

# **WHY F A HAYEK IS A CONSERVATIVE**

**By Dr Madsen Pirie**

This piece by Dr Madsen Pirie was published in 1987 at the end of a tribute to F A Hayek by many distinguished scholars. The book was 'Hayek — on the fabric of human society.' Hayek himself died within five years, but lived to see socialism perish earlier, as he had said all false religions do.

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# WHY F A HAYEK IS A CONSERVATIVE

By Dr Madsen Pirie

At the end of his *Constitution of Liberty* in 1960, Professor F A Hayek appends a famous postscript entitled 'Why I am Not a Conservative.' Conservatives in many countries who look to Hayek for ideas and inspiration have this essay raised against them from time to time. Indeed, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, as British Prime Minister, was herself challenged in a radio interview on the BBC. She had claimed the influence of Hayek's ideas; it was her recommendation which secured him the title of Companion of Honour. Even so, the interviewer reminded her of the title of Hayek's postscript, leaving Mrs. Thatcher to claim that F A Hayek would certainly approve of much of what she had done. This was correct.

## Hayek's argument

Hayek's case in that essay was a straightforward one. He denied the identification as a conservative because conservatives wanted to keep things as they were, whereas he wanted to change them in the direction of greater freedom. Conservatives had no political destination in view, whereas Hayek wanted to move towards a free society. Conservatives accepted a status quo hostile to liberty, whereas he rejected it. In his judgement, 'Conservatism proper is a legitimate, probably necessary, and certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change.'<sup>1</sup>

'Let me now state,' he adds, 'what seems to me the decisive objection to any conservatism which deserves to be called such. It is that by its very nature it cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving. It may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments, but, since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continuance. It has, for this reason, invariably been the fate of conservatism to be dragged along a path not of its own choosing.'<sup>2</sup>

Hayek was emphatic in his rejection of conservatism. He dwells on the points of differences, and minimizes the areas of contact and co-operation. Although conservatives find themselves from time to time in harness with those who seek a free society, Hayek argues this is no more than an accident of circumstance. It is the joint opposition to socialism which makes them appear to be allies: 'At a time when most movements that are thought to be progressive advocate further encroachments on individual liberty, those who cherish freedom are likely to expend their energies in opposition. In this they find themselves much of the time on the same side as those who habitually resist change.'<sup>3</sup>

In a perceptive piece of analysis, Hayek shows that in the United States tradition is to a great extent the tradition of liberty. 'Defence of the existing,' he says, 'is often a defence of freedom.'<sup>4</sup> The point could be argued in detail, and may not be as widely accepted today as it would have been when Hayek wrote, but there is a case to be made for the view. It is thus possible for conservatives in America to equate the society they wish to sustain with a free one, or one which is comparatively free.

In Europe, by contrast, the establishment of free societies would often involve the rejection of traditions averse to liberty. Hayek's point is that the distinction between liberty and Conservatism might be blurred for an American audience, but is sharply visible in Europe, even when both are working together against the further

encroachments of collectivism. The one, says Hayek, seeks to slow the pace of change, whereas the other wants to move in a different direction. An American trying to slow the pace of change could be slowing the rate at which traditional freedoms are eroded.

'I personally cannot be content,' Hayek tells us, 'with simply helping to apply the brake. What the liberal must ask, first of all, is not how fast or how far we should move, but where we should move.'<sup>5</sup>

Hayek depicts conservatives as following helplessly in the wake of progress toward socialism. 'As the socialists have for a long time been able to pull harder, the conservatives have tended to follow the socialist rather than the liberal direction.'<sup>6</sup>

### **Other conservative writers**

Hayek's own stress on the difference between himself and the conservative position is reinforced by some conservative writers. In his *Rationalism in Politics*, Michael Oakeshott refers to Hayek by name, describing Hayek's rejection of ideologies as an ideology itself. While being admittedly better than other ideologies, its philosophical origins deny it admission into the conservative camp. 'A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite,' observes Oakeshott, 'but it belongs to the same style of politics.'<sup>7</sup>

Russell Kirk in *The Conservative Mind* takes a similar view. After dealing with the traditionalist conservatives, he turns to those whose support is for a free society, saying 'Turn we now to the gentiles.'<sup>8</sup> His 'gentiles' include such thinkers as De Tocqueville and Macaulay, and would, if he were admitted at all, include Hayek.

