

The Deference Voter

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A study of the working-class Tory

This article has been written on the basis of a preliminary survey in Clapham and Stevenage.

THERE ARE many people in the Labour Party who still believe that the “working class Tory voter” is a myth. The working class Tory has been treated as an isolated deviant, a fabricated figment projected both by the Conservative Central Office and the left wing extremists to embarrass the Party. For some years, the Party has been geared, at each election, to “getting out the Labour vote”—the safe assumption being that the social composition of Labour’s support is a fixed, immutable fact, and that the only barrier to an electoral victory was the “reluctance” of the working class to cast a vote.

This picture has never, in fact, been wholly true, and it is less true now than it has ever been. What has still to be analysed and discussed are the characteristic attitudes of the large minority of working people who, at the last election, recorded a Conservative vote.

“The Conservative Party is the gentleman’s Party. They’re the people who have got the money. I always vote for them. I’m only a working man and they’re my guv’nors.”

The man who said this to me—a 61 year old plumber, living in a pre-war council flat in Clapham—might be thought untypical. He came from a country family—both he and his wife had been brought up in a Cotswold village—and the roots of his Conservatism could no doubt be traced back to the villager’s traditional deference to the local gentry. His work, too, may have been more than commonly deferential—much of his time had been spent in the buildings of Royalty, Government and the Academy. But his views were representative. They des-

cribe the main features of what might be called the ‘deference vote’.

“They’ve got the money, and the people with money are the people you look up to.”

These sentiments express the characteristic faith of the working class Tory. They are not survivals from a vanished past, nor do they appear to be declining. On the contrary. They were expressed as commonly and as emphatically by young voters in Stevenage—one of the newest industrial communities in Britain—as by the elderly in Clapham, an ageing inner London borough.

“With background and education, you naturally go to the top. I take my hats off to the Conservatives I recognise them as gentlemen. The Labour Party are only men.”

“The Labour Party are all against making too much money, and they don’t like the top classes. But I think you must have rich people to run the country.”

“I think the Conservatives are made for the job of government. They’re mostly men with money, and they’ve got more money sense. They understand it more. And there are the different universities and colleges they’ve gone to. It all helps, that sort of thing.”

These were some of the comments at Stevenage, where one third (31 per cent) of the seventy voters interviewed believed that political leaders should be drawn from families used to running the country.

The attitudes represented here are very deep-seated. Yet most commentators have ignored the significance of the deference vote and leave undiscussed the influences shaping it—the revival of the ruling class, the renewed power of business, the free-floating nationalism of Conservative Britain. They have looked at the

effects of prosperity rather than the facts of power. "Classlessness", affluence and individualism ("I'm all right, Jack"), and complacency are generally considered a sufficient explanation of the Conservatives' third term of office. But how far does complacency or "prosperity" go to explain the working class Tory vote?

"They Look After Us Now"

Clearly there are the complacent: "I'm all in favour of more for old people", said a plastic fitter, "so long as it doesn't fall back on us". Here can be seen a drift into a selfish individualism, which cuts away many of the more traditional attitudes towards the common provision of community services, etc. which were drawn upon in the creation of the Welfare State. But complacency and prosperity are often closely linked together; much more common was the belief that "everyone's more comfortable now".

Most people today *are* "more comfortable now" than they have ever been, even if they are not so well off or complacent as Conservative propaganda would have us suppose. There are, it is true, the "voiceless poor"—the submerged fifth, the aged, the injured, the unemployed and the sick: but they had been kept out of sight and mind too long to become, through Mr. Greenwood's first T.V. programme, a very real presence in the election campaign. In fact, one of the main effects of "prosperity" is not that, of itself, it makes working class people Tory, but that it blurs and distorts the picture which many people have of the country in which they live. Most people have in their minds a picture of the society constructed on the basis of their own lives and experiences. Labour placed a great deal of emphasis, in the closing stages of the campaign, on their plan for old age pensioners. But how urgent could this have seemed, for example, to the Stevenage housewife, who said, "There aren't any poor now. Just a few—in London?" For her, the poor had simply disappeared.

In Stevenage, of course, the prosperity is hardly surprising; it is a new town and a centre for two of the nation's most thriving industries—electronics and missiles. But it was in Clapham, where the prosperity is much less obvious, that people were most enthusiastic about it. "Education is very good, the children are really well cared for". "Working people are beginning to get some of the things they're entitled to". "People have never been so well off". "You don't know what it means to people like us to have a bath instead of a couple of curtains hung in the corner with two chairs behind it and a bowl". Naturally this influenced the election.

