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Unprincipled politics [1]

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At a meeting of our Next Generation group this week, *Sunday Telegraph* columnist Iain Martin talked about the various failings of the Conservative Party. His primary criticism is that the Conservatives under David Cameron abandoned their principles in favour of telling people what they wanted to hear. That might have been a decent electoral strategy when the economy was booming, but once the financial crisis hit it left the Tories rootless and incoherent, so that no-one (least of all the Tories themselves) had a clear idea of what they stood for.

I more or less agree with that position, with the caveat I?m not convinced the Tories were that principled to begin with. Even a cursory look at the Conservative Party?s history will reveal that Margaret Thatcher?s reputed ideological fervour is very much the exception, rather than the rule. Indeed, many Tories will tell you that the rejection of hard and fast principles in favour of ?pragmatic?, case-by-case managerialism is the essence of British conservatism. And as Sam wrote [3] yesterday, the trouble with that mindset is that it leads inevitably to the persistent, piecemeal erosion of individual liberty.

After the speech, a few people asked me what I really thought about the coalition government. My honest response is not a terribly positive one. On education and welfare reform, their policies are generally pretty good. Their deficit reduction plan, while far less impressive than the chancellor?s rhetoric would suggest, is at least better than the alternative (*I think that?s what they call damning with faint praise ? ed.*). There have been a few good moves on tax ? like raising the personal allowance and cutting corporation tax ? but it is hard to ignore the fact that they?ve has robbed Peter to pay Paul and skimmed off the top while doing it.

Beyond that, I struggle to think of anything nice to say. Certainly, when it comes to matters of personal freedom, this government borders on the fascist. The commitment to civil liberties that both parties claimed in opposition seems to have gone out of the window now they?re in government ? the electronic surveillance powers trailed last week are even more despicable and grotesque than anything Labour managed to come up with. And when it comes to food, drink and tobacco, the government couldn?t be more in thrall to the bully-state establishment. To be blunt, they plainly care not a jot for individual liberty.

I had hoped that coalition might mean the best of both worlds ? that the Liberal Democrats? civil libertarian, non-interventionism might be blended with the Conservatives? fiscal conservatism and suspicion of state power. That seems an increasingly forlorn hope.

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