Hayek himself is so sure that he is not a conservative that he tries to find a name suitable for those who espouse views such as his. He rejects the term 'Liberal' as being too debased both in the United States and in Europe by the enemies of liberty. 'What I should want is a word which describes the party of life, the party that favours free growth and spontaneous evolution. But I have racked my brains unsuccessfully to find a descriptive term which commends itself.'<sup>9</sup> After something of a struggle, the best term he can produce is 'Old Whig,' because 'it was the ideals of the English Whigs that inspired what later came to be known as the liberal movement.'<sup>10</sup> But he admits the term is inadequate.

### **HAYEK AND CONSERVATISM**

Given the title of Hayek's postscript and his own determination to emphasize the points of difference, the writer who ventures to disagree has to make a case. It is possible to argue that Hayek's interpretation of conservatism needs an overhaul, or that Hayek himself has changed in the quarter century since the essay was published. I intend to argue for both of these positions.

It is not sufficient to redefine conservatism so that it includes Professor Hayek, nor to produce present-day conservatives who happily embrace the name while simultaneously espousing the views of F A Hayek. A case can be made, however, for suggesting that Hayek has drawn no distinction between the conservative temperament and the conservative political tradition. My contention is that there is such a distinction, and that it is an important one.

## **The meaning of conservatism**

The term 'conservative' is used to describe both an attitude of mind and a political tradition. Thus a lifelong supporter of the left can be described as 'conservative' if he or she exhibits a reluctance to accept change or to move with new ideas. The trade union movement in Britain, and especially its leadership, was for a long time described as 'conservative' even though it worked to secure the election of collectivist, even radical, governments.

Lord Hugh Cecil describes conservatism as 'a disposition averse from change,'<sup>11</sup> and Michael Oakeshott speaks of the conservative 'disposition.'<sup>12</sup> Both of them have as their subject matter an attitude of mind. What they describe is a psychological trait, or a tendency to behave in certain ways. The conservatism to which they refer is an aspect of personality.

Among the differences of temperament between people is their reaction to change and their sense of adventure. It is a valid and useful distinction to point to. Some people by nature prefer the quiet life and like to keep things the same. More adventurous souls forever seek out new challenges and opportunities.

Hayek himself is by no means 'conservative' in this sense of the word. His own disposition is far from staid. On the contrary, it is characterized by intellectual curiosity and a readiness to be stimulated by new ideas. Few people have sought in their mid eighties the challenges which Hayek took on, or displayed the same enthusiasm for intellectual excitement.

But Hayek's postscript is not intended to tell us primarily about his personality. He does tell us directly of the way he embraces change, and the readiness with which he accepts an unpredictable outcome for society. 'The chief need,' he tells us, is 'to free the process of spontaneous growth from the obstacles and encumbrances that human folly has erected.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, 'to pretend to know the desirable direction of progress seems to me to be the extreme of hubris. Guided progress would not be progress.'<sup>14</sup> Because he equates the disposition to reject change with the conservative political tradition, Hayek declines the label.

It is by no means obvious that the disposition does equate with the political tradition. Those of conservative bent tend to avoid the process of political activity altogether. They prefer instead to spend time on the things of permanent value. As Quintin Hogg put it, 'the simplest among them prefer fox-hunting — the wisest religion.'<sup>15</sup> It is very rare indeed to find one of conservative disposition who is prepared to engage in active politics. History accords few examples of those who have embarked upon political activity in order to stop it.

Contentment is not the hallmark of the politician; activity and change are the very stuff of politics. The occasional lord might be thrust into the upper chamber by chance of inheritance, but those of conservative inclinations would not normally be active participants. It is possible that some may have been motivated to such a life of toil by the concept of duty; but this is something which more politicians plead than feel. Lord Eldon, who spent a life in politics voting against everything, is an exception so noteworthy that a society was formed to commemorate his achievement.<sup>16</sup> If the conservative political tradition were limited to this type of performance, there would be very little of it.

## **The imposition of change**

The point is that there is a distinction between the mere dislike of change and the practice of conservative politics, even though it is a distinction not drawn by Hayek. Conservatives in politics are not united by similarities in personality, but by their attitudes to society. If we list under the banner of conservatism figures as diverse as Burke, Liverpool, Peel, and Salisbury, right down to Churchill and Thatcher, we find major differences of temperament at once obvious. Some were optimists, some pessimists. Some were gregarious, some withdrawn.

What unites them is not an aversion to change, but an aversion to imposed change. All of them have embraced certain types of change and opposed others. Some introduced change. The unifying factor is an opposition to those changes which attempt to impose a pre-conceived plan upon society. What they have sought to preserve is not any particular state of society, but its spontaneity. Their opposition has been to the type of changes which seek to produce a particular outcome and to make people live in a particular way.