"There is a better class of living now and education has changed a lot. Young people just don't know what the old times were like. That's why so many of them changed."

"Labour have helped the working class a lot in the past, but we seem to be better off under the Conservatives than what we were under the Labour. They have done a lot for the working class."

All this is important, but it would be mistaken to conclude that the fortunes of the Conservatives depend upon

those of the economy, and to expect that the working class Tory will vanish, mechanically, with a downturn in the trade cycle, or—as Harold Wilson seems to suggest—with a change in the terms of trade. It is worth recalling that the two greatest Conservative triumphs of the century—the elections of 1931 and 1935—were won in face of massive unemployment and unexampled misery. Tories were steadily returned throughout the Thirties in some of the depressed towns of the North.

In the end, the Conservative support among working people depends, not upon income and employment statistics—important though these are—but upon the pattern of power that prevails and the image people hold of the nation and of themselves.

Since the election, far too much attention has been given to the supposedly "middle class" character of workers in the new industries and on the housing estates. They are said to have defected, at one and the same time, from class and Party.

The argument is plausible—but misleading. There are, of course, people on the move into the middle class: there always have been. Many of them vote Conservative, like Mrs. Richardson, a 35-year-old Clapham woman, who said:

"My father just worked; he didn't get anywhere. But my husband has got on. He's out to better himself. He's studied at night and that sort of thing. Now he has this job as a bank clerk. When you get out of the rut you feel that the Labour Party has not come along with you. You've changed, but Labour's where it was before."

Such people are saying something about the ageing, backward-looking image of the Labour Party, which is very important. They will, under present circumstances, always vote Tory as an expression of changing social status—though more so because of the image of the Labour Party than because of a deep conviction about the Tories. But the numbers are not substantially greater than they were in the past. A fair number of working class people do call themselves middle class. Sometimes this is to distinguish themselves from "the poor", and often they go on to describe themselves as "working men" "working class people". In both Clapham and Stevenage the majority of the Conservative's new voters were working class people. They described themselves as working class—"working people", "hard working class", "working class undoubtedly", definitely working class". It was *as working class people* this time, that they were supporting the Conservatives.

"I voted for them this time because the standard of living of the working class has gone up."

"They have done a lot for the working people. They've done more for us than what other Conservative governments have done. A few years ago I would have said they stood for themselves—making money and getting rich. But now they're certainly looking after us."

As well as those affected, in the way suggested earlier, by "post-war prosperity", and those who have voted Tory in the process of crossing over into the middle class, there are working class people, affected by neither fact, who are solid Conservative supporters. Who are they?

Nearly three quarters of the population is working class to judge by the Registrar General's classification—but Labour *has never* received more than a half of the total vote. Robert Mackenzie estimates that two fifths of the working class voted Conservative on October 8. This is a dramatic percentage, and although so little attention has been given to it on the Left, the Conservatives—busy since October 8 organising contracting-out among the unions—seem to know better. These working class Tories are often pictured as unorganised or ill-organised workers, with jobs, perhaps, in factories and workshops run on patriarchal lines, or shop workers and office employees, where they are peculiarly susceptible to the pressure of employers.

Perhaps working class Tories *are* more easily made in these kinds of occupations. But the fact remains that a strong, if minority, Tory support exists *traditionally* among working people. How have the Tories themselves conceived this support, and what is the relationship between Party ideology and Party support in the working class?

“They’re Born To Rule”

This relationship has not always been what it is today. In the early nineteenth century, the Tories—a landlord's Party at that time—were often anti-capitalist. It was a Tory, Richard Oastler, who led the Yorkshire textile workers in the fight for the Ten-Hour Day and the campaign against the New Poor Law. There were many working class radicals—notably O'Connor and Stephens the Chartist leaders—who saw in the Tories possible allies against the Whigs, the Benthamites and the Manchester manufacturers. It was in this context that Disraeli set out, for the first time, the ideology of working class Toryism. He called on the traditional aristocracy to become, once again, the leaders of the people and to end, through this alliance, the gulf which capitalism fixed between the “two nations”.

