

David Wood

## Sir Ian comes out of his shell

Not too long ago, during a small luncheon largely given up to a learned and fascinating discussion on breeding pedigree Charolais cattle, Sir Ian Gilmour's dual father-in-law asked how it happened that so very able a man seemed then to be making no deep mark in politics. I remember suggesting that in politics modesty and difference get you nowhere. It was, in short, time for Sir Ian to be a living illustration of several clichés: to come out of his shell, to stand up and be counted, to sit firm and not budge, and so on.

At last he has done it by his characteristically urbane and oblique lecture in Oxford on Conservatism. The text has won him a notoriety he no doubt finds disobliging, for he appears to have shown no vulgar zeal in seeking publicity for it.

Nevertheless, singlehanded he has won a propaganda battle for the wet members of Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet that the hard men and Mrs Thatcher herself have so far lost. The attention he has won among Conservative rank and file is disproportionate to the space he commanded in newspapers, simply because by an accident of timing he went to Oxford precisely at the time when political commentators were looking for evidence of Cabinet disagreements, splits, or even threats of resignation.

Sir Ian Gilmour, an unimpeachable source, provided that evidence. The only question left was who and how many stood four-square with him to what used to be called Butskelism, although it could equally be called Churchillskelism or Moncktonskelism? Label the political style and approach how you

will and must, it really amounted and still amounts to Conservative leaders' political and social jitters after the Labour landslide of 1945. How could the Conservative Party recover the working class electoral base necessary if it were to return to power?

There is a great deal in the Gilmour thesis that we may all agree with. Nobody either wants, or could get if they did want, a society divided at the roots. Nor does anybody now believe that such a government would be democratically governable. But, if general elections mean anything, they mean that a voting majority has accepted one view of society's needs rather than another; and it happens that Mrs Thatcher and her views of society's immediate needs, with the remarkable swing of working class votes, prevailed on May 3, only 10 months ago.

In essence, Sir Ian Gilmour now says that Mrs Thatcher and her colleagues, having been elected on one clear prospectus, must find another prospectus that would be more attractive to the electorate if they had a general election today. In other words, Mrs Thatcher, her Cabinet, and Conservative backbenchers must be prepared to make an about turn and head North instead of South, as every government since 1945 has done.

For him it is the business of government to intervene to ensure an economic and social equilibrium and keep society stable and, by implication, to superimpose corporatism on a general election mandate that has become inconvenient or untimely. All duty is on the Government; none is on the people.

It is a seductive argument, seductively developed. Since 1945 every government has used our money to pay blackmail, not only to the trade unions but no less to failing industries and to played-out regions dependent on textiles, coal, shipbuilding, steel, and car production. The Gilmour argument, if put to the people now, would probably win the day overwhelmingly. Paying blackmail is the easy way out. Trains run again, electric power comes back on, docks are cleared, garbage is shifted, turn the tap and water runs. Life returns to normal, and the British people apparently value

normality and pronounce blessings on any government that gives it to them. Yet nothing fundamentally changes. One blackmail payment has to be followed by another.

Because she fought a camera and television election, Mrs Thatcher said surprisingly little during her April-May campaign, but what she did say came as balm to the soul of most voters. She spoke for self-help. She said government would not be the last home for lost causes and failed industries. Government and country would live within their means. Industry that could not swim would sink. Most of those who voted liked what they heard, not least the promise that the power of trade unions to bring down three democratically-elected governments in nine years (1970, 1974 and 1979) would be somehow turned.

To be sure, it's easier said than done. That is why Mrs Thatcher and the Government have lost the initiative in presenting their case. You cannot make much of a policy of non-action, of staying on the sidelines. Mr William Sirs, the steelworkers' leader, for example, has made a far more plausible case in public than anybody within the British Steel Corporation and the Cabinet.

The fact is, of course, whatever the failures of government policy presentation and advocacy, that a large chunk of the public sector in the United Kingdom either pays itself too much or produces too little. Mrs Thatcher and the so-called hard men are determined to drive home the lesson. Sir Ian Gilmour and the softer men, who of course fully supported Mr Heath's U-turns between 1970 and 1974, want to avoid any confrontation that threatens, partly out of social compassion, partly out of un-Thatcherish guilt feelings dating back to before the war, partly out of electoral calculation.

Why, there are even Conservatives today who like Mr Wedgwood Benn begin to talk of import controls to protect Britain's failing industries. Once you accept the implied Gilmour thesis and work it to the logical end there is no conclusion to the blackmail we should all have to pay.

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