'We must all obey the great law of change,' says Burke. 'It is the most powerful law of Nature, and the means perhaps of its conservation.'<sup>17</sup> Robert Schuettinger concludes in his analysis of conservatism that 'The intelligent conservative will not be content simply to stand like a rock for order and tradition.'<sup>18</sup> Even Michael Oakeshott says that being conservative 'is also a manner of accommodating ourselves to changes, an activity imposed upon all men.'<sup>19</sup>

Burke's objection to the French revolutionaries was not derived from an obsessive dislike of change. He recognized that changes are sometimes necessary. What he objected to was the attempt to make society conform to a rational plan. Burke's conservatism was founded in his rejection of endeavours to produce a preconceived outcome.

A body of tradition, in Burke's scheme of things, is not a fixed status quo to be preserved, but something which enables changes to be made safely. Burke's determination is to preserve the circumstances under which society can evolve over time, and to prevent attempts to make it conform to rational precepts. Society is too complex to be planned by the mind of man, he thought, and should reach its outcome as a result of the actions of large numbers of people made over a long period of time.

Burke reflects here the 'healthy skepticism' which Schuettinger has conservatives show 'toward grandiose plans for reform.'<sup>20</sup> 'We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.'<sup>21</sup>

Traditions can guide people by the accumulated wisdom they represent, but even traditions change over time. The outcome must be a spontaneous one, with the inputs of many persons over time.

The conservative political tradition seeks not to preserve any given state of society, but its spontaneity. It seeks to retain, or to restore, the conditions under which the pattern of society is not determined by the actions of an individual or a group who try to mould it to fit a vision, but emerges instead from the accumulated inputs of the many. To borrow and adapt Oakeshott's famous metaphor, what conservatives object to is the attempt to steer society.<sup>22</sup>

Under conservatism, people make choices. Their future, and that of their society, is not made to conform to the grand design of some idealist, but is instead a cumulative result of independent actions. The individuals do not try collectively to achieve any particular goal; the outcome is the overall result of all of their actions.

Most people follow traditions because they are brought up to do so, because they like to do so, or because it is easier and safer to do so. When traditions change, conservatives would have it that they do so because their value has declined, or because circumstances have changed, and because people have developed different traditions to replace them. What conservatives object to is the deliberate abolition of traditions because they have been examined and found wanting, because they fail to produce the social goals desired by the legislators.

By opposing plans to make society conform to a preconceived end, conservatives have established a political tradition which links Burke and Churchill, Peel and Salisbury, Liverpool and Thatcher. It tries, as R J White puts it, 'to legislate along the grain of human nature rather than against it,' and seeks 'to pursue limited objectives with a watchful eye.'<sup>23</sup>

Conservatives in politics may or may not have shown conservative temperament or disposition. They may have supported empires, opposed corn laws or ended rationing. What has united them has been their determination to let society evolve in its own way, instead of being steered toward some predetermined end. Causes come and go, but the principles by which conservatives approach them remain.

### **Conservatism and the free society**

It is necessary to draw this distinction between the conservative disposition as a personality trait and the political tradition which bears the same name, because while Hayek eschews the former he can be accommodated within the latter. Hayek's own desire to move towards a freer society fits in well with the conservative preference for a society whose outcome is the product of actions by its members, rather than that of rules imposed by leaders.

Hayek would unquestionably endorse Winston Churchill when he said 'We seek a free and varied society, where there is room for many kinds of men and women to lead happy, honourable and useful lives. We are fundamentally opposed to all systems of rigid uniformity in our national life.'<sup>24</sup>

Churchill's recognition of the necessity for a large measure of individual freedom would similarly attract Hayek's approval. 'Let the people use their good common sense, multiply the choices which are open to them at every difficult phase in their lives,' is Hayek distilled for the hustings, but the words are those of Churchill.<sup>25</sup>

A century earlier Disraeli had described the fact that an Englishman is 'born to freedom' as among 'the noblest of all inheritances.'<sup>26</sup> 'We value our freedom principally,' he had said, 'because it leaves us unrestricted in our pursuits.'<sup>27</sup>

Hayek's notion of a spontaneous order accords with the conservative rejection of a planned order superimposed upon society. Even the conservative distrust of rational planning finds its echo in Hayek's contention that society itself holds more information than can be found in the brain of any individual or small group. While Hayek is at pains to deny that the sum of the knowledge of individuals exists anywhere as an integrated whole, he does speak of there being 'much more "intelligence" incorporated in the systems of rules of conduct than in man's thoughts about his surroundings.'<sup>28</sup>

At the time of the postscript, Hayek was perhaps influenced by the fact that some parties which called themselves Conservative appeared to have embraced central planning, and were not trying to restore to society the spontaneity it had yielded to rational design.

