

by Michael Meadowcroft

There is a danger in being attacked by William Hague that one might be so proud that one confesses. So it was with his curiously snide comment on "the liberal elite". The inclination is to stand up and be counted, particularly as the alternative Hague promotes is so grim. And yet it would be a mistake to do so if one is concerned to chart key differences in attitude and response between Liberals and other non-Conservatives. Certainly there is a need to provide a reasoned and powerful refutation of reactionary Conservatism but the very different values that are urgently needed in a world starved of liberalism will not be achieved by being trapped within an amorphous catch-all "liberal elite" description.

Even in its own terms the phrase "liberal elite" is a misnomer. "Progressive elite" might, in a general sense be a more accurate description, but William Hague no doubt realises the dangerous response its use would provoke. The group of the progressive good and great immediately identified by The Observer contained hardly a single recognisable Liberal.

For over a hundred years Liberals have been unable to break out of that broad Left/Right nomenclature which places parties and philosophies on a spectrum determined by attitudes to control of the economy - which has never been liberalism's prime motivation. The left/right shorthand is by now so convenient and pervasive that I doubt whether there is a chance of it being abandoned in the foreseeable future. We have to live with it, but without accepting it. Because Liberals have been thus entrapped their parliamentarians have regularly been forced to struggle to "liberalise" proposals put forward by Labour politicians that purport to be progressive but which, from a liberal perspective, are highly conservative. This struggle is not to be despised, even if, as with the recent Freedom of Information Bill, it appears to compromise those Lib Dem peers involved. However, a Liberal Party's vital duty is to analyse issues, to identify the Liberal "line", and to promote a genuine Liberal progressivism. Only then is there the chance to fight on our ground rather than on that of our opponents.

Simply put, in relation to Conservatives' reactionary ideology, all Liberalism is progressive, but all "progressivism" is not Liberal. Even new Labour retains an instinctive affection for the state and for hegemonic control. In some policy areas, such as transport, Liberalism and new Labour attitudes are not far apart, though Liberals would give a much higher priority to promoting "community transport" projects on a co-operative, self-help basis. On most other issues, however, there is a vast difference between a genuine Liberalism and what is represented as coming from a "liberal elite". To identify the folly of a number of post-war "progressive" policies is not to condemn those who put them forward with the best of motives, but rather to demonstrate the disaster of the weakness of Liberalism. From the wide spectrum of issues there is only space to examine four - and even then in insufficient detail.

The 1944 Education Act is invariably represented as being the epitome of the progressive post-war consensus. Its effects are regarded as being a high point of educational opportunity and it is almost above criticism. From a Liberal perspective the reality is very different. Enabling a swathe of working class children to grasp a vital educational opportunity was a tremendous achievement, but, without that benefit being set in a liberal framework, its consequences were socially disastrous. Post-war educational opportunity enabled bright working class children to become middle class and gave them enough social mobility - encouraged by anxious and conscientious parents - to escape from unpleasant and repressive social conditions. To this day the 1944 Act has been partly responsible for denuding urban working class areas of their leaders. Without a Liberal perspective on reform there is little chance of considering policies holistically. For Liberals the integrity of the community is crucial to the health of the wider society.

Similarly the more recent enthusiasm for a national curriculum, for removing FE and all HE from local democratic determination, and for privatising poorly performing LEAs, may be "progressive" but is certainly not Liberal. By choosing centralisation rather than diversity Conservatives and new Labour believe that dangerous and illiberal nostrum that the end justifies the means.

Labour housing reformers of the 1930s were rightly angry at the horrors of the urban slums. They were determined to take drastic action to transform housing conditions and they therefore embarked on huge programmes of slum clearance and of council house building. These policies, decided on from a genuine progressive spirit and from the best of motives, produced the housing disaster of the vast single tenure, single class, council estate. This gross error was further exacerbated by the enthusiastic espousal of the high rise, often deck access, council flats. Without neighbourhoods containing a wide range of human society, and without the potential for each individual and family to move on step by step to better housing according to their means and their needs, there will always be the feeling of alienation and rejection. It is almost akin to forcibly putting poorer and more vulnerable people onto "reservations" and expecting them to put up with their awful circumstances docilely. The housing situation we still have in most large cities may be "progressive" but it certainly isn't Liberal.

The National Health Service is another repository of progressive myths. The NHS has never, and can never, deliver its aims. "Health", in its broad sense, has little to do with clinical practice. The huge extension of the expectation of life over the past 150 years owes nothing to the amazing technological advances in medicine. Rather, it is the result of pure water, sewage disposal, clean air and of vaccination and immunisation. "Progressive" opinion favours throwing vast amounts of money at the NHS, supposedly to reduce waiting lists and to enable hugely expensive medical innovation - including new proprietary drugs - to be more available. It simply cannot work and will not improve "health". A genuinely Liberal progressivism involves a considerable devolution of primary health care, moving to a limited list for prescribing, stressing preventive health care, including much better nutritional practice, and concentrating medical intervention to levels at which prognosis is generally better, rather than allocating far too much finance on hitech "frontier" surgery.

Finally there is law and order, that inevitable refuge of the populist determined to implement policies that have no basis in reality but which pander to a knee jerk public reaction. The task of political leadership and of public representatives in this policy above all others, is to lead, to explain and to persuade. Repression does not work. Prohibition does not work. Even more finance for current policing practice does not work. Deterrence comes from there being a perceived high risk of being caught, and not from a stiff penalty that is unlikely ever to be imposed. Worst of all we have that bizarre example of "progressive" policy, Closed Circuit Television in public places. It would be difficult to conceive of a more illiberal example of current thinking. The spy in the sky watching your every action. Permanent omnipresent surveillance. CCTV will not help catch criminals - it will push them elsewhere. And the inexorable consequence is to have cameras everywhere. Already we are seeing an increase in rural crime attributed to the existence of CCTV in urban areas. And even if it did - temporarily - improve detection rates it would be immoral. CCTV tackles the symptom not the disease. It gets in the way of genuine public-police co-operation and of real community policing. It is a vivid example of the end justifying the means and yet it is espoused by many of the so-called progressive left.

None of the Liberal stances required on these and other issues are easy or comfortable. They require courage and intellectual rigour but they are crucial to real progress and to the healthy transformation of our communities and our society.

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