
Ancient Britons and the Republican Dream

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'The country is filled with anxiety and ill-feeling, and with the sense of a dishonoured public life.'

So writes Karl Miller, in the introduction to the latest anthology from the *London Review of Books* which he edits.¹ It is a moral statement, placing in a moral category all that is now amiss with the economy, the political style and the distribution of power in the United Kingdom. As such, I take it to be fully in the tradition of John Mackintosh. One of his gifts, often disconcerting to his party colleagues, was his capacity to judge and speak as a citizen and not only as a politician. This implies a language which is not that of U-turns or of so-called 'presentation', but of right and wrong, health and sickness. The United Kingdom, and Scotland within that kingdom, is in a poor way, which is liable to grow in both senses poorer; but there is a strange paralysis of the political ingenuity which might alleviate the situation. As they said in Warsaw in 1981, 'the Polish crisis is that nobody knows how to find a way out of it'. John Mackintosh was an Enlightenment man, certain that the power of rebellious reason could overcome. I know that he would have found our present-day fog of resignation the real dishonour of public life.

By using the phrase Ancient Britons in my title, I am suggesting that we live in an archaic political society. Its myth of origin is in many ways as fraudulent as the myth of an Ancient Britain served by all-wise Druids. It is the painful contradiction between this unreformed political structure and the rapid transformation of our social environment which is responsible for much of that 'anxiety and ill-feeling', and which lies at the root of economic dysfunction, mass unemployment and the growing antagonisms between society and the repressive power of the State. Perhaps it seems strange to write of the present Government as archaic, or an instrument of archaism. Mrs Thatcher is a moderniser, in her own terms, and her Government is anti-historical in at least two ways. She has severely cut State support for culture in all its aspects, from education as a whole through the British Council to the maintenance and development of the past through archaeology or conservation. Moreover, she has declared war on a number of institutions which she accuses of wishing to turn Britain into a museum, most prominently traditional trade unionism.

But in fact this leader's call to modernity rests heavily upon appeals — often spurious

— to the values of the past. Patrick Wright, in his book 'On Living in an Old Country',² remarks: 'The Falklands adventure made a new combination possible: this small war enabled Thatcher to draw up the legitimising traditions of the 'nation' around a completely unameliorated 'modernising' monetarist programme. This new and charismatic style of legitimisation fused a valorisation of national tradition and identity with a policy and programme which is fundamentally destructive of the customary ways and values to which it appeals'.

Critical of some aspects of the past, Mrs Thatcher is all the more uncritical about the political heritage — above all, about the nature of the British State. Note the November 1985 Queen's Speech, with its emphasis on the enforcement of public order and even more reduction of those few liberties still left to local government. There is a queer dialectic between the relaxation of economic controls and the dismantling of the Welfare State on one hand, and a striking increase in the repressive and centralising power of the State on the other, a dialectic which this Conservative Government has dramatised rather than initiated, for it was also beginning to operate under the 1970s Labour governments. It was this Prime Minister who articulated the pseudo-historical slogan of 'Victorian values'. But harping on the theme of 'national unity' (supposed to be an essential Victorian feature) is a nervous twanging practised in our times by all the main political parties. I would oppose to this a remark made recently in *Le Monde* by the sociologist Alain Touraine, who asked: 'Should we not recognise the inevitable and even desirable existence of conflicts between the strategy of the State and the demands of public opinion? Instead of subjugating society to the State or the State to society, let us admit that it's the nature of the western world to experience an ever growing separation between the State and civil society'. He goes on to deplore the absence in France of a demanding public opinion willing or capable to argue for this separation in the face of the State. We are not much better off in Britain.

I believe that the British State is to be categorised as an *ancien regime*. It is closer in spirit to the monarchy overthrown in 1789 than to the republican constitutions which followed in France and elsewhere in Europe. It is true that French Jacobin republicanism introduced — or perhaps reinforced — a rigid centralisation of State power which has some parallels in the extreme overcentralism of modern Britain. But it also established the doctrine of popular sovereignty, based on the notion of the rights of man, expressed in a constitution of supreme authority to which the citizen could — in theory — appeal over the heads even of the National Assembly. I am arguing here for a British version of republicanism, and it is my view that while Jacobin centralism is exceptional among republican projects, the principle of popular sovereignty and a written constitution is an almost universal element of definition.

