



MOVING TARGETS

Thatcherism forever

A conversation with Lord Roy Jenkins

For its long term health, Britain needs a non-socialist alternative to the Tories, so that when people tire of the Conservatives (as one day they will), they can pick another group of competents who will not treat the economy and defence as an adventure playground". This quotation from the *Economist*, a weekly certainly not known for being prejudicially hostile to conservative policies, is all the more topical considering the possibility that the present upheaval in the economies of the West could pose, in the short term, the question of what a post-Thatcher Britain should be. To discuss this issue, Giuseppe Sacco, Editor of the "European International", met Lord Roy Jenkins, who in recent years has devoted most of his efforts to "breaking the mould" that paralyses the British political system.

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I Mrs Thatcher has just become the longest-serving Prime Minister in this century. Moreover, the results of the last general election in Britain have brought the Conservative Prime Minister to three victories in a row, a record which no previous Prime Minister has ever achieved, in spite of real decline in both percentage and absolute terms, and of the fact that the Tories did not score a majority in the total vote. The election also brought about the third Labour defeat in a row. To an observer from continental Europe, all this seems to mean that the present state of the Labour Party is such that, for the foreseeable future, it will be unable to win an election again, and is therefore creating a situation in which the Conservative Party will be "condemned" to stay in power indefinitely. Would you agree with this analysis?

Roy JENKINS — Yes, and there are several reasons why this is so. First, in the 1987 election the Labour Party was unquestionably defeated. This is a fact that cannot be denied, whatever "window dressing" is applied, to obscure this unpleasant reality. Secondly, this last general election defeat was — as you have already pointed out — the third in a row, so that the present leader of the

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Labour Party also set a record in last summer's election. Thirdly, the defeat of the Labour Party under the leadership of Kinnock is in a way more serious than the previous defeat of the Labour Party under Michael Foot, because this time the campaign was well conducted from both the political and organisational point of view.

It has been unanimously acknowledged by experts of all political persuasions that the last campaign of the Labour Party was the best of all the three contesting Parties. On the other hand, in the previous election, it is well-known that the Labour Party did not play its cards as well as it could have done. These three successive defeats tend to suggest that the Labour Party has lost the ability of offering the voters an acceptable alternative to the Tories, and this applies not only as long as Mrs Thatcher is in power, but even after.

E *Is this why you have recently written that Callaghan is probably going to remain in history as the last Labour Prime Minister?*

Roy JENKINS — There is, of course, no way one can absolutely predict the future. But I do believe that an objective observer might well come to the conclusion that as long as the Labour Party is what it is, no further Labour leader is going to get to 10 Downing Street.



E *Then you don't seem to agree with generally held idea that Kinnock is trying to change quite drastically not only the image of Labour Party in order to make it more attractive to the "middle of the road" voter, but also the actual policies of the Party itself, by reducing the influence of extremists who have, up-to-now, been entrenched in the Party machinery?*

Roy JENKINS — If you read the official documents — policy papers, conference resolutions and public pronouncements — of Neil Kinnock's Labour Party, you could certainly come to the conclusion that it is completely "de-ideologised", and that Kinnock has stopped, and even reversed, the previous trend, which was to move away from pragmatism and drift endlessly into ideology. But, if one goes beyond the official policy papers or public pronouncements, one sees that the changes introduced during Kinnock's time are accentuating the drifting of the last decade. Indeed, the new aspect brought about under Kinnock is that the relationship that has traditionally existed between the Labour Party machinery and the Parliamentary Party has been badly damaged. Before Kinnock's access to the leadership, the Parliamentary Party was always a rather faithful expression of the voter's political attitudes, and acted as a countervailing force to the party machinery. But under Kinnock the Parliamentary Party has become crowded with extremists. Your readers can judge for themselves if this is an improvement or not.

E *Still, Kinnock's position as Party leader is much stronger today, isn't it?*

Roy JENKINS — The fact that Kinnock has succeeded in strengthening his position in the Party does not necessarily mean a shift towards the centre. Quite the contrary, this has given him even more manouevring space to reshuffle the shadow cabinet which has lined up with the composition of the Parliamentary Party. The fact that someone like Denis Healey is no longer in the shadow cabinet is quite meaningful. I have serious doubts that even a change in the internal voting system for the re-selection of candidates on the basis of the so-called "one man-one vote" principle will help the Labour Party to regain a position from which an election could be won.

E *From what you have been saying and describing, I get the impression of an overall situation that in continental Europe we would call a "blocked democracy". That is a situation where, in one major political party, there is an ideological element that makes this party unacceptable to the majority of voters, and therefore unable ever to win an election. In some continental*

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Roy Jenkins was Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Wilson Government, and President of the European Commission in Brussels.

On the more recent British political scene, as Member of Parliament for Glasgow, he played a decisive role in the struggle for the new Liberal-Social Democratic Party. Currently a Member of the House of Lords, he is also Chancellor of Oxford University, a position held in the past by 172 predecessors, amongst them two saints and Oliver Cromwell. He is also a notable political biographer.

