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## Facets of British Classical Conservatism: A Bird's-Eye View

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### Introduction :

Conservatism is, perhaps, more a state of mind than a political ideology. In order to be conservative one must have something to conserve – property, status, power, a way of life, etc. Conservatives are therefore likely to be those who have power or wealth or status, and who simply want to keep things the way they are. In addition to this, a significant number of people, mostly the old and the uneducated, cannot imagine something different, or are afraid of change. They, too, want to keep their way of life the way it is.

The conservative ideology has its own inherent logic, which can be formulated in terms of a number of general principles like : (A) Conservatism does not agree with Social Contract Theory which is based on the consent of the people. (B) Socio – political life comes through customs and traditions by natural evolution. (C) They believe in gradual change and are oppose to radical and revolutionary changes. (D) They believe in natural leadership by birth. (E) In contrast to the supporters of authoritarianism, conservatives accept representative institutions and universal suffrage, and are particularly committed to individual rights and limitations upon government power through constitutionalism.

### The Political Society :

According to early British conservative thought, Society is organic and hierarchical. Classes and social groups fit together in the same way as do the various organs of our body. One is indispensable to the others, nor can it function without them. Relations between them must be harmonious and balanced. Each group and each class performs the functions that are necessary to the others for the good health of the 'whole'. Society is not like a machine in which the motions are eternally identical and where each part has no idea of what the other parts are doing. Unlike machine, society knows it has a purpose ; it grows and changes.

Society thus consists of interdependent parts - and all the parts are equally conscious of the interdependence. Each one does its own work, but what it does makes sense only when the whole is understood and valued. Society is not a 'mixture' of various roles, groups, qualities and activities. It is, as Aristotle said, much more of a 'compound' in which the parts are related with each other to become something different from what they are individually. They become a society.

Different functions and roles inevitably suggest a hierarchical organization and social inequality. Some of society's roles are more important than others, and some people do more important things than others. This means that there must be a subordination of some individuals to others. Persons endowed by nature with certain qualities that others do not have should play the most important roles. Equality and

freedom, therefore, are not acceptable to the conservative ideology. Rather it emphasizes 'rights' and 'liberties'. Material benefits should correspond to the talent shown and the work done. Men have equal rights but not equal things.

The 'Whole' – the society – is formalized in the Constitution. This is not a written document, and in fact there is no way, according to the conservatives, a constitution can be set down. The Constitution is a set of customs, understandings, rules and especially traditions that define political power and set limits upon its exercise. Power thus preserved by habit, custom and tradition becomes authority – that is, it is accepted and respected.

Thus, it is the Constitution that binds the citizens to its rulers and the rulers to the citizens within the nation. But the conservatives are not necessarily nationalists. To them the nation-state is a social and historical reality, the product of many centuries of common life and togetherness. But it is not a supreme moral value unless it has managed to embody justice and order. "To make us love our country, our country must be lovely," said Edmund Burke.

#### **Political Authority :**

In contrast to those who establish the foundations of political authority on contract and consent, conservatives find it in tradition, custom, and what they call inheritance. Society as a living whole is the result of natural evolution. For example, the Constitution of England and its various parts are an "entailed inheritance." One accepts it to live on it, but cannot waste it. Burke sees in the State something like a mystery : its parts and its majesty cannot be dissected, analyzed and put back together in the same or in a different way. "The State cannot be made," says Burke.

Conservatives therefore have no use for the 'contract' theory of the State propounded by the early liberals. They believe that the Contract Theory runs counter to the organic theory of society and to the role history and tradition play in the formation of a State. Burke insisted that even if there were a contract, it was shaped by history and tradition. And once made, "it attaches upon every individual of that society, without any formal act of his own." We are born into political society like our fathers and forefathers ; we do not make it.

#### **Change :**

Conservative thought is generally opposed to change unless it is gradual. Our "partnership with the dead" should not be broken, for fear that this would undermine the living and those still to be born. Innovation is suspect, and Burke claimed it was prompted by "selfish temper & confined views." As a result the conservatives fall back upon the existing and widely shared values that have kept the society together. Religion is one of the most important ; so is common law ; even prejudices. As Burke said, "wise prejudice, consecrated by long usage is better than thoughts untried and untested."

Religion, tradition, the common law, prejudice - they all give the individual shelter and solace. They provide stability which is a higher value than change. All these things, together with the State and its organs, must be strengthened with the proper pomp and ritual that appeal to the common people. The crown itself is a symbol which, through ritual, secures support and obedience.

If change, however, is to come, it must be natural and slow. Conservatives may even favour change in order to preserve. Change must reflect new needs and be the result of cautious adjustment with past practices. The British conservatives “allowed” for changes in the Constitution, which they venerated : thus came about the gradual extension of the franchise, the supremacy of the popularly elected House of Commons over the hereditary House of Lords, the development of a Civil Service based on merit, as well as economic and social reforms. But they did so often under pressure, and with the aim of preserving what they valued most. In their efforts to slow down reforms, however, the British conservatives remained firmly attached to the basic democratic principles of representative government, elections and the rule of law.

