

How a move further right will sink the Tories

by Ian Gilmour

It is profoundly unconservative for Tories to denigrate the economic policies of every Conservative government since that of Sir Winston Churchill. Yet it has become fashionable for some Conservatives to say that everything that was done in the past was wrong.

This argument is used both to defend the unique effects of the policies now being pursued and to bolster the extraordinary claim that there is no alternative to them.

Now history is being further distorted by the suggestion that the late Cabinet was the cause of the disappointments in the Government's economic policy. This is fantasy. As is well-known, economic policy was firmly in the hands of a small group of like-minded ministers. They had their way, and the Cabinet only occasionally came into it.

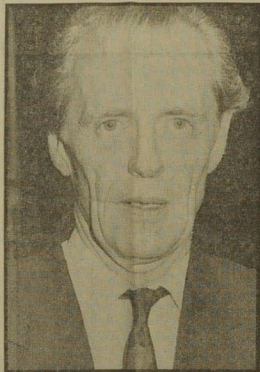
The pay explosion in the first year was partly due to Mr Callaghan's decision to postpone the election to 1979, partly due to the Chancellor's decision to increase the cost of living by heavily increasing VAT, and partly due to the belief by monetarist ministers that wages did not affect inflation and that anyway they

would be dealt with by the control of the money supply. No doubt, as has been widely reported, the Wets were responsible for preventing some cuts in public expenditure this time last year. No doubt too, some of them wanted to give aid to British Leyland and other nationalized industries. Anybody who believes that economic activity should be lower than it is now and unemployment even higher has every right to complain.

But now we are told that all will be well because the Prime Minister at last has a 'conviction Cabinet'. I am not sure what this means.

The chief difference in the last Cabinet was not between those who had convictions and those who had not, nor even between those who had their own convictions and those who had other people's, but between the Wets who had by and large held the same convictions over the years and the Hards who had mostly changed theirs fairly recently. In that sense the Hards had had more convictions than the Wets.

Yet a series of strongly held erroneous convictions is not necessarily a recipe for good government. Lord Montgomery used to think



that it was a good thing to take 15 decisions a day. A conviction Cabinet might do the same. Regrettably the important thing about both decisions and convictions is not their number or their strength but whether they are right or wrong.

Possibly a conviction Cabinet might mean a Cabinet that held the convictions of the Prime Minister. But looking down the list that hardly seems an accurate description. I conclude that the phrase a conviction Cabinet is as meaningless as the alleged division between conviction and consensus politicians.

In any case the Tory Party should now be ploughing off its ideology, not sharpening it up. Ideology, as Baldwin wisely foresaw, divides the country, and that is something the Conservatives should seek to avoid at almost any cost. For the Tory Government to move to the right now would be a



defiance of the laws of political gravity.

The Conservatives are very unpopular, probably more so than they have ever been. We regularly register between 25 and 30 per cent on the polls. Nobody can think that this has been caused by defections to the right.

The Labour Party is in a state of incipient civil war, its policies grow ever dotier, and it is manifestly unfit to govern. Yet it is still well ahead of the Conservatives, and in spite of the turmoil its standing in the polls has dropped only a little below its admittedly low point at the last election. That in itself should be enough to give the Tories pause before moving further to the right.

The Social Democrats and Liberals give the Tories every reason for moving towards the centre. Anybody who had suggested a year ago that a party not yet formed would

Ian Gilmour: "Now we are told all will be well because a Mrs Thatcher at last has a 'conviction' Cabinet. I am not sure what this means".

might indeed facilitate a Labour victory. They appear, therefore, to be a net more likely to ensure Conservative voters than to save Conservative politicians.

Yet the reasons for moving towards the centre are not solely or even primarily electoral. Not that electoral reasons should be despised. Parties exist after all to win elections. But the crucial reason is that because of the importance Conservatives attach to national unity the centre is the place where the Tory Party should always be. It is because it has usually been there that it has been in business for so long. If it had endured many other periods like the present, it would have disappeared ages ago.

Scepticism about fashionable orthodoxies, emphasis on the importance of the centre ground, the stressing of the British tradition of One Nation — all these are necessary but they are not enough. There are immediate issues which cannot be shirked. Public expenditure may be one, if another round of public expenditure cuts are proposed following on the glittering success that has attended all the previous cuts. And of course there is the issue of TINA ("there is no alternative"). Since the argument continues to be expressed that there is no alternative to present policies, there will presumably be great enthusiasm when alternatives are produced. I look forward to seeing it.

It is possible to regard the SDP as a safety net for the Conservatives: if Conservative unpopularity continues, the election will be won not by a left wing Labour Party but the SDP Liberal alliance, which whatever its other drawbacks is fully committed to the democratic tradition.

It is far from certain that the SDP will do Labour more damage than they will do to the Conservatives. The

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