European countries, where the Communists have long been the main opposition, such as Italy, and — up to the time of Mitterand's victory — in France, this "blocked democracy" stalemate has existed a considerable period. But it is unusual for Britain, and is certainly not a part of British political habits, where "swings of the pendulum" are traditional ones.

Roy JENKINS — One should not overestimate the strength and continuity of the British tradition of government alternation. "Swings of the pendulum" from Conservative to Labour and vice-versa have occurred regularly only in the period between World War II and 1979. Before that there had been a period of steady Conservative predominance.

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I *But this was due to the fact that at that time the Labour Party was replacing the Liberals....*

Roy JENKINS — Certainly, this was due to the fact that the Labour Party was emerging and displacing the Liberals as the major alternative to the Conservatives. The division of the progressive forces that ensued from this struggle made it easier for the Conservatives to win practically all elections. In fact between 1905 and 1920 there was a de facto continuity under an apparent instability. But this reason only applies up to 1920. After that the Labour Party established itself as the major alternative to the Tories. One could not, therefore, conclude that it is against British tradition to have one party representing a quasi-impregnable position of political and social predominance.

E¹ *The idea that a long period of Conservative control would not, therefore, be completely alien to the political tradition of Britain is certainly a very interesting one. And, of course, your point could be strengthened by the observation that today the ideological, social and political divide between the governing and the opposition parties is almost as clear cut as it was in the pre-war period. Conversely, this divide is much less "clear cut" than during the last forty years when the "Welfare State", by the reduction of social differences and tensions, rounded out these political edges, and made "swings of the pendulum" possible.*

Roy JENKINS — One could certainly say that when one looks back at the "Welfare State" period, it looks remarkably calm. It is as though we were looking at a landscape from a great height; the undulations of the landscape seem smaller than if one looked at them from the ground up. But this doesn't mean that, during the Welfare State years, the political struggle was not carried out with a great deal of bitterness and hostility.

Beyond any doubt there was basic consensus, in both foreign and domestic affairs, among political parties. In foreign policy matters, the Labour Party seems to have accepted a pro-America policy, (and in fact it was under a Labour government that such foreign policy was initiated). On the other hand, Macmillan succeeded in getting the Conservative Party to accept and continue the policy of liquidating the Empire.

In a way, the significance of the consensus of the past appears to be magnified through the lenses of today's perspective, after the ideological radicalization of the two major parties. There was then acceptance by each party of basic points of the other party's programmes, and more especially, there was acceptance of the practical irreversibility of most of the actions of its predecessor in power. All this practically disappeared during the seventies. Indeed, if this basic consensus appears today so much less obvious than it was then, it is because under Michael Foot there was a surfacing of unilateralist attitudes in foreign policy, and a rejection of the pro-NATO line. At the same time, in domestic affairs, we witnessed, under Mrs Thatcher, a rebuttal by the Conservatives of welfare capitalism that neither Churchill, nor Macmillan or Heath ever thought of ideologically opposing.

This ideology is, of course, partly the consequence of a very significant change that has occurred in the structural composition of British society, where the number of white collar workers has grown very quickly and the percentage of industrial workers has systematically shrunk. But independently of this *social* change — and in a way at odds with social transformation — there has been a

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strong *political* and *ideological* mutation of the Conservative Party. The Tories have indeed moved to the right in ideological terms, in spite of the fact that their constituency has moved towards the left, and now includes not only votes of the wealthy, but also a new middle class. This can be seen even in the Cabinet, where the social background of its members is very different from that of the past.

E *Could one see in this divergence towards extremes, with the Tories becoming a sort of "radical right" and the Labour moving into an ideological "radical left", the reason for the emergence of a trend towards forming a Third Party, and for the possibility of an electoral reform?*

Roy JENKINS — At the beginning of the eighties, the need for a Third Party appeared not only for ideological reason, which pointed out this need, but also because the voters started to behave in a manner that convinced the politicians that the "mould" was starting to crack, and that there was actual "demand", real support, for an alternative political force. The figures that showed the decline of the political duopoly were quite meaningful even before the creation of the Social Democratic Party, and, of course, before the Alliance. In all elections, there were remarkably good results by the Liberals and the Scottish Nationalists. In the fifties, the Conservative and Labour vote together made up no less than 97% of the total vote. Yet before the Alliance was created, this enormous percentage had already dropped to 76%. And in 1983, the two major parties attracted less than 70% of the total vote.

E *Still, the Social Democratic split and the creation of the Alliance was not triggered off by the appearance of an opportunity in voting behaviour, not by the mere fact that there was a "demand" to satisfy, but by political factors.*

Roy JENKINS — The decisive factor which accelerated and made irreversible the long-standing process that eventually forced an important fraction of Labour to secede from the Party, to create the SDP and to establish the Alliance with the Liberals, was the abandoning, by the group in control of the Labour Party, of the party's long-established attitude on foreign policy matters. Still, as I say, the process of political incompatibility, that made the split inevitable, had been evident for quite a long time.

