

Comment

Remember 'Understanding Thatcherism'?

'I told you so' is an unbecoming phrase from political commentators, professional or amateur, particularly when not a single one of them predicted, even a few months before it happened, the collapse of the Russian Empire in Eastern Europe. None the less, a footnote to this publication's special issue of last November, 'Reconciliation in Europe', might just be excusable, directing readers who are seeking an explanation for the disarray of the Conservative party in respect of European policy to *New Blackfriars* for July—August 1988.

In the article 'Understanding Thatcherism', written, I seem to remember, rather before Mrs Thatcher's now notorious 'Bruges speech', I suggested that European policy represented one of the two weak points in what in those dark days seemed an impregnable ideology. It laid bare a fundamental contradiction in the Thatcherite position which had little or nothing to do with questions of personality, 'style' or 'mood', and which would be resolved only when Thatcherism—a transient and local conjunction of political and economic necessities in post-Imperial Britain—was no more. The Thatcher party, as Mr Patten discovered in his administration of the Poll Tax, was the party which ruthlessly exterminated autonomous institutions and appropriated their powers to the central agencies of national government. Yet it was also the party which claimed to believe in the free movement of capital within a free market, to the operations of which national boundaries, and the national governments which maintained them, were an obstacle, or an irrelevance.

The light shed in Brussels or Rome was so uncomfortably revealing because it showed up Mrs Thatcher as the functionary of a vested interest—Arthur Scargill enlarged—defending bitterly the market-distorting cartel that goes by the name of Westminster and Whitehall. The obfuscating rhetoric about rolling back the frontiers of the state is dispelled when it is repeated on the European stage: the representatives of the City of London and the CBI do not advocate Britain's participation in a single European currency because they have suddenly succumbed to nostalgia for bureaucratic corporatism on a continental scale.

'The contradiction', I wrote in 1988, 'is between the internationalism that is intrinsic to Thatcherite economic practice and the nationalism which is an essential part of its appeal and self-definition ... Thatcherism is by its nature an internationalist creed ... But this market internationalism leaves a national central government in an anomalous position, as the least justifiable of restrictive practices. The Thatcher

government is in a cleft stick. On the one hand it cannot commit itself to realizing a European community—not just because it cannot commit itself to any institutional ideal