

Comment

Back to Basics

“(Individualism is) a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends: with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.”

Alexis de Tocqueville

Every so often an ancient heresy reappears in modern guise. Cardinal Ratzinger, in a recent interview, proposed Pelagianism as one such. In an odd way it suits the individualist climate of our times. A traditional response to a feeling of general social and political decline has been the withdrawal of individuals to societies in which some patterns of order can be maintained and some values preserved in the company of like-minded companions. Early monastic communities partly served this function. It has been suggested that Pelagianism, with its élitist moralism, was very much influenced by the aristocratic patterns of piety in antique Rome. A pessimistic estimate of the future of the imperial ideal had prompted an aristocratic retreat from public life. Noble country estates or urban palaces came to function as more or less self-contained religious centres. One historian has remarked that, behind the counsels of perfection of Pelagius, we can sense the high demands of *noblesse oblige* and the iron discipline of a patrician household.

The emphases that fear of general fragmentation and decline produces when extended to public policy are often unbalanced. The present disorder within the Conservative party could be seen as an expression of massive displaced anxiety. The Labour Party has finally realised, thanks to a government report, that the individual tax bill has increased drastically during Mr Major's tenure of office. This runs contrary to an undertaking Mr Major gave during the last general election campaign. The simple message banged out by the opposition is: either Mr Major was not telling the truth or he is incompetent. What the Labour Party cannot admit, because our political system does not function in this way, is that most economic policy is a response to events which are totally beyond the control of individual national governments and that a Labour government would be faced with similar problems. However, no government can admit that it is not in control. Mr Major has done what Mr Smith would do in similar circumstances, and what many other politicians have done when faced with identical

challenges. He has attempted to divert attention from the general to the particular. That is what 'back to basics' represents.

A predominantly individualist society dominated by the ideals of Social Darwinism often takes flight from reflection on the nature and function of social institutions to a concentration on the role of the individual. As Dr Mary Midgley has pointed out, '...there seems to be something about the individualistic approach that makes it more natural to deal with social friction by looking inward and trying to adjust the individual rather than by looking outward and trying to change the institutions.' Mr Major's appeal to us to 'get back to basics' is a classic individualist response. What is increasingly clear is that he plainly did not know what he was talking about when he first coined the phrase.

The key themes in this revival were to be 'personal responsibility' and a return to 'common sense'. However, the cry of personal responsibility must spring from some conception as to what a person is. In a society which aborts thousands of babies whilst contemplating using others as a quarry for spare parts; which is working its way up to displaying its vision of the worth of human life by allowing euthanasia; which infantilises people whilst simultaneously condemning them for being dependent and lacking initiative, is it any wonder that questions of personal responsibility should be rather confused? Since, over the past decades, the forms which emphasised the commonwealth of our society have been systematically challenged and undermined, it should come as no surprise that there is no consensus on what is common to us at all. Sir Edward Heath observed that it was a disastrous mistake for the Conservative party to involve itself in ethics. Like patriotism for a scoundrel, morality is the last refuge of a politician. Recent debates have laid bare the Conservative party's loss of whatever philosophical coherence it once had. Mr Smith's silence on matters of policy stems from the realisation that Labour is similarly bereft, but he has the prudence to realise it.

Mr Major has gone to the ethical cupboard and found it stripped bare. Mr Portillo's attempts to restock it with the bric-à-brac of Saint-Simonianism do not inspire much confidence. The Conservative response will be: further emphases on the family, a community which the last fifteen years have seen falling into almost terminal decline; a stress on education; on religious formation, albeit of a multicultural kind; and a drastic attempt to restore the traditional symbols of British society. Like Lampedusa's Prince of Salina, Mr Major will promote the illusion of change so that things may stay the same. We shall continue to be faced with the prospect of propriety without virtue.

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