Looking at this event from a wider angle, there is little doubt that the ground for it had been politically prepared by the political and social consequences of

the new Conservative ideological approach, consequences to which the Labour Party was clearly becoming less and less able to provide a credible response, crippled as it was by its ever-growing ideological emphasis as opposed to a pragmatic one.

E *How would you describe the consequences of this new conservative attitude?*

Roy JENKINS — The emergence of Mrs Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party is, at the same time, a cause and an effect of significant sociological, ideological and political changes that have occurred in that Party. From a sociological point of view, it is quite clear that the Conservative Party has become less identifiable with the traditionally privileged classes, and has been becoming more and more the party of the “nouveaux riches”. Ideologically, this has meant that the Conservatives have even been losing the paternalistic attitude towards the underprivileged that has always represented a typical feature of traditional Tory politicians.

In other words, the Conservative leadership that emerged in the late seventies appeared to many people to be affected, in domestic politics, by a kind of incurable short-sightedness, that was not only morally unacceptable, but also a political mistake, since it disregarded the effects of the widespread social instability it could lead to. Moreover, this new class with which the Tory Party had come to be identified, has even been influencing the stance of the party in the realm of international affairs. Indeed, the short-sightedness of this class of *parvenus* also made it anti-European, basically out of lack of familiarity with grander ideas and strategies. This was a lack of vision that manifested itself in a lack of patience for the complexities of European politics, and in outright irritation and intolerance for the Brussels bureaucracy. Such irritation, of course, was not a new phenomenon, but one which had been suppressed in the Conservative Party before the advent of Mrs Thatcher. On all these accounts, Edward Heath and his predecessors were very different from the present leader of the Conservative Party. Heath still fitted the old model of conservatism associated with a moral obligation to social responsibility and with a taste for grand government. This, as I have implied, was also due to their social background, and that of the people the Tories used to represent politically — that is, the mentality of people who had been rich enough for a long enough time.

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I But Mrs Thatcher's Conservative revolution is not only one of style and flair. It does not only consist of the shift from a grand vision of politics to a petty one. To many observers, it also seems to have responded to the collective reaction of a large majority of British society to excessive Trade Union power, and to the depressing impact felt by the entire nation at the lack of competition typical of a mixed economy where the Government played an excessively important role.

Roy JENKINS — It is indisputable that the Trade Unions exerted excessive political power, and that Mrs Thatcher rode upon a wave of discontent against it. She undoubtedly fought against Union power with tremendous energy. But as far as competition is concerned, I am not convinced that the present government is actually succeeding in its policy which is aimed at making the British business world more resentful. Closing down inefficient plants is not going to increase the actual degree of competition among the survivors. And in any case, the ideological point of reducing the role of public enterprise and of the state in general is over-emphasized. Today's main rival of the Western



industrial economies, Japan, cannot be defined as a free-market country in the proper meaning of this expression, and certainly not in the meaning that Mrs Thatcher's Conservative ideologues give to it. And the same thing can be said, more traditional European competitors, such as Germany, Italy and France. Even in the US, in spite of official rhetoric, military expenditure and the huge budget deficit give a crucial economic role to the federal government.

E *From what you say, one could easily come to the conclusion that Mrs Thatcher's conservative revolution has gone so far, not only in its ideological premises but in its political and social consequences as well, as to explain the symmetric radicalisation and strong ideological intoxication of the Labour Party. Still, you seem to believe that a radicalised Labour Party would not be more able, but less able, to respond to a situation of aggravated social inequalities. Could you explain this final point to our readers?*

Roy JENKINS — It is not hard to describe the social costs of Mrs Thatcher's "free enterprise" strategy. Moreover this strategy may also encompass a heavy political cost. In Britain today there are no less than twelve million people that could be called "underclass". By that, I mean people cut off from the mainstream of the economic and social life of the nation in which they live. People who are ill-educated, ill-housed, and with a standard of living which has not been experienced since the 1930's. People who have no other future perspective than a widening of the gap that divides them from the fortunate and ever increasingly prosperous middle class.

It should be pointed out, though, that this polarization of social inequalities does not justify, as it may appear at first sight, the extremism of today's Labour Party, the stubborn and doctrinaire entrenchment of its present leadership in strategies and policy proposals, that are some forty years old. What is new in terms of the political consequences of these inequalities, is that they are far too complex and large to be solved by Welfare State measures alone.

What the Labour Party seems incapable of understanding is that, in order to solve a social problem of such magnitude, we have to have recourse to market forces as well. Seizing from the productive sector of British society the share of revenue that would be necessary to cover the needs of these twelve million members of the "underclass" would certainly be impossible under the present system of government. If a ruling political party were ever to try such a gigantic redistribution of national wealth, it would first have to introduce substantial and dangerous changes in the political system. In other words, civil liberties could be endangered.