'In many parts of Europe,' Hayek tells us, 'the conservatives have already accepted a large part of the collectivist creed.' He cites 'advocates of the Middle Way with no goal of their own' as the ones who have compromised with socialism.<sup>129</sup>

From the perspective of a quarter of a century later, we can see that this was a temporary phenomenon. Conservatives have reasserted since then, in several countries, the rejection of a central design, and the determination to allow society's course to be determined by the actions of its members.

A marked contrast appeared briefly in Britain between the conservative disposition and the political tradition. Those who opposed change found themselves supporting a socialist status-quo against conservatives of the political tradition seeking to bring back the spontaneity lost to central direction. Margaret Thatcher appeared as radical to them as no doubt did the conservatives who in the first half of the nineteenth century unwound the cumbersome controls and mechanisms of the eighteenth century.

Winston Churchill sought to restore in his 1951 administration some of the spontaneity lost to socialism.<sup>30</sup> Mrs. Thatcher did no less in 1979. F A Hayek would find no difficulty in supporting both of them, and indeed, the general tendency of conservatives to sustain spontaneity against the encroachments of the designers when it is present, and to restore it when it is lost. He points out that 'Follies and abuses are no better for having long been established principles of policy.'<sup>31</sup>

## **Rational planning**

Hayek shares with the conservative political tradition the skepticism of rational planning from the centre, preferring that which is done by individuals. He shares that tradition's respect for choices made by individuals, and perhaps even its view that most of those choices will be to follow the traditions and customs which have evolved in society. Hayek sees tradition as 'not something constant, but the product of a process of selection guided not by reason but by success. It changes but can rarely be deliberately changed.'<sup>32</sup> He adds that '*all progress must be based on tradition. We must build on tradition and can only tinker with its products.*'<sup>33</sup> (his italics).

There have always been issues superimposed on the general strands which unite conservatives over the centuries. At one time it might be imperial preference, at another it might be the question of British entry into the European Economic Community. The issues arouse opposition from within the conservative movement, as well as from outside it. The point is that the issues do not define the Conservative parties, and never have. The central unifying aspect of political conservatism is an attitude to society which is clearly shared by Hayek himself.

Hayek credits Adam Smith with the perception that 'we have found a method of creating an order of human co-operation which far exceeds the limits of our knowledge. We are led to do things by circumstances of which we are largely unaware. We do not know the needs which we satisfy, nor do we know the sources of the things which we get. We stand in an enormous framework into which we fit ourselves by obeying certain rules of conduct that we have never made and never understood, but which have their reason.'<sup>34</sup>

It is part of the conservative disposition to fear the unknown. A predictable outcome is regarded more sanguinely than a leap into the dark. Yet the political tradition continually seeks to reject plans which purport to lead to a predictable outcome in favour of allowing society to reach unknown conclusions by the aggregate behaviour of its members. It is 'the socialist who wants to reconstruct all social institutions according to a pattern prescribed by his individual reason.'<sup>35</sup> Political conservatives do not seek any particular order; they seek the unknown one which will emerge gradually if preconceived ends are denied.

On this point, too, Hayek is in agreement with conservatism's political tradition, and out of accord with the disposition. He tells us in the postscript that he has no fear of the unknown outcome. 'The fact that I prefer and feel reverence for some of the traditions of my society need not be the cause of hostility to what is strange and different.'<sup>36</sup> His supposition is that the spontaneous order which arises as society evolves is more likely to be acceptable than any conceived in the mind of man. His thoughts match the view of conservatives that the traditional practices and culture of a society are a surer guide than rational analysis.

It is clear from the foregoing that Hayek's rejection of the label 'conservative' arises from his equation of it with simple hostility to change, rather than with the more complex attitudes characterized by the conservative political tradition. Once the distinction is made and established, Hayek's views can be seen as fitting in comfortably with the latter. He might indeed occupy a position which stresses freedom and choice more than some who are called conservatives, but these ideas have always played a significant role in conservative political history. Churchill himself saw the choice as 'between two ways of life; between individual liberty and state domination; between the concentration of ownership in the hands of the State and the extension of a property-owning democracy.'<sup>37</sup>

## HAYEK'S CHANGING VIEW

The second prop of the argument that F A Hayek is a conservative is that Hayek has changed, and that the F A Hayek who wrote the postscript in 1960 can be seen as more conservative a quarter of a century later. My point here is not that Hayek has changed his views, but that he has changed his emphasis.

