

What Matters in Politics

Daniel Hannan, *How we invented Freedom & Why it Matters*, Head of Zeus 9781781857540 £20

I disagree with Daniel Hannan's thesis and shall say why, so to begin with it should be emphasised that this is a book worth disagreeing with. It is a pleasant surprise, even exhilarating, to find a contemporary British politician with some beliefs, capable of making judgements from a perspective of historical knowledge and in decent English prose. No member of the present cabinet could conceivably have done anything like it.

It is a compliment to Hannan's mode of argument that the first objection has to be to the lack of references. Again and again he tells me interesting and important things I didn't know, but never tells me where to find them. I discovered the book when I noticed on some website Hannan's claim that "government of the people by the people for the people" was a saying originated not, as I thought, by Abraham Lincoln, but half a millennium earlier by John Wycliffe. It does not sound like Wycliffe. I obtained at some expense a pdf version of the Wycliffite Bible and searched without finding the phrase, but I am not confident enough to say simply that Wycliffe never said it. I *do* want to see the phrase in context. Nearer the other end of Hannan's history: is it really true that Eisenhower changed his mind and regretted his not having supported the Anglo-French Suez débacle in 1956? I would like to know, and if so in what form. Hannan does not tell me where to find out.

This is an objection that would only be worth making to a serious book, which this is. It offers itself as a political judgement based on a return to a Whig view of history. About this Hannan is explicit, acknowledging the importance of Butterfield but nevertheless asserting that "the Whig historians glimpsed important truths." (p.15) These "truths" are several times stated, for instance in the formulation with which Hannan ends his book: "You . . . are the heirs to a sublime tradition. A tradition that gave us liberty, property and democracy, and that raised our species to a pinnacle of wealth and happiness hitherto unimaginable. Act worthy of yourselves." (p. 377)

To the trinity of liberty, property and democracy and its effect of a height of happiness is attributed the global predominance of the Anglosphere; and it is traced all the way from the primeval forests of Germany through Anglo-Saxon law, Magna Carta, three wars seen by Hannan as Anglosphere civil wars, and to the present "Anglosphere twilight" when we are all losing this trinity for the sake of statism, big government, bureaucracy.

Many of Hannan's reports of moments of English, American, Canadian, Australian, Indian . . . history are fresh and interesting. His account is nevertheless a distortion of history and his political principles insufficient.

The objection is not just that Hannan has not a good word to say for the Monarchy, for the Aristocracy, for the Church of England, but that as a historian he can only get there by consistently playing down the importance of what to him is the wrong side in the history of England, and by misrepresenting his heroes, the Whigs. The Norman Conquest for Hannan was nothing but a great national disaster that saddled the country with an alien aristocracy necessarily the enemy of liberty and democracy. "The Restoration of 1660 had been a restoration, first, of the legitimate Parliament and only second of the monarchy"! (p. 184) In what we all agree to have been a civil war Hannan not only sides simply against Charles I, he goes all the way to unambiguous identification of English values with the Levellers, with whom surely the Whigs would have had nothing to do.

It is a gross distortion to think of the great Whig families as in any sense democratic. One hiatus in Hannan's history is any discussion of the *second* Reform Act of 1867. Disraeli got it through Parliament because (whatever his private thoughts may have been, and despite Carlyle's

clear warnings) all parties agreed that this must *not* be a step towards inevitable one-person-one-vote.

There is also a Tory tradition, or was. Were the Tories not properly part of the nation? not patriotic? Does not the evolution of the party political system itself show that serious difference is part of the national character? We [I will say, though Hannan would make it only an unpopular faction] resisted the American and the French Revolutions, the latter with some success. Is it really true to the spirit of the nation that the “values” of the American revolution are now the only ones permissible in this free society? The oaths of allegiance are still to the monarch. “No one seriously disputes the rights of their legislatures to choose any head of state they please.” (p. 193) Is this form of absolutism true to English tradition?

Hannan does not himself use the phrase *the greatest happiness of the greatest number* but there is no discord between it and his ideals. Hannan accepts the case originated by Weber that capitalist prosperity follows from the Protestant work ethic, so the Protestant nations used to be wealthier than the Catholic nations. (I think he is mistaken in taking Protestantism to be much the same as religious freedom, but let that go just now.) It is not in fact true that human happiness, however we understand it, is the same as human wealth. (An Anglican priest whose congregation in the West Indies was more or less composed of millionaires once told me he had never met such a miserable bunch in his life.) Were the workers in the industrial cities of the nineteenth century *happier* than the farm workers they left in the villages? Were, and are, the people Arnold called Philistines *happier* than the cultured? Hannan ignores the opposition to Utilitarianism, an opposition some of us think one of the admirable things in recent British history, and which stretches from Carlyle and Coleridge through Arnold and Eliot all the way to Leavis.

Hannan’s ideals do not make love of country comprehensible. We have “almost everything that we consider to be modern, comfortable and rational . . .” (p. 313) Locke and the social contract myth (never embraced by the Tories) is important to Hannan. (He does not mean the set of social contracts known as the feudal system.) But could any sort of agreement about mutual benefit and the enjoyment of the modern, comfortable and rational explain why some young men used to be willing, if necessary (though they certainly didn’t want to) to die for their country? When the young men of Europe were ordered to slaughter one another a hundred years ago, why did they do it? In defence of Magna Carta, “the most fitting symbol imaginable of what the English-speaking nations were fighting for”? (p. 113) That is not what it says on the war memorials. A common inscription is “For God, King and Country”. The First World War was fought against the Central Powers, not against monarchy. The Second World War was fought against the Axis, not against fascism. Our objection to Hitler was not that he was a National Socialist, but that we thought he wanted unjust power over us. Love of country shows itself in defence of hearth and home: a far better principle than defence of principle.

How come that the only thoughtful mind within the Conservative Party is that of a Leveller? What has happened to the Tory tradition?

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