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The organic roots of oaks and free markets [1]

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?David Cameron will announce tomorrow that the oak tree has been dropped and the torch of freedom will once again be the Conservative party logo.? So wrote Benedict Brogan for atongue-in-cheek Telegraph blog [3]. Brogan?s mirthful explanation for this ?back to the future? change?

> *The move is being promoted by Downing Street as a ?decisive? switch that demonstrates the urgency with which the Prime Minister is advancing the cause of free enterprise and a more robust grip on the economy.*

Hold on, Mr Cameron, good news! The cause of free enterprise can still be championed by the Tory party?s venerable cultural symbol. As a traditionalist, for example, you will appreciate these inspiring lyrics from ?Heart of Oak? to rouse your industrious compatriots:

> *?Tis to honour we call you, as freemen not slaves, / For who are so free as the sons of the waves?*

Fortunately, too, free market economics is synonymous with the organic principles of generation and growth which should be at the heart of conservatism, modernised or otherwise. For in The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith praised the ability of entrepreneurs to struggle and triumph against adversity:

> *The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, the principle from which publick and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived, is frequently powerful enough to maintain the natural progress of things toward improvement, in spite both of the extravagance of government, and of the greatest errors of administration. Like the unknown principle of animal life, it frequently restores health and vigour to the constitution, in spite, not only of the disease, but of the absurd prescriptions of the doctor (II.iii.31[4]).*

In his 1974 Nobel Prize lecture [5], Friedrich von Hayek denoted this undirected, up-from-below phenomenon as ?spontaneous order?:

> *...in the social field the erroneous belief that the exercise of some power would have beneficial consequences is likely to lead to a new power to coerce other men being conferred on some authority. Even if such power is not in itself bad, its exercise is likely to impede the functioning of those spontaneous ordering forces by which, without understanding them, man is in fact so largely assisted in the pursuit of his aims. We are only beginning to understand on how subtle a communication system the functioning of an advanced industrial society is based?*a communications system which we call the market and which turns out to be a more efficient mechanism for digesting dispersed information than any that man has deliberately designed. *[emphasis added].*

Hayek?s discomfort with the ?power to coerce other men??whether for good or ill?and what Smith called ?the extravagance of government? and ?the greatest errors of administration?, is another reason why a return to the Tory torch (factual or otherwise) may be a bad omen, especially if it were meant to signal, in Brogan?s mirthful rendition, ?a more robust grip on the economy.?

As Smith cautioned, ?What is the species of domestick industry which his capital can employ, and of which the produce is likely to be of the greatest value, every individual, it is evident, can, in his local situation, judge much better than any statesman or lawgiver can do for him.? If a decision must be made in favour of either the individual or the State, the presumption must always be made for the wisdom of individual entrepreneurs.

> *The stateman, who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it (IV.ii.10[6]).*

So, oak or torch, modernised or traditional, the Conservative party must always stand for individual initiative in economic endeavours, cognisant of the government?s circumscribed role in supporting such entrepreneurship. And that?s no laughing matter.

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