We all know about the penalty Britain has paid for its economic priority — for being the first nation to experience an industrial revolution. We understand much less well

the penalties incurred by Britain's — more properly, England's — priority in *political* development, by the fact that England underwent in the seventeenth century the first modern revolution. The English Revolution, to put it crudely, simply transferred absolutism from the king to Parliament. One may talk about the doctrine of the Crown-in-Parliament: the reality is that the House of Commons still possesses an absolute, undivided sovereignty which no Republic, *unie et indivisible*, can match. In effect, no higher institution can overrule what the Commons may decide by the majority of one vote. There is no doctrine of popular sovereignty — the half-formed Scottish version of that doctrine vanished with the Union of Parliaments in 1707. There is no written constitution, as the supreme authority to which the subject can appeal. There is no way in which Parliament can share its absolute power, except by lending it as a loan revocable at any moment — a lesson we in Scotland learned during the devolution debates. Federation is unthinkable. It would entrench rights in a part of the United Kingdom which Parliament alone could not overrule. For the Druids of Westminster, charged with weeding the sacred grove, such an impious violation of the sovereignty of Parliament would bring the oak trees crashing to the ground — no doubt leading to crop failure, plague and Roman invasion as well.

Under this Ancient British regime, the subject is almost helpless before the huge extension of State power that has taken place since 1945 and which is still taking place. The idea that the subject has an effective recourse against the executive through his MP has long been a joke, which the introduction of various ombudsmen has only made richer. A proliferation of isolated tribunals only makes the absence of a coherent code of administrative law more glaring (another institution which would require a written constitution and falls under the Druid ban). The principle of official secrecy still renders the defence of civil rights (which strictly we do not enjoy, as they are not embodied in positive law) about as easy as the work of a jeweller under a 15-watt bulb.

How often these complaints have been lodged — by John Mackintosh, in particular! And yet the *ancien regime* persists, the weight of its inefficiency more crushing every year, almost untouched by Republican principle. In what sense is it 'ours'? In Poland, Lech Walesa is one of many who have referred to the nation as a 'house'. The image suggests a tenement, overcrowded and dilapidated no doubt, whose inhabitants none the less recognise a duty to hold together; not to quarrel irrevocably, but to co-operate in repairing the fabric. That is a usable metaphor for the value of national unity. But Britain as 'nation' seems to me to present itself less as a house than as a temple — that sacred grove, indeed. We do not live inside this grove, but outside it; we approach it, perhaps tiptoe across its turf on suitably escorted occasions; we pay it reverence but we do not own it, we, the living. For this nation-grove belongs to the nation of myth which includes the dead ancestors. 'They' are the major component of 'we'.

We are dealing here with a concept of almost biological continuity which blatantly derives from the central principle of sanctified monarchy — the principle of hereditary succession. Applied to a whole society, it is a collectivism which submits the appeal of the individual in the present to a constitutional court of ghosts and skeletons — to the judgment of the past. It is no bad definition of the republican spirit to say that a Republic keeps the dead firmly in their place — not necessarily a dishonourable one, but certainly not a place of authority.

It is an irony that a government so dedicated to *laissez-faire* and to private enterprise presides over a State regime whose ethos is so collectivist. Its creed of economic individualism has, in this sense, no effective institutional foundations. The historian Larry Siedentop has observed³ that 'the liberalism of the British constitution has been an essentially pre-individualist liberalism'. Britain was scarcely touched by the great social-political conflicts of continental Europe, between monarch and people, between empire and nation, between the lay State and the universal Church, out of which emerged republics based on the codified rights of the individual.

And yet we often describe Britain as a middle-class democracy, and is not militant individualism the defining characteristic of a middle class? Well, often and in most places — and I would include Scotland among most places, here as in so many other areas closer to the model of a small, normal European nation. But in England this generalisation runs into severe difficulties. In the 1960s the group around the *New Left Review* drew attention to the limited social and political results of the seventeenth-century upheaval and suggested that England had not experienced a bourgeois revolution. This absence would go a long way to explain, within the Marxist schema, the inner weakness of the British Left and the peculiar difficulties of approaching the threshold of a proletarian revolution. Another way of attacking the problem is to note the extent to which the English middle class, especially the later industrial bourgeoisie, adopted aristocratic values which hindered the development of that confidence and dynamism thought proper to their class.

In a remarkable article published eight years ago in the *Spectator*,⁴ Siedentop asked why the British middle classes had ceased to be the carriers of an individual concept of society. Tocqueville had warned of the plight of a society which had lost the advantages of the aristocratic condition without gaining the advantages of the democratic condition. Siedentop wrote: 'The very openness of British society in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led . . . to the middle classes assuming quasi-aristocratic attitudes and accepting a more corporate conception of society . . . There followed a partial collapse or failure of middle-class values and ideology which is basic to an understanding of the condition of Britain today. It is the chief reason why the individualist movement here has been contained, if not reversed'.

