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Ed Miliband and Disraeli: paternalism and interventionism [1]

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Ed Miliband seems to have appropriated Disraeli's famous slogan about 'one nation' government. Whether this is merely a meaningless catchphrase, an attempt to out-manoeuvre Cameron or has any real policy implications remains to be seen. Having raised the issue, it is interesting and instructive to reflect on nineteenth century government as well as what the phrase might imply for modern politics.

It is notable that Disraeli coined the phrase in 1844 as the 1840s were a decade which represents the high-water mark of Classical Liberal values in Britain and perhaps throughout the world - contemporary American and French had similar Classical Liberal features. That decade saw the repeal of the Corn Laws and Navigation Acts and the apparent defeat of mercantilism and economic nationalism in the UK. It saw the triumph of the Manchester school led by Richard Cobden and John Bright. It is worth remembering that these great strides for liberty were inspired by, amongst others, Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century.

Similar movements towards freedom were being made in the social sphere with, for instance, the abolition of slavery and Catholic emancipation. Fiscal retrenchment was the hallmark of mid-nineteenth century government, with great strides being made to pay down the national debt. How striking a contrast to today's politicians who fail to eliminate the public deficit and . Although Peel re-introduced the income tax in 1842, he and many other politicians were opposed to its use and aimed at its elimination. Peel's government also introduced the Bank Charter Act (1844) - a high-minded but ultimately misguided attempt to create stable, gold-backed currency. It is notable that both parties - Whigs and moderate Tories - were broadly sympathetic to these policies.

The most famous political slogan of that era is 'peace, retrenchment (cuts in government spending) and reform' - something which our modern politicians would do well to emulate. We cannot characterise the mid-nineteenth century as a period of true laissez faire as there was still a great deal of government intervention and whilst government spending was low, it is important to recognise that government was still very activist. There was much government intervention in social life via the Poor Laws and the education system. Nevertheless, the tone of times was towards liberty and equalitarianism (i.e. equality under the laws and the absence of discrimination by government) in general.

The 'one nation' position is one of paternalism and limited egalitarianism. Disraeli used the phrase as a political slogan in a bid to win the support of the new voters enfranchised in the 1867 Reform Act - an Act

which created far more voters than its more famous predecessor. In this he was doubtless successful; instead of being destroyed by Reform the Tories successfully adapted. The Whig Party, in Britain (unlike the US) the party of small government and free trade was, by contrast, was consumed by the Liberals. The Tories shifted their position to appeal to the new voters and sought to portray Whiggism as heartless individualism.

The following era saw a gradual shift in political positions of which Disraeli's slogan is a signifier. Whilst Disraeli himself was a showman and a populist, his 'philosophy' such as it is represents an opposition to Manchester values, much as does Bismarck's. Gladstone's Liberals represented a more fiscally conservative, Whiggish position. The 1860s-1880s period should be recognised as witnessing the 'Strange Death of Whig England', the causes of which are contentious but bear a good deal of historical study.

Again, both parties in this period turned to a more interventionist style of government, albeit in a limited fashion. In the sphere of political thought, the 'New Liberals' emerged led by Green and Hobhouse. Herbert Spencer in The Man Versus the State (1884) categorised this shift as the 'New Toryism' [3], a return of paternalist values blended to varying degrees with the contemporary collectivist ideas of socialism, imperialism and nationalism. By 1894 it was possible for the Chancellor WV Harcourt to announce that 'we are all socialists now' as he introduced death duties.

With Gladstone's death the Liberals emerged more strongly as the party of social democracy although the Conservatives, as they became, gradually adopted a more moderate version of this position. This point should not be too greatly over-stated, however; prior to 1914 government spending remained small by contemporary standards, there was little deficit spending and the currency was stable.

This gallop through history leaves much detail out, of course, but it should remind us of one or two very salient points. Ed Miliband is quite within his rights to adopt Disraeli's concept as his own as they both represent paternalism and interventionism. It is worrying, however, that both Miliband and Cameron laud Disraeli whereas very few politicians would adopt a Gladstonian much less a Cobdenite position (including the mis-named Liberal Democrats). It is interesting to observe how political parties tend to adopt slightly moderated versions of essentially the same position and actual ideological divides are rare.

In reality, all three major parties are offering greater or lesser degrees of managerialism. On a more hopeful note, it is also clear that ideas take a long time to become embodied as the prevailing doctrine. The ideas of Smith's generation took 40-50 years or more to become reality. It is our duty, therefore, to generate the ideas and methods to free ourselves from the welfare and regulatory state so that our grandchildren may benefit.

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