How to save the Tory party

Mark Steyn says that US-style local democracy could just save the Conservatives

Readers may recall that, back in the glory days of New Labour, I wrote a piece for The Spectator on how the Blair project seemed to boil down to the Canadianisation of Britain — i.e., the replacement of the hereditary House of Lords (which is hard to make the case for) with an Ottawa-style all-appointed Upper House of pliant deadbeats (which ought to be impossible to make the case for); the introduction of varispeed parliaments in the Celtic regions — or what Canadians call ‘asymmetrical federalism’ (Quebec controls its own immigration policy, Alberta does not). Even the desperate wannabe hipness of ‘Cool Britannia’ produced nothing tangible until last year’s Olympic gold medal at the hitherto Canadian sport of curling, providing final confirmation of my thesis that ‘Cool Britannia’ was cool mainly in the sense that Yellowknife in February is.

‘If it works for water, it might work for super-strength lager.’

I had hoped that Canadianisation would become the dominant paradigm through which the Blair era was viewed, but unfortunately it involves finding out stuff about Canada, which few Fleet Street colossi seem to be able to muster the energy for. Still, recent developments have reminded me of the general soundness of my theorem. For example, the collapse a decade ago and the inability to recover of the Conservative party. In Canada, even when there is widespread disenchantment with the government and its leader, this somehow never translates into support for the conservative opposition. In Canada, even when there is widespread disenchantment with the government and its leader, this somehow never translates into support for the conservative opposition.

Ring any bells? Here’s something else: because the unelectability of the conservatives is assumed by everyone from the media to the Leader of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition himself, what passes for competitive politics tends to be conducted within the ruling party. In Ottawa for most of the last decade, the talk was of when the prime minister would make way for the finance minister — his heir apparent and leader of the real opposition — and whether he’d reneged on any understandings he’d given his colleague re his retirement. Sound familiar?

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Following Canadian precedent, the next British election will look like this: at the start of the campaign, Mr Blair may well be considered to have outstayed his welcome and the Tories’ poll numbers may well suggest that victory is not entirely beyond the realm of possibility; but, after six weeks of prolonged exposure to Mr Duncan Smith and co., Labour will be re-elected with a comfortable majority. No wonder, as Michael Gove wrote here last week, that in the Tory party ‘a universal darkness covers all’. Last year, the universal darkness was because Edwina had carelessly slung a metaphorical pair of John Major’s grey Y-fronts over the conference. This year, it was Betsy Duncan Smith’s secretarial timesheet. There is no reason to believe this run of remarkably timely bad luck will not continue. But, in the event that the Prime Minister goes into serious decline or simply decides to chuck it, the impatient finance minister will be ready to step in and satisfy the public yearning for change by providing a pre-election switch of government — as is about to happen in Ottawa.

One other point of comparison: five years ago this month, Conrad Black launched a new Canadian national newspaper, whose personnel included yours truly, David Frum (who went on to coin — as he puts it — two thirds of the term ‘axis of evil’ for President Bush) and Martin Newland, who was recently appointed editor of the Daily Telegraph. Many Canadian media types complained that, although we were undoubtedly conservative, there was nothing very Canadian about our conservatism. By ‘conservative’ we seemed to have nothing in mind other than mimicking the Americans. Martin Newland’s only been back in London for 20 minutes and already
Stephan Glover’s hurling the same accusations at the Telegraph: it used to be conservative in a British sense, now its conservatism just boils down to being pro-Bush, pro-Likud, etc.

There’s something in this. It’s a little pathetic in a settled democracy to look like your political philosophy comes mail order from overseas. As it happens, the most foreign ideas — legal, constitutional, administrative — to British custom and practice are the ones the Eurofetishists have trumpeted for 30 years, but they have the advantage of being promoted by every bien-pensant in the land. As you might expect, I’m broadly supportive of the Tories’ proposal to introduce elected sheriffs — my own sheriff in this corner of New Hampshire, Charlie Barry, presides over an all but crime-free domain and his annual cook-out at the County Courthouse is one of the highlights of the political calendar. But, if I were a Tory policy cove, I’m not sure I would have called these chaps ‘sheriffs’. Though it is an ancient English word like many others still in use around here — we have elected sextons and constables, too — and while it is surely less foreign than the gobbledygook in the European constitution, it allows the headline writers to use phrases like ‘US-Style Sheriffs’ and damn it as somehow unBritish. Perhaps ‘Community Outreach Co-ordinator’ would have got the idea a better press. But anything’s better than quangos stuffed with the same old rotating baronesses, and you’d have thought even the anti-American types would have recognised that.

But that’s the point. What is British Conservatism? Is it the old House of Lords? Hunting? Or old maids on bicycles sipping warm beer as they’re sideswiped by the Eurojuggernauts on the bypass, as John Major rhapsodised. That’s gone, it’s not coming back, and it doesn’t leave much else. If you object to pinching ideas from the one country where conservatism remains a going concern, where do you look? If not George W. Bush and Strom Thurmond, who? Jacques Chirac? Ken Clarke? Stephen Glover, Matthew Parris and a big chunk of their Speccie pals? There doesn’t seem to be a big constituency for their worldview beyond the TV and radio studios.

But one of the problems with a highly centralised body politic is that it’s hard to get new ideas into the political bloodstream. If you want to know why Britain is a crime-infested CCTV hellhole, this sentence from last week’s Birmingham Post explains it all:

‘The Conservative plans include recruiting an extra 2,426 officers to West Midlands Police, 670 to Staffordshire Police, 633 to West Mercia Police and 311 to Warwickshire Police.’