He remarked that 'the weakness of the individualist drive — what Marxists would call bourgeois ideology — is costing Britain dear. For that is the reason why Britain has not developed the impulse which might be expected from the wider spread of education, income and opportunity'.

It is another of those contradictions in which Thatcherism seems so rich that the individualist drive is being frantically signalled forward with whistles and green lights precisely at the moment when that 'wider spread' of education, opportunity and income has been stopped dead in its tracks and even induced to move some way backwards. So far, I do not see much response to green lights in the manufacturing sector, although the City of London is very appreciative. Travelling as a journalist, I frequently meet British salesmen and businessmen abroad. Their appetite for commerce and competition is still curiously weak. I look for contrast to — for example — West German businessmen I know, who show every sign of actually *enjoying* buying and selling. The activity which brings them profit also brings them pleasure. They admit this quite shamelessly. But captains of British industry suggest that they carry out their thankless duty of manufacture and commerce for the sake of the nation, a sort of defensive self-identification as public servants in private clothing! The corporate spirit of aristocracy again. The capitalist tiger prefers to register himself as the regimental mascot-sheep.

The point is this. The historic weakness of the English middle class proceeds from exactly that seventeenth-century compromise from which the British constitution proceeds. The middle class identifies with the *ancien regime* and is unable to see the advantages of overthrowing it and advancing to a condition of politically-guaranteed individualism. In return, however, the archaic nature of our State arrangements and the corporate ethic which they encourage repress bourgeois initiative at every turn. A recent poll in the *Mail on Sunday* reported that 48 per cent of the sample considered themselves not to be ambitious. I would not go as far as an American psychology textbook I picked up many years ago, which stated in its first chapter: 'Absence of the competitive instinct must be considered the primary neurosis.' All the same, such a degree of resignation in a western capitalist society in the 1980s is very startling indeed.

Let me sum this topic up with a statement which is already becoming worn by use — or perhaps by my own over-use of it in the past few years. It is commonly and comfortingly said that there is nothing basically wrong with British institutions — 'the finest in the world' — but that they are not working well at present because the economy is in such a bad state. The reverse is true. The reason that the British economy does not work is that British institutions are in terminal decay.

The Druids are determined that we shall not perceive this. I have spoken of the cult of the Ancient British grove, in which the dead are not 'they' but part of 'we'. What has come down to the present is defined as 'heritage', imposing duties as well as

conferring privileges, an essential component of national and personal identity. It was the sharp ear of Patrick Wright which picked up the television commentator at the raising of the *Mary Rose* as he celebrated 'the first time *we* have seen her in 437 years'.

Here is the notion of a historical continuum. Now, I do not deny that a cult of history, a sense of continuum, can be invigorating. I know Poland too well to deny it. Polish nationalism and radicalism have always been restorative. In 1863, the Russian exile Alexander Herzen tried in vain to bring into a common front the Russian and the Polish enemies of the Tsar. He concluded: 'The ideal of the Poles was behind them; they strove towards their past from which they had been cut off by violence and which was the only starting-point from which they could advance again. They had masses of holy relics, while we had empty cradles'.

Within the sealed time-capsule of Polish experience, mere linear time becomes distorted. The poetic dramas of the early nineteenth century have a utility and relevance as direct as that of a telephone directory, for Poland's plight has not changed its essential shape since then, and the cast of characters spawned by that plight change only in the way that the names of actors change as they succeed to a part. Events which are important appear to have happened more recently than less significant ones. Some events which ruptured the sealed continuum are agreed not to have taken place at all. For over forty years after the Nazis destroyed it, the Royal Castle at Warsaw remained a hole in the ground. Now, however, the guide who takes you round the minutely-reproduced Castle will point across a courtyard and draw your attention to 'the only Renaissance window which survived the Baroque reconstruction'. The window has been there all the time, the Castle has been there all the time, but some malign disturbance of the ether made it for a while impossible to perceive.

Conservatism, in the literal sense, can go no further than this. This is not to say that Polish political aims are reactionary, but that — as with Solidarity — they wish to restore relics that are familiar: independence, social justice, civil liberty, the limiting of State power. The Russian cradle, filled in 1917, is empty again. But if another child is ever laid there, its face will be entirely new.