Disraeli's vision of ‘one nation’, each man in his order and degree, bound by ties of deference and obligation to the whole, has remained with the Conservative Party—Hailsham's picture of the ‘organic nation’ in *The Conservative Case* is the latest re-statement—but its content has been changed. Anti-capitalism, the original basis of working class Toryism, was discarded by the Conservatives when they became, later in the century, the united party of privilege and profit. Since Disraeli, the principal recipient of deference was business and the business class. The pretensions of the old elite were carried over to buttress the power of the new.

The relationship between the Conservative Party and the Tory working class vote has, therefore, been consciously re-defined since Disraeli's day. Today, the feudal and the bourgeois elements have been linked together. Today, the working class Tory believes *both* that “They're born to rule, they were brought up to it”, *and* that “They've got the money, they know how to use it”.

It is unlikely, therefore, that the *majority* of working class Tories see voting Tory as a way of acquiring middle

class status, or as a means of bettering themselves in the eyes of their neighbours. The aim of the working class Tory is not so much to draw nearer to his rulers in social status, but *to acknowledge the distance between them and himself, to defer to them precisely because* “they were born to rule”. His Tory beliefs often include a lively sense of his own inferiority in matters of state and economy, together with a settled conviction that these are not proper matters for working people to decide. Ruling should be left to the ruling class.

“The Conservatives have got more idea of what they're doing than the people who come up from the working class—the mines and such like. Working class people are not the sort to run the country, because I don't think they understand it really. I'm sure I wouldn't if I got up there.”

“It helps to have background. Leaders shouldn't come from an ordinary working class family like myself. I know I wouldn't know how to be a Prime Minister.”

The clearest statement of this deference view of politics came from Mr. Ashton, a Clapham warehouseman, who had voted Conservative all his life, and who described himself as “just an ordinary working man”.

“You need brains and money to run the country in an efficient way, and working class people can't have that. The Conservatives are better suited to running the country. They're better educated—I think there is nothing better than to hear a Public School man speak English—and they've had the experience. Unless you are a genius—which are very few and far between—I think the best men are those that are used to handling things like government. And that's obviously not the working class. With their upbringing the Conservatives are used to handling money. They know how to use it. They don't throw it away as the working man would.”

Views such as these were quoted as axioms—“Leadership is born in people”, “If a man has ability he will probably inherit it”, “The ones who have jumped up tend to be cocky”. They were thought by some to be as relevant to industry as to government—“The born and bred ones are the best for running things”, said a worker at English Electric when asked about leaders of industry. Nor were such views confined to Conservative voters: “I prefer to have a man who's been trained as a gentleman”; said Mr. Elton, a Labour voter, (“they look after the working man better”) and Stevenage engineer “the can handle men better”. These views about industry naturally led them to give political support to those who by birth and breeding, seemed obviously best suited to be the permanent political elite.

“The Conservatives have had more experience over the centuries. It's in the blood for them, running the country. There's more family background in the Conservatives, more of the aristocratic families, more heritage.”

“They're gentlemen born. I think they're made for that sort of job.”

“These old political families have the political education, don't they?”

One can see from these quotations that what we have called “the deference vote” is not a new or marginal thing. It is, in its way, a traditional vote, anchored in the very structure of the society today, affected by social changes as well as by political events over a long period

of time. Since the Nineteenth century, it has been shaped by the growing power of business, and, since the War, supported by the renewed ascendancy and confidence of the ruling class, fostered by the Conservative success in presenting themselves again as the more national Party, coloured by the free floating nationalism which has emerged in the years since Suez.

If the Left has not noticed the importance of the deference vote, it is because all attention has been focussed on the new Conservatism. A great deal has been said about the Conservative's changing 'image': Mr. Butler's 'backroom boys' and, latterly, the Bow group, are thought to have been the shaping influence on post-war Tory thinking; Mr. Amory boiling his eggs for breakfast, Mr. Marples riding his bicycle into Palace Yard, these are considered the characteristic, almost plebeian representatives of the new-style Tory Party.

