sexual relations into three groups, celibacy, marriage and promiscuity. His thesis in "The Contradictions of Conservatism" is that Conservatism is neither as vague nor as unideological a term as it is often thought to be, that it has a definable meaning—even if the definition has to run to a longish closely-argued essay—and that a contradiction is a necessary part of the definition, for conservatives have to oppose change but then accept it when it is accomplished and then oppose any change to what they began by resisting. "Conservatism cannot sanction revolution and yet has to sanction the order which follows revolution." (p. 3)

Alexander's admirable lucidity makes it possible to wonder whether in fact what he has demonstrated is not so much a contradiction inherent within all Conservatism as that there are two or three different concepts that now go misleadingly under the same proper name.

As stage one, there is a sort of status-quo-ism, perhaps more an instinct than a system, though even here reasons can be given such as that changes will most likely be for the worse, because of the impossibility of predicting consequences, and human imperfection. Dr Alexander's subject is specifically British Conservatism, which seems to be a second stage, "conservative" being a word first recorded in the *Quarterly Review* of January 1830, during the agitation preceding and accompanying the revolutionary changes, as Alexander thinks them, of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, Catholic Emancipation, and the Reform Act. Before that date Conservatism was not a formulated system: it came into being as such because it had to address its ideological rivals on their own ground.

In history, Alexander demonstrates, the predominant kind of Conservatism was what could be called the melancholy-long-withdrawing-roar school, actualised, surely, in premierships divided by more than half a century, those of Lord Salisbury and Harold Macmillan. Change is inevitable and we cannot defeat the post-1832 ideas, but change can be minimised, made not too disruptive, and allow something of the old order to survive in a different form.

This has always looked unlikely to inspire any great devotion; and though its practitioners have had much electoral success, the position was not made explicit in election manifestos. In the last quarter of a century or so it has almost vanished; perhaps its most recent embodiment was the internal Conservative opposition to Margaret Thatcher.

In fact *all* forms of conservative thinking have just about vanished both in the worlds of practical politics and of discussion at least as that is found in "the media". Even the basic Conservatism of "if it ain't bust don't fix it" (or Disraeli's politer version "When it is not necessary to change it is necessary not to change") is eschewed by our present Conservative-dominated coalition. All they had to do to marriage was leave it alone. But *innovation* is now an in-word in the Conservative Party as in the others. (Cf. the different view of Shakespeare's King Henry IV on "hurly-burly innovation".)

How has it happened that both the revolutionary ideals of the English seventeenth century and those of the New England eighteenth century have become unchallengeable in the society that fiercely resisted them? and in the Conservative Party as much as anywhere? It is not that they are unanswerable. In answer to Charles I's demand, at his show trial, "I would know by what power I am called hither. I would know by what authority, I mean *lawful*. . . . I have a trust committed to me by God, by old and lawful descent; I will not betray it to answer a new and unlawful authority . . . .", reiterated in similar ways in several sessions, Bradshaw "exhorted the King to answer 'in the name of the people of England, of which you are *elected* King'."[1] That the people had the lawful authority to appoint and try the monarch had to be, like the rights of the American Declaration of Independence next century, self evident, for no supporting evidence could be found. The killing of a monarch may come naturally to human nature but is hard to understand as the exercise of a lawful right. A dozen years later the right was denied on the return of the King, and the regicides were tried under the law of the land. We fought a long war against the Americans who had started with the amazing claim that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The patriots wisely refrained from trying to reason; a proposition, however, to which it is impossible to attach any sense should not be allowed to be self-evident. But who in the British Parliament would now deny these incoherences, or that authority derives from the people? *Legitimacy* is now a word applied only to democracy, in the Conservative Party as elsewhere.

The belief that all authority derives from the people is just that, a belief, and a rather fantastic one compared with the doctrine of both Old and New Testaments that authority derives from God. "All men are created equal" is not even offered as a belief, and indeed it hardly merits the name, for belief has to be in something credible. People who accept "all men are created equal" as any sort of truth are deceiving themselves under the influence of emotional commitments more commonly associated with religion.

Even before the beginning of modern ideological Conservatism as a response to the 1820s–1830s revolution, we had already at least two strong traditions of conservative thinking. Oakeshott recommended that Conservatism should be seen as a secular political movement; but that was after recognising, in Alexander's account, "two traditions of conservative thought", one to

1 C. V. Wedgwood, *The Trial of Charles I*, 1964, pp. 131, 138, our italics

include Hooker, Hyde, Johnson, Burke, Coleridge and Newman (to whom might perhaps be added as continuing and developing the tradition Keble, Carlyle, T. S. Eliot?), the other "Halifax, Bolingbroke and Hume, which was secular". Can they be combined?