The areas which Hayek has explored since writing *The Constitution of Liberty* do not represent any marked philosophical shift. On the contrary, all of them are presaged by remarks made in his earlier work. The difference is that what appeared then as points made in passing have since become central. What appeared in the guise of qualifying remarks barely noticed have become dominant themes in his thought.

A comparison of Hayek's work before *The Constitution of Liberty* and after it might lead one to suppose that the libertarian at sixty became a conservative by his mid-eighties. It is not the case I propose to argue. Instead my claim is that even in his early works, Hayek shows due deference for the concerns which were later to occupy the major part of his thought. In 1945 he had written: 'We make constant use of formulas, symbols, and rules whose meaning we do not understand and through the use of which we avail ourselves of the assistance of knowledge which individually we do not possess. We have developed these practices and institutions by building upon habits and institutions which have proved successful in their own sphere and which have in turn become the foundation of the civilization we have built up.'<sup>38</sup>

Hayek has changed, but it is not a change of ideas, but of the attention devoted to them. In changing his emphasis, Hayek has brought to the surface the conservatism



which was always implicit. In *The Constitution of Liberty* Hayek spoke of the mind as a 'product of civilization' and referred to the experience which shaped it as 'embodied in the habits, conventions, language, and moral beliefs which are part of its makeup.'<sup>39</sup> 'Civilization,' he told us, 'enables us constantly to profit from knowledge which we individually do not possess.'<sup>40</sup>

## Earlier works

Through the pages of the earlier works strides the autonomous individual making choices. Nowhere is this presence writ larger than in *The Constitution of Liberty*. He or she knows more about their circumstances, and cares more. They are better equipped to make decisions and plans than is any central authority. The moral argument and the practical argument ride in harness. No-one has the right to take away that power of decision, and the result of its exercise will be a more efficient allocation of resources and wealth creation.

'Liberty' says Hayek, 'is not merely one particular value. It is the source and condition of most moral values.'<sup>41</sup> If it is usurped by central planners, then people are denied the very basis of morality, and that which makes them distinctively human. Instead of being equal citizens of the kingdom of ends, they are reduced to mere building blocks for the private utopia of another.

Furthermore, a society which allows us to pursue our advantage as we perceive it will be more efficient at delivering the goods. It will be more flexible, more adaptable to the changes constantly taking place, and will direct resources to where they will be used to best advantage. When we are free to make choices, and to take part in voluntary transactions, the price mechanism will be able to direct people toward supplying the needs of those they will never meet.

So forceful are the arguments for the free choices of autonomous individuals that *The Constitution of Liberty* has been hailed as a classic libertarian text. It builds on John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*,<sup>42</sup> reproducing some of Mill's arguments in more subtle and complex form, and adding more sophisticated ones of its own, while avoiding Mill's occasional pitfall.

## The later Hayek

The Hayek who wrote *Law, Legislation and Liberty* in the 1970s, *Knowledge, Evolution and Society*, and *The Fatal Conceit* in the 1980s talks in different tones. His attention has switched to the way in which societies evolve, and which of them survive. In his 'The Three Sources of Human Values' he deals with the sources of our values. Those we think up are minor, as are those we inherit biologically. By far the most important source is transmission by cultural inheritance. '*Culture is neither natural nor artificial, neither genetically transmitted nor rationally designed.*' (his italics) It is a tradition of learnt rules of conduct which have never been 'invented' and whose functions the acting individuals usually do not understand.'<sup>43</sup> 'What has made men good is neither nature nor reason but tradition.'<sup>44</sup>

Hayek rejects the sociobiologists in large measure. He sees 'no justification for some biologists treating evolution as solely a genetic process.'<sup>45</sup> But he also dismisses values derived rationally.

In assigning prime place to cultural transmission, Hayek appears to downgrade the role of the autonomous individual thinking things out and coming to rational

conclusions. Evolution, albeit cultural evolution, has displaced the individual rational mind from the pedestal it appeared to occupy.

