

Old, new and Conservatism

One critic remarked that he could not support the Conservatives because they had never held up change or progress for a single day. He revealed a misunderstanding of Conservatism. Conservatives accept the past, and are happy to adapt and conserve all that is best from it. That does not mean we wish to go back in time, freeze the status quo or resist positive improvements to people's lives. We like the new as well.

Radical parties of the left favour more revolutionary action, Conservatives favour more evolutionary action. Both often seek the same high level aims. The main parties in the UK if challenged would say they wish to promote greater prosperity and freedom for everyone in our society. The disagreements come over how you do that, and over how far you should go in sweeping aside or remodelling the past. There are also some issues of definition over freedom, with Conservatives thinking more of freeing people to do things for themselves, and socialists thinking of ways the state can enable some people to do things within government control. This distinction is a matter of emphasis or degree, not an absolute.

Curiously today the parties of the left are more conservative than the Conservatives when it comes to the big issue of constitutional reform and our withdrawal from the EU. They are more radical when it comes to wanting a much bigger role for the state in our lives, in the hope that will create greater equality of outcomes. They fight every inch of the way to try to avoid decisions passing from the EU to the UK people and Parliament. They seek new ways to mimic the controls, spending, taxes and requirements that come from the EU. At the same time they recommend spending far more on state service provision, without discussing whether they could do this within the tight guidelines of the Maastricht budget criteria that the EU requires of its members.

Conservatives and socialists both want good quality public services, with healthcare and education delivered free at the point of use. Both want to spend more on developing those services, with disagreements about how much of this extra spending can and should come from the proceeds of economic growth and how much if any should come from tax rises.

Meanwhile the mood of the country is for the EU to get on with Brexit and tell us what if any barriers they wish to impose on their trade with us. The government should seek to up the tempo and remind them nothing is agreed until all is agreed, and no deal is better than a bad deal.