### **Leadership :**

The purpose of the State and its leaders is to balance the whole, to create unity and commonality of purpose out of diversity. Government leadership and decision – making should be entrusted to “natural leaders” - men or women of talent, high birth, property, with a stake in the interests of the country. Till the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many argued in England that noblemen could own whole regiments in the army, and the explanation given was simple - they cared more about England’s welfare than did the common people.

Thus, according to conservative ideology, quality and not election should be the source of leadership. Therefore, the conservatives fought against the extension of the franchise and did not accept the full logic of majority rule until very recently. The principle of one man one vote was unacceptable, and the notion that decisions could be made by simple arithmetic majority was considered as “a violent fiction.”

Conservatives believe that the natural leaders hold the interests of the country in trust. They act on behalf of the people and the society. The trust, however, is almost a complete and blanket grant of power – it is not a delegation.

Conservatives favour the Theory of Virtual Representation. Today we agree that representatives represent their constituency in particular and the country in general. Their capacity to make decisions is derived directly from the elections and from the “mandate” they receive from their constituency. Virtual Representation, on the other hand, is the capacity to represent and make decisions by virtue of qualities other than mere election. Conservative thinking, thus, returns to the idea of birth and wealth. Persons who have one or both can represent the people and the nation by virtue of their position better than elected representatives.

Thus the natural leaders should govern, and the many should follow. Many of the members and leaders of the Conservative Party in Britain still think that they are endowed with capabilities with which they can govern better than any other party and its leadership. They still believe that they can secure the interests of the country better than all others. They also think that the government has autonomous and independent powers to govern, and that once elected it is free to exercise them. Thus, there is an element of authoritarianism and elitism still present in the hearts of all good conservatives, along with a certain distrust for the ‘common people’ or the masses.

### **Constitutional Government and Democracy :**

It looks very strange that the British Conservatives and their Conservative Party are strong advocates of constitutional and representative government. In contrast to the European Conservatives, they did not waver in their support of democracy and parliamentary institutions. In this way conservatism, while representing the 'status – quo' groups, recognized the realities of social change and the necessity of guiding it and reducing its speed rather than preventing it altogether. Classic conservatives, thus, appear something like a well – controlled dam, not a fortress against the forces of all change.

After the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conservatives in Britain accepted major economic changes such as the establishment of Britain's Welfare State and the nationalization of its industries. They themselves also introduced social and economic reforms. The Conservative Party did not reject Labour's social, economic and welfare legislation. It, however, tried to slow their pace of reform until the society, in their opinion, was not in a position to adjust to it.

The Conservative Party remains staunchly committed to democratic principles. While the leadership of the party is given greater authority than in the case of other parties, notably the Labour Party, the Conservative Party has developed into a mass party. It holds annual conferences ; allows its various organs considerable autonomy ; holds free debates in which policy resolutions come from the floor and can be approved despite the opposition of the leadership. It now selects its candidates for the House of Commons without the consideration of their personal wealth and ability to contribute to their own campaign or to the party. In general, despite its close relations with the wealthier and upper status groups of the population, it has managed to appeal to and get support from many of the voters who belong to the working or lower middle classes. As a result, the Party has survived as one of the two major political parties in England. Since 1945 it has formed governments many times and, in 1992, the party created a history when it came to power for the fourth successive term. Again, the Party won three consecutive General Elections in 2010, 2015 and 2017 and hence the Tory regime continues in Britain since 2010.

### **Some Concluding Remarks :**

To sum up, some of the basic characteristics of British classical conservatism are : (A) There is a belief that society is like an organism and its parts are hierarchically arranged. (B) Authority should be entrusted to natural leaders. (3) A rejection of individualism and egalitarianism. (4) A strong belief in custom and tradition and an opposition to change. (5) Emphasis upon religious and ritual ceremonies to strengthen the union of the whole.

Yet at the same time there is a strong commitment to a government under law guaranteeing individual rights. An acceptance of representative government and with it an approval of the increased participation of all the people. An implementation of the Welfare State and above all, a rejection of authoritarianism. Conservatism has thus legitimized itself as an ideology consistent with democracy.

People who like change and innovation and find themselves at odds with the conservative ideology should not be much hasty in rejecting it. British Classic

Conservatism, as discussed here, was and remains a brake to rapid change. But it channeled the well-to-do and the masses into accepting gradual and peaceful change.

It is true that the Conservatives have been distrustful of human reason and majoritarianism. But they never attempted to control the human reason or to outlaw the majoritarianism. They presented their position and policies strictly in the context of democracy. The Conservative Ideology in Britain tamed the class that formulated it and disciplined its followers to act within the logic of individual and associational freedoms and accepted free political competition without which democracy cannot exist. They legitimized not only gradual change but all change if and when the people demanded it ; and they prepared their followers to accept change, if not always with grace, but at least without resorting to force.

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