Those who thought that *The Constitution of Liberty* or early parts of *Law, Legislation and Liberty* represented attempts to show the framework of a rational society based on the principle of liberty may have felt unease at the new direction of Hayek's thought. Hayek says explicitly that '*Man did not adopt new rules because he was intelligent. He became intelligent by submitting to new rules of conduct.*'<sup>46</sup> (his italics).

The title of *The Fatal Conceit* is significant. It arose from an old challenge, never accepted, to have the proponents of socialism engage in public debate with Hayek and his supporters. In writing *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek writes his life's enemy into its grave. But there is more. The fatal conceit is that of man who thinks he can construct human society to a pattern.

Hayek points out that there have been many human societies, and many experiments with new ones. Those which survived were the ones which incorporated traits conducive to survival. Hayek never goes into great detail about this, but does stress the family and private property as institutions without which societies have not survived for any length of time.

'We do not owe our morals to our intelligence: we owe them to the fact that some groups uncomprehendingly accepted certain rules of conduct — the rules of private property, of honesty, and of the family — that enabled the groups practising them to prosper, multiply, and gradually to displace the others.'<sup>47</sup>

In his later works, Hayek's account of the development of our moral values draws more heavily on evolutionary mechanisms than it does on the rational decisions of autonomous minds. 'Moral advance by some groups results from their members adopting rules which are more conducive to the preservation and welfare of the group.'<sup>48</sup>

We emerged from the society of the hunting pack by a process of cultural evolution, says Hayek. Those groups which were able to set aside the moral values of the small group were the ones which prospered and spread. Instead of sharing, some groups learned to store and accumulate wealth, and to trade. Hayek notes that 'most of these steps in the evolution of culture were made possible by some individuals breaking some traditional rules and practising new forms of conduct — not because they understood them to be better, but because the groups which acted on them prospered more than others and grew.'<sup>49</sup> Thus began the origins of the 'Great Society' which has subsequently made possible so much of human progress.

It is central to Hayek's case that this process took place by the selective survival of those groups which followed the appropriate precepts. 'Those communities who adopted the new rules and, in doing so, infringed upon deeply embedded natural feelings became the successful ones, the ones who multiplied because they were more prosperous and were able to attract people from other groups.'<sup>50</sup>

The values were incorporated into traditions and customs, and passed on culturally. Children acquire detailed knowledge of the complex rules of society, says Hayek, as they master the complex grammar of languages. They are not learned by rote, or acquired from books. They are part of the complex web of information which children absorb from their cultural environment during their upbringing.

Hayek points to an important advantage which cultural evolution enjoys over genetic evolution. 'It includes the transmission of acquired characters. The child will acquire unconsciously from the example of the parent skills which the latter may

have learnt through a long process of trial and error, but which with the child become the starting point from which he can proceed to greater perfection.<sup>151</sup>

This is certainly a plausible account, but it does diminish the domain over which free choice has jurisdiction. When moral values are determined by cultural inheritance over time, and transmitted by custom and tradition, there is less scope for the autonomous individual to make free decisions about them. His choices are, as it were, already constrained by his own upbringing and the history of his society. What Hayek calls 'rules of conduct' matter very much more. 'Man has certainly more often learnt to do the right thing without comprehending why it was the right thing, and he still is often served better by custom than understanding.'<sup>52</sup>

The fatal conceit is this belief that man's individual mind is wiser than the collective mind of his society over the centuries. The latter not only holds more information, it has the advantage of having been tested by time. Hayek, in his later writings, returns again and again to the theme that the societies which survived and spread were the ones which incorporated the traits necessary for them to do so. 'The new manners of conduct were not adopted because anybody thought they were better. They were adopted because somebody who acted on them profited from it and his group gained from it.'<sup>153</sup>

Individuals still make choices. They sometimes make the choice to reject the accumulated wisdom which inheres in their society, and attempt to refashion it anew. Hayek cites cases. Indeed, he says that new religions with their attendant behaviour codes appear on average about once per decade. The ones which endure are those whose social practices sustain such necessary institutions as the family and private property. The others, he reckons, are counted out within three generations; 'not more,' he says, 'than roughly a hundred years.'<sup>154</sup>

Hayek makes what must be, for the left, a disturbing inversion of their world view of values. They view modern 'scientific' socialism as a rejection of man's primitive past, and the imposition upon his world of the products of rational insight. Not so, says Hayek. 'Our innate moral emotions and instincts were acquired in the hundreds of thousand years — probably half a million years — in which Homo Sapiens lived in small hunting and gathering groups.'<sup>155</sup>

Our ancestors learned to override the primitive instincts in order to create that 'Great Society' whose maintenance depends upon learned rules. It is the left who take us back to the primal instincts, teaching us to reject what we have learned in favour of feelings more appropriate to the hunting pack than the larger society whose suppression they made possible. Socialism is thus an atavism, appealing to the sentiments of our primitive past.