But the Conservatives retain another, equally compelling image—that of the traditional governing class. It is significant that the Party has chosen to project its image through the persona of Mr. Macmillan rather than Mr. Butler. Labour propagandists who make fun of his raffish and downbeat Edwardianism miss the point of it all. A governing class, if it is to be taken seriously, must *look* like the governing class. Its leader must always appear in the confident stance of his class, arrogant on occasion, but always unruffled. "Unflappability" is the essence of the ruling class posture, and Macmillan's well-publicised grouse-shooting holiday—just before the announcement of the election date—was perhaps a more carefully-planned exercise than people supposed. Certainly Brigadier John Hincliffe—the man who made the Tories look sincere on television—knew what he was doing when he took viewers on that little trip to Chequers. How comfortable the ministers looked, ensconced in the seat of Authority! How *obviously* at home! Even some staunch Labour voters succumbed. Mrs. Walden, for instance, a 61-year-old woman who had moved to Stevenage to live near her children; she had voted Labour for 32 years—"we're all Labour people in my family"—but she admitted to feeling a little doubtful in this election, and she had been greatly impressed by Macmillan on TV:

"He looks what he is—very aristocratic. He's had a jolly good education, and he's very wealthy. I've always thought that showed itself. It's a good thing in a Prime Minister."

Deference may be offered at a greater distance than it used to be—watching the parlour television rather than standing at the country house gates—but it is none the less important.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Conservative achievement is that they seldom refer to the upper classes, and never argue the case for an elite-run society. Occasionally their true feelings come through—but they never actually proclaim that they *are* the governing class. The Conservative canvasser who was heard to say in the early hours of October 9, "of course the class war is over; we've won it" was not speaking with Central

Office sanction. Macmillan's remark was intended to show, rather that we have at last achieved "one nation", an open society in which abundant opportunities are available to all. This kind of propaganda has been remarkably successful, and the active belief in the Conservative "opportunity state" accounts for many of their votes. Seventy-two per cent of the Stevenage voters interviewed believed that there were equal opportunities now. "Everybody's more the same now" "It's up to the individual whether he wants to get on or not". "If you try hard enough you can get to the top. There are plenty of opportunities". "People are pretty well equal these days". Yet the people who said this were often those who voted Conservative because "They're the guv'nors", "they've got the money."

There is no more powerful argument for voting in the status quo than the fact that it is *there*. Seldom has it looked more securely established than it does today. The ethos of business now directly affects every sphere of national life. In the fifties, the confidence of capitalism has been steadily reconstructed, and its resurgence has gone largely unchallenged. The triumphs of businessmen make up the news of the day, their social life invades the gossip columns, their patronage hangs over the arts, their openings in business seduce the intellectuals. Fewer people see anything intrinsically wrong with the sway of private competition and the mechanism of the "free" market: more people regard "spending the taxpayer's money" as a kind of criminal folly or public sin.

"They've Got The Money"

In the big boom of the fifties, the ruling class has secured its power in the business corporations. And the more confident and powerful it looks, the more there will be people, prepared to yield or defer to its established sway. This is not to be interpreted narrowly—in terms of direct propaganda, such as the Steel Nationalisation Campaign—but more generally in terms of the atmosphere within which political attitudes or allegiances are formed. It is the overwhelming *presence* of capitalism which generates the deference vote.

"Isn't it better to work for a person that you know had got the money, than for a person that has a scheme, but won't be able to pay you at the end of the week. You can't beat the Conservatives to run the country. They've got the money, and if they didn't have it they would know where to find it. I'm a working man, and I would sooner work for a guv'nor who was Conservative than for a Labour man. Labour haven't got the money, and they don't know where they would get it."

"Labour's better for us, for the working class, but I think the Conservatives are better for the country as a whole."

"You must have the money and the Conservative people have got the money. If they didn't get in, they would hold the money back. They might circulate some, of course—just to make it look good—but not the same amount as before, because they're all for themselves really."

"The Conservatives do represent big business, and I think that makes them the more efficient Party. Running the country, after all, is just the biggest business of them all."

It is, then, *because* the Tory Party is the Party of business and breeding that the Conservatives win a good deal of their working class support. They present themselves to the country covered—in Lord Hailsham's phrase—with the "mystique of a traditional authority". Their appeal as the more *national* of the Parties—one of their most powerful self-images—is closely linked to this.

"Labour is good for the working class, the Conservatives are more for Britain, more for the good of the country as a whole."

"The Conservatives do more for us as a whole. They keep us together much more overseas. They have that flair, they're much more diplomatic. We've had much more prestige in the world with the Conservatives in power."

These are judgments of the traditional kind. They can be contested and debated, for they are rational arguments, even if they are wrong. But the 'national' appeal of the Conservatives is being overtaken and overlaid with something much more dangerous—the emotional appeal of thwarted imperialist sentiment. There is in the country today a mood of injured national pride—a free-floating jingoism—which the Conservatives have done so much to create by their policies in Suez, Cyprus and Africa.