Who’s Oliver Letwin to say how many extra constables Warwickshire and West Mercia need? Maybe Warwickshire needs an extra 633 and West Mercia can rub along with an extra 311. Maybe Warwickshire doesn’t need 311, but 308 or 327 or 294. Either way, why can’t the electors of Warwickshire decide the number of police they need? Why can’t West Mercia? Well, OK, there is no ‘West Mercia’ — you can’t find it on any map, it’s like the Lost Kingdom of Atlantis, or Narnia, the crime-ridden fairyland of some Home Office bureaucrat’s imagination you can only reach by going through the back of a wardrobe in Coventry, except some 12-year-old stole the wardrobe, despite the laser alarm system that had been installed in it. But even if you were to follow the yellow-brick gyratory system all the way to ‘West Mercia’, I bet no one, after their car radio’s been nicked there, ever says, ‘Cor, crime in West Mercia gets worse every day.’ The invention of phony jurisdictions known only to the quangos that preside over them is a reminder that the ‘democratic deficit’ is not merely a European disease.

If conservatism still has a point in Britain, it’s encompassed by the hoary Tory slogan, ‘Trust the people.’ That, after all, is the one thing the permanent political class, whether in Europe or Westminster, can’t quite bring itself to do. ‘To introduce locally elected sheriffs to oversee policing may be taking the democratic ideal a little too far,’ fretted the Independent, understandably enough. A centralised political culture necessitates a centralised media culture: the minute you start having little elections hither and yon for this chunk of their Speccie pals? There doesn’t seem to be a big constituency for their worldview beyond the TV and radio studios.

Needless to say, Britain’s police — overpaid, over-equipped and over you — are among the most useless on the planet, with vastly more manpower and much lower clear-up rates than the Yanks, and so quite reasonably they side with the Independent on the matter of local accountability: Thames Valley police chief Peter Neyroud is reported to be ‘concerned that Tory proposals on law and order might lead to far-right extremists gaining positions of political power’.

Each to their own. I’m concerned they might lead to Liberal Democrats and Greens and Plaid Cymru gaining positions of political power. Chances are, we’ll both be right. So why don’t we leave it to the voters?

Besides, ensuring that local government has no real power is the best way to deliver it into the hands of glib demagogues. Look no further than the mayorality of London. Imagine if Osama had hit Canary Wharf on 11 September, and then think about Ken Livingstone on your TV instead of Rudy Giuliani. If you want a self-promoting poseur, make sure that that’s all the job allows him to do.

Conservatism should be committed to as decentralised a politics as possible. If my town has lousy policing, it’s no skin off my neighbours 15 miles down the road. Conversely, if my town hits on a good idea, my neighbours are happy to borrow it. Decentralisation is the best way to ensure a dynamic political culture, full of low-key field studies. That’s one reason why every good idea Britain’s law-and-order monopoly takes up was started in a local American jurisdiction (the ‘broken window’ theory) and every bad idea was cooked up by the national Home Office bureaucracy (the gun ban).
Decentralisation is also the best way to get new politicians in. London’s Euroleft conventional wisdom disdains not only the rude unlovely electorate at large but also any representatives chosen from without the full-time political class. As the Guardian sniffed, ‘Putting Arnie in charge of the world’s fifth largest economy is like making Benny Hill Chancellor of the Exchequer: quirky but unreal — and not very funny.’ Get a grip, lads. Benny Hill would have made a terrific chancellor. Judging from his frugal lifestyle, he was certainly a fiscal conservative. Unlike British Leyland, he was hugely successful in overseas markets. More to the point, given the people who did become chancellor in his day, how good would he have to be? If it was 1976 and we had a choice between Benny Hill and Denis Healey at the Treasury, I know who I’d take a flier on.

As for Arnold, motion pictures are a key California business — like shipbuilding on the Clyde or sheep-farming in the Lake District, assuming for the purposes of argument there’s any of either still going on. I don’t see why his experience is less valuable than joining some nerdy think-tank out of university and then landing a safe seat somewhere you pass through on the train from time to time. I know Boris Johnson recently issued an eloquent plea on behalf of Eton as an excellent nursery for the MPs of tomorrow — hath not a public-school boy eyes? If you prick him, does he not bleed? Etc, etc. All very moving. But, although in normal circumstances I usually heap derision on the American Left’s platitudinous bumper sticker ‘Celebrate Diversity’, I can’t help thinking it has something to commend to Tories. I love the responsiveness of US politics, and the best way to find genuinely British Conservative voices is to introduce American-style localisation. British Conservatism will never have the gun nuts, anti-abortionists, Wall Street types and Christian fundamentalists who make Republican gatherings look like the result of a dating agency run by sadists, but, at a time when Labour, Liberals, Brussels and the media are ossifying into a closed shop of the likeminded, the Tories should be able to recruit far more widely than they do. If Oliver Letwin is so obsessed with micro-managing personnel, he should be musing on attracting another 633 viable Tory candidates in ‘West Mercia’.

Finally, here’s another lesson from Canada. Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal party was very successful at inventing a state in its own image and then promoting itself as the best party to run that state. Between them, the EU and New Labour are doing the same: the institutions they break are conservative, and the structures built to replace them are EuroBlairite. In such a world, the Conservative party, even if not eventually defunded or banned under some EU anti-xenophobia legislation, is likely to seem more and more out of place with each election it loses. ‘Damn your principles, stick to your party,’ declared Disraeli during earlier Tory feuds. But, when the Tories can’t get any traction out of traditional Conservative issues (law and order) and newer controversies on which the elite is out of step (Europe), it’s hard not to conclude that they’ve ceased to be an effective vehicle even for popular issues. Right now, pace Disraeli, it’s the party that looks damned.