Hayek's later work on the evolution of society and the cultural transmission of values still allows free choice. That free choice is conditioned by the society in which we grew up, and whose values we acquired. 'Freedom was made possible by the gradual evolution of the discipline of civilization.'<sup>156</sup> There is, moreover, an additional proviso that if we exercise that choice to overturn institutions such as private property and the family, we cannot expect the long-term survival of the societies which result.

### **Underlying unity of Hayek's thought**

The stress on the origins and development of human societies in his later works should not lead us to suppose that Hayek has only recently arrived at these views. In fact there are precursors and echoes of this viewpoint in his earlier work. What is

new is the attention and the emphasis which his later works impart to them. Hayek's earlier attention was given much more to the decisions which people make about their societies, even while recognizing the sources of many of those views and the consequences of them.

In one sense, Hayek's later work has concentrated on areas which produce a third argument to supplement the other two. We should opt to sustain that Great Society of free exchange because it is more moral, and because it allocates resources more efficiently. Hayek shows how Edmund Burke and Adam Smith were at one on this point. 'Edmund Burke,' he tells us, is 'the man whom Smith described as the only person he ever knew who thought on economic subjects exactly as he did without any previous communication having passed between them.'<sup>157</sup>

Hayek has now added the additional point that the Great Society is one which has succeeded in evolutionary terms. It is a society which survives, where others have failed.

My contention is that while Hayek's work on cultural inheritance does not contradict his earlier position, it does bring about some more conservative strands which were previously recessed. Hayek has not departed from his concern to restore and sustain a freer society. What he has done is to put it into the context of the evolution of societies. We now see clearly what he previously put almost in parentheses, that custom and tradition play a role in shaping our values and influencing our choices. He does not mince his words. 'Our morality itself is the result of a process of cultural selection. Those things survive which enable the species to multiply.'<sup>158</sup>

People might plan for an equal society, but evolution has counted out previous attempts to do so. They might decide to confiscate property and reallocate it according to some supposed sense of justice; but societies which head too far down that road find it to be a dead end. People might make children wards of the state, in order to free them from the values which would otherwise be imparted by parents, but the graveyards of history are littered with societies which sought to do likewise. Even the stability of our present civilization is 'precarious,' 'because it rests largely on cultural traditions which can be more rapidly destroyed than the genetic endowment of populations.'<sup>159</sup>

### **Conservative sentiments**

Hayek remains firmly committed to freedom. People must be allowed to make choices, and the overall outcome must be the result of those individual decisions. Hayek now treats society as a process just as he treats the economy as a process. The multitude of inputs continually reaching it as a result of individual choices change it from moment to moment. Even as Hayek opposes economic planning from the centre, so does he oppose social planning on a similar scale. Individuals should do the planning, and should be free to do so.

Even here, Hayek recognizes that 'the success of an innovation by a rule-breaker, and the trust of those who follow him, has to be bought by the esteem he has earned by the scrupulous observation of most of the existing rules. To become legitimized, the new rules have to obtain the approval of society at large — not by a formal vote, but by gradually spreading acceptance.'<sup>160</sup>

These are conservative sentiments. The combination is that of a respect for the importance of custom and tradition as vehicles for transmitting social values, with a rejection of any imposed rational order. Burke himself would be happy to line up

behind a banner such as that one. David Hume would consider himself in good company.

If there were those who thought from Hayek's earlier work that he wanted to distil the essence of liberty and use it to build a society anew, his later writing must have changed their opinion. Hayek seeks, as conservatives do, a spontaneous society in which individual actions produce an unplanned order. He rejects, with them, the attempt to construct a rational order and impose it upon people in place of their own decisions. He stresses, as they do, the value of culture in its broadest sense as a repository of wisdom greater than can be retained by any one mind.

Hayek recognizes that societies change; that is what evolution is all about. But it is evolution, not revolution which makes change take place successfully. This, too, is part of the conservative political tradition. In Hayek's earlier works, we saw, as he did, the differences between his own outlook and those of conservative disposition. He saw the contrast between those who wanted to win back ground for freedom and spontaneity, and those who did not. In his later work we see how his ideas mesh with the political ideas which conservatives have stood for and worked for.