"The Conservatives are for the Empire more than what the Labour are. I don't think we should let other people trample on us the way they do. I think we should be firm and not bow down to little dictators like Nasser. These little countries, they seem to throw us out when they feel like it. At one time they wouldn't have dared. First there was India went, and then there was Cyprus—all the trouble there was there. Now there are all these foreigners coming into the country. You've got these Indians coming over. If we were still governing India, they wouldn't be in such a state they'd need to come. I think everybody ought to stop in their own country."

This new model nationalism is only enthusiastically taken up by a minority of Conservative voters. But it has infected the entire Conservative side of the Suez debate. In the nationalism of previous generations Britain was cast in the role of "Jack the Giant Killer" (again the phrase is Hailsham's). Today nationalist sentiment is born of frustration and directed towards the little country. "It seemed a shame for the Egyptians to throw mud in British faces". "We shouldn't be trodden on by these sorts of people". It underpinned the qualified approval which a majority of those interviewed at Stevenage gave to the invasion of the Canal.

"Someone had to make a stand. We paid for the rights. Let these people see Britain is no longer a country to be trodden on. I hate that Barbara Castle, standing on her hindlegs and squawking."

"I think they should have carried on with it. We've been pushed around so much; we've always appeased people and its got us nowhere. That wasn't how we got our colonies. But nowadays the whole idea seems to be 'they want that, let them have it'—anything for a quiet life. Well I don't think that's right. You can't just go on and keep giving in. You've got to make a stand sometime. Labour's always been for appeasement—look at the way they helped that other bloke when he came back with 'peace in our time'—but its never been any good."

This article has attempted a 'model' of the Tory deference voters. It describes some of the common characteristics of the working class Tory. It is necessary at this point to qualify. Many working class Tories are

not deference voters. If some supported the Conservatives because "they've got the money", there were others who did not. And as we saw earlier, the pure deference voter retained many basic working class and Labour beliefs. "The idle rich", "the nobs", "all out for themselves", were among the things they said about the rich and the upper classes. Mrs. Edwards of Clapham, when asked what she would most liked changed said:

"There's something I don't believe in—that's Kings and Queens. This country would be a lot wealthier today if it was run with a President. It's not just them, it's all their relatives. We have to support them all. They could make Buckingham Palace like the Tower of London."

There have always been working class 'deference' voters. If their number has increased, it is partly because of what has happened to Britain in the Fifties. The Conservative appeal has been strengthened by the visible power of business, the celebration of business values, and the mood of frustrated nationalism. In the next five years the Conservatives are likely to appear even more 'national', for they will be shaping the nation in their own image. The business system will look more powerful than ever, the class system maintain its sway. Must we then conclude that the Conservatives will rule for ever? Will the number of working class Tories go on increasing?

The answer is less pessimistic than this article may at times seemed to have suggested. If the Conservatives have been gaining working class support it has been, in considerable part, by default. Seldom has the incapacity of the governing class to govern been more apparent than at the time of Suez. Yet Labour, after a one month campaign, preferred not to affront the prevalent jingoist sentiment. As a result many of those who were doubtful and shocked at the time of Suez were permitted to come round to support of the invasion. The Labour Party itself, between elections, scarcely touches the lives of many working class people: "they seem so distant nowadays", said a Stevenage woman, "you never see them except at elections". There is an alternative democratic view of the nation, but it has never been communicated with any force to many people. But the Conservative supremacy can only be contested if the Labour movement suggest itself as an equally imposing alternative presence to that of the governing class, with an equally compelling, but socialist view of the way this country can live.

This Article

is based on a post-election survey of 3 wards of Stevenage New Town. A random sample of 91 names (1½% of voters in the wards) was made from the electoral register. Of the 70 interviewed, 30 voted Labour, 7 Liberal, 29 Conservative. Of the 36 Liberals and Conservative voters, 19 voted Labour at one or more of the previous four elections. Of the 29 Conservatives, 20 were working class, 16 were "deference voters". Of the 18 working class voters who described themselves as middle class, 10 voted Labour 3 Liberal, 5 Conservative. The article also draws on 33 interviews taken in Clapham by a group led by George Clark. Our thanks are due to Stephen Hatch, Penny Balchin, Dick Leonard, Richard Pryke, Thea Vigne and Kathy Burton.