English manipulation of history is quite different. Here, time is linear to a perfectly oppressive degree. We are gazing from the terrace of a country house down carefully-landscaped perspectives of barbered lawns and positioned trees. The eye is masterfully led down a vista of elements (this battle, that cabinet) chosen to combine with one another into a single artistic experience. You could say: 'Prune back that Reform bush and make the Tolpuddlia bed twice as big'. But you would feel a bit of a vandal.

I'm exaggerating, of course. There is vigorous argument among English gardeners, and items of history are being repositioned all the time. But there is still an assumption that 'our' (in quotes) history can only have one focal point, one perspective. In France, by contrast, it is thought evident that French history as perceived by a Communist, by a middle-of-the-road Republican and by a Catholic monarchist will be a matter of three quite different gardens. This is emphatically not Druidic thinking. But there is another contrast to English historical landscaping, and that is the Scottish awareness of Scottish history. It isn't an insult to the enormous pioneering work of historians here in the last 40 years to suggest that the public perception of history in Scotland remains chaotic. Time is not generally used to enforce perspective, and instead there is a scrapbook of highly coloured, often bloody scenes or tableaux whose sequence or relation to one another is obscure. But there is a source of energy in this dislocation. As in Poland, what is more intense appears to be in some way nearer: its impact is not diminished by informed distancing. I take for example the tableau of the murder of Archbishop Sharp on Magus Muir which has so powerfully seized the imagination of Scottish writers. Innocent of context, stripped of explanation, this murder takes place always now, in our Scotland. The contorted face of Hackston who has bungled the killing and is now urging his horse to stamp on Sharp's head is your face and my face; when the screaming is over and they open Sharp's little snuffbox to find his familiar, we all hear distinctly in the silence the sound of the bumble-bee escaping from the box and spiralling away across the heather. Walter Scott tried to play the Druid, to organise scenes like these into a mere heritage and say that they were over. But he did not really succeed, and the ferocity latent — occasionally patent — in Scottish society shows they are not over.

I have tried to outline some of the ways in which a particularly English historiography and concept of the continuous nation has been used to legitimise the *ancien regime* — the unreformed British State — and to discourage republican ideas. But of course the question is not just how to describe this but how to change it, and here we come up against a great curiosity. Why is it that the idea of radical constitutional reform appeals only to the centre of British politics? (It's no mystery why it appeals to nationalist movements in Scotland or Wales.) The Social Democrats have proposed sweeping changes; the Liberals have for many years supported proportional representation and constitutional reform, including federalism. Both parties in the Alliance have published versions of that formula which attribute economic failure to the decay of institutions. The curiosity is that the Labour Party remain, in their overwhelming majority, hostile to this approach. We ought to remember once again, John Mackintosh's lonely struggle to persuade his Party to think, in the wider sense, politically. But the orthodoxy of Labour, transmitted down the Tribunate line from Bevan to Foot, has remained a sort of debased economic Jacobinism. One day, the unreformed electoral system will deliver another huge

Labour majority in Parliament, which will use centralised State power to redistribute wealth. This remains the dream. It would be unfair not to mention some recent, if marginal changes of emphasis, like Labour's new regional policy which would transfer some responsibility for economic growth to local initiative. But Labour are not a republican party. Labour still believe that they can achieve their ends through the existing State, through existing institutions.

Labour's outlook remains corporatist rather than individualist. Siedentop, to quote his *Spectator* article again, blames the absence of a powerful middle-class ethic. He writes: 'Just as the French bourgeoisie acquiesced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the growth of centralised royal power, in order to destroy their local aristocratic oppressors, so the British working class has acquiesced in the centralisation of power during the twentieth century in order to destroy what it sees as social privilege — the middle class masquerading as an aristocracy'.

One could stop to argue about the wisdom of a policy of class defence, in a period when working people are so intensely concerned with their individual rather than their collective destinies. But I am more interested in the consequences of Labour's fatal fascination with the instruments of actually-existing Britain. The consequences can be implied by stating this proposition, which is fundamental: it is not possible to build democratic socialism by using the institutions of the Ancient British State. Under that I include the present doctrine of sovereignty, Parliament, the electoral system, the Civil Service — the whole gaudy old heritage. It is not possible, in the way that it is not possible to induce a vulture to give milk. The British regime is designed to preserve privilege, to prevent the effective distribution of power and to smother the individual who counterposes his own interests to the collective interest of the mythic nation. It is democratic in the sense that the Powderhall Sprint is democratic; it is socialist in the sense that the National Coal Board is socialist.