Hayek searched to find a name for the party which would represent people who thought as he did. His search is over. There already is a name for the party which stands for freedom of choice, and which seeks to preserve the spontaneity of outcome which those individual choices accumulate toward. It is a party which recognizes the role played by traditions and cultural inheritance in the safe evolution of society. It is the party which rejects the pretensions of central planners, collectivists, and advocates of a preconceived design. If Professor Hayek has avoided knowing it hitherto, he should know now that the name of this party is *Conservative*.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> F A Hayek, 'Postscript: Why I am Not a Conservative', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Michael Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics' in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962)

<sup>8</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Gateway, sixth edition, 1978)

<sup>9</sup> F A Hayek, 'Postscript: Why I am Not a Conservative', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Lord Hugh Cecil, *Conservatism* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1912)

<sup>12</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962)

<sup>13</sup> F A Hayek, 'Postscript: Why I am Not a Conservative', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)

<sup>14</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to Volume 3 of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

<sup>15</sup> Quintin Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947)

<sup>16</sup> The Eldon League.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Noble Lord* (London: 1796)

<sup>18</sup> Robert L Schuettinger, *The Conservative Tradition in European Thought* (New York: Putnam, 1970)

<sup>19</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962)

<sup>20</sup> Robert L Schuettinger, *The Conservative Tradition in European Thought* (New York: Putnam, 1970)

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Noble Lord* (London: 1796)

<sup>22</sup> The reference is to Oakeshott's metaphor depicting political activity as a ship without direction. See his 'Rationalism in Politics', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962)

<sup>23</sup> RJ White, *The Conservative Tradition* (London: Black, 1950)

<sup>24</sup> Winston S Churchill, 'Speech to the Conservative Party Conference', 5 October 1946, in Randolph S Churchill (ed.), *The Sinews of Peace* (London: Cassell, 1948)

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- <sup>25</sup> Winston S Churchill, 'Speech to the Conservative Party Conference', 14 October 1950, in Randolph S Churchill (ed.) *In the Balance* (London: Cassell, 1952)
- <sup>26</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Vindication of the English Constitution* (London: 1835).
- <sup>27</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, 'The Spirit of Whiggism', in *The Runnymede Letters* (London: 1836).
- <sup>28</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- <sup>29</sup> F A Hayek, 'Postscript: Why I am Not a Conservative', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)
- <sup>30</sup> His party's slogan in that election was 'Set the People Free'
- <sup>31</sup> F A Hayek, 'Postscript: Why I am Not a Conservative', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)
- <sup>32</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> F A Hayek, 'Our Moral Heritage', in his *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 1983)
- <sup>35</sup> F A Hayek, 'Postscript: Why I am Not a Conservative', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>37</sup> Winston S Churchill, 'Election Address', 15 October 1951, in Randolph S Churchill, *Stemming the Tide* (London: Cassell, 1952)
- <sup>38</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Use of Knowledge in Society', reprinted in his *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948)
- <sup>39</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Creative Powers of a Free Civilization', Chapter 2 of *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)
- <sup>40</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Different Uses of Experience', in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)
- <sup>41</sup> F A Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)
- <sup>42</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (London: 1859)
- <sup>43</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> F A Hayek, 'Our Moral Heritage', in his *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 1983)

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<sup>48</sup> F A Hayek, 'Socialism and Science', in his *New Studies in Politics, Philosophy, Economics, and the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

<sup>49</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

<sup>50</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Reactionary Nature of the Socialist Conception', in his *Knowledge, Evolution, and Society* (London, Adam Smith Institute, 1983)

<sup>51</sup> F A Hayek, 'Nature Versus Nurture Once Again', in *New Studies in Politics, Philosophy, Economics, and the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

<sup>52</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

<sup>53</sup> F A Hayek, 'Science and Socialism', in his *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 1983)

<sup>54</sup> F A Hayek, 'Our Moral Heritage', in his *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 1983)

<sup>55</sup> F A Hayek, 'Science and Socialism', in his *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 1983)

<sup>56</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

<sup>57</sup> F A Hayek, 'Individualism: True or False', in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948)

<sup>58</sup> F A Hayek, 'Our Moral Heritage', in his *Knowledge, Evolution and Society* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 1983)

<sup>59</sup> F A Hayek, 'Nature Versus Nurture Once Again', in *New Studies in Politics, Philosophy, Economics, and the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

<sup>60</sup> F A Hayek, 'The Three Sources of Human Values', Epilogue to *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)