The third kind of conservatism, but especially of the Burke / Coleridge kind, is discussed in the concluding section of Alexander's essay. Perhaps it is now quite extinct, but it is right for any complete historical account to include it. This what Alexander calls "sacral monarchy". He argues convincingly that it is only this kind of conservatism that is not self-contradictory. But its consistency entails the contradiction of some of the elements often thought to be essential to Conservatism; for this third kind is (a) principled (to avoid the Marxian terminology of ideology), (b) reactionary and (c) committed to an ideal, in the sense that it is not any actual historical society that these conservatives aspired to return to, but its *idea*. Since in the West there is only one candidate for the source of the sacring, the idea itself has to include the paradox of the bringing in in this world of a kingdom explicitly not of this world. When Alexander says that sacral monarchy has "nothing to do with Jesus's 'kingdom of God'" (p. 16) he is bypassing too easily the idea of Christendom, and the possibilities and tensions brought about by the idea of Christian monarchy: the bequest of Constantine. In a state where the archbishop of Canterbury crowns the monarch but the monarch appoints the archbishop of Canterbury the relations between the two kingdoms must be closer than his formulation allows.

So sacral monarchy in Christendom, as against what is always thought of as Conservatism, cannot fully identify itself with any extant or extinct state, and expects the relation of the two swords to be uneasy: it looks for a body that is always in process of becoming, and in which the wheat and tares grow together to the harvest.

In Alexander's account, conservatives accept social and political inequality as an unfortunately necessary consequence of maintaining the existing social order. In a full-blooded sacralism political inequality is part of the divinely ordained covenant, to be celebrated. This is an ideal that is explicitly anti-democratic and which limits "human rights" to what can be derived from obedience to law and from loving one's neighbour as oneself. God save the king!

That Alexander gives the position any attention is in itself remarkable. But perhaps now that *all* Conservatism has vanished from the practical world, it has as much chance as what may still seem the more commonplace varieties.

In any case, considered in the abstract it is surely a weakness in any constitution for the head of state to have no powers. If the state has no executive presidency like France or the U.S.A. or Russia it needs someone to defend the constitution, and to appoint, and then keep an eye on, the prime minister, as in Italy. Such a head of state should have the right to dissolve parliament and to accept or reject a prime minister's request to dissolve parliament. At present the Governor-general of Australia, the deputy of the British monarch, has more power than the monarch. If we had had a functioning head of state in 2010 Mr Cameron would have been asked to form a minority government which, if it had been defeated in the Commons, could have gone to the country with an honest programme of controlling debt. In the event it was left to the politicians themselves to invent the coalition which, to be sure, has made plain for all to see that the Conservative Party is not conservative in any of Alexander's senses.

We are most unusual in the United Kingdom in still having a Christian monarch *dei gratia*. What could be the present policy of sacral-monarchy Conservatism? What steps could be taken in its direction? The monarch could be encouraged to exercise some of the rights of monarchy. (It wouldn't do to think of "restoring power to" the monarch, because the authority to do so would then come from the people.) For instance it would be a good day for the United Kingdom if the monarch, as head of the Church of England, vetoed any bill purporting to make homosexual marriage lawful. British foreign policy would also probably be less slaughterous and more devoted to the national interest if it were again conducted by the monarch, but how this could be initiated it is hard to see.

The main reactionary item really on our present political agenda is the restoration of national sovereignty. Sacral-conservative policy would not be to conduct a referendum about membership of the EU but for Parliament to advise the monarch to denounce the Treaty of Rome and subsequent "European" treaties.

A reactionary reform of local government could also be enacted. The country at district and county level is not better or more justly governed by salaried appointees of elected representatives than it used to be by the royal officers, the sherrifs and lord lieutenants chosen from the local aristocrats and gentry. The majority of local electorates are steadily uninterested in local government and not enthusiastic about extending democratic elections to, for instance, police commissioners; and so the abolition of local-government democracy at all levels higher than parish and town councils might be very popular. But again popularity, from the third-phase conservative point of view, could not be used in support of this change without the contradiction of making the demise of local democracy depend on democratic legitimacy.

There is no knowing what the country would be like if the constitution were rebalanced away from the dictatorship of the Commons (under the *imperium* of the EU), to restore an important hereditary element in an independent nation. The most determined reaction in English history brought back in 1660 a monarchy unlike the monarchy of 1640; so, much less successfully, the restored French monarchy of 1814 was quite unlike that of 1789, though it tried hard to re-establish everything in detail. What would have happened if the Whites had won the civil war in Russia God knows, but at least it couldn't have been as horrible as what happened with the victory of the Reds. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn was right to think that after the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia would have done better as a constitutional monarchy—if a constitutional Romanov can be imagined. It could not have been the Russia of the Tsars.

Dr Alexander's work—and he is very prolific—is worth the best attention we can give it.