The Jacobins themselves knew that the Revolution required new institutions. Marxism's warnings about the problems of a socialist movement confronted with the state apparatus of the previous regime have stood up well — tragically well — to experience. But Labour appear still to believe that the British Parliament under George III could have composed the American Constitution and applied it to the Thirteen Colonies.

So it appears that in fact it is precisely Labour, out of all the British parties, which stands to gain most from constitutional change, but which is most stoutly opposed to it — dismissing it, indeed, as a middle-class irrelevance. Instead, Labourism makes an effort to claim the heritage for itself, and compete with the Tories as the party of 'the nation'. This is not only absolutely unhistorical, in a multinational state like the United Kingdom. It is doomed to failure even as a tactic, for this is a game which the Tories and the regime itself will always win. Patrick Wright⁵ suggests that Labour's failure to appropriate the 'nation' is inevitable 'not least because the nation to which

Thatcher appeals so successfully is articulated . . . against post-war statist reform. While actually increasing the powers of the centralised State, this Conservatism is also thriving on widespread disillusion with the bureaucratic corporatism of the welfare state'. The nation or national interest to which Labour appeals, Wright goes on, is perceived as grey, inhuman and undignified. 'Starkly opposed to this, "the nation" to which Thatcher has learned to appeal is full of adventure, grandeur, ideas of freedom, ceremony and conscripted memories (of childhood or war, for example) . . . There are indeed "two nations" in the symbolism of Thatcher's Britain, but these are not the two nations of habitual definition: the division is not so much between rich and poor or North and South, but rather between the grand . . . symbolism of Empire and War on one hand and the bureaucratic imagery of the welfare state on the other'.

In whose name, then, should a mass party of the Left speak in Britain of the 1980s? Not in the name of the nation, but not in the name of one class either. How about in the name of the people? It is not a nation or a class which demands Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, but the living — all the living-inhabitants of a definite country at a definite moment: now.

It is for the Left, above all, to develop this notion of a 'people', free of British national mythology but also free of a false, defensive collectivism which threatens to become part of that mythology. Democratic socialism is about co-operation and community. But that can now only be reached by an indirect route. Labour cannot get there by syndical and class struggle alone; it must become the party of individual liberty as well, fighting for the rights of the citizen, for his power to challenge the bureaucracy, for institutions which enfranchise him whether these are administrative courts or local pressure groups or community co-operatives. A war against the State is waiting to be fought by a mass 'freedom party' of the Left. Its battles should be for a written constitution, for the doctrine of popular sovereignty, for a just electoral law based on proportional representation, for a code of administrative law and a constitutional court, for a sweeping reform of Parliament and its proceedings, for the option of federal status for those parts of the United Kingdom that wish it, for an entrenched grant of far greater competences to local authorities including the power to levy variable rates of taxation, for the demolition of the English legal professions and their replacement by a judicial system in which justice is affordable and judges come from all classes and age groups . . . For the abolition of the monarchy? I hold this to be — in Reformation language — 'a thing indifferent'. If the cult of the archaic nation is demolished, the monarchy — no longer called upon to sanctify it — will reduce to the scale of a harmless focus of affection and newspaper scuttlebutt. It is not the last king or queen who should be beheaded. It is the last Druid whose brains should be knocked out with the last volume of Walter Bagehot.

We are living in an increasingly airless room. Hope has been pumped out of it, and replaced by a scent of decay, by Karl Miller's 'anxiety and ill-feeling and . . . sense of a dishonoured public life'. If unreformed State power goes on expanding, and popular misery deepens, convulsions and unconsciousness will ensue. We must escape, or at least kick open the windows. We must transfer power to the people, but that will remain a dead political cliché until Labour, especially, understand that this transfer cannot now be achieved by the old, direct methods of syndical and class struggle, still less by a Labour government acting through the British State. This society requires drastic and immediate constitutional change. And the simplest way of justifying that change is to say that it would allow people, at last, to fight for themselves.

¹ 'London Reviews' (Chatto and Windus, London, 1985).

² P. Wright, 'On Living in an Old Country' (Verso, London, 1985).

³ L. Siedentop, 'The Strange Life of a Liberal England', *The Times Literary Supplement*, September 1985.

⁴ L. Siedentop, 'The Impotence of the British Middle Classes', *The Spectator*, 30 December, 1978.

⁵ 'On Living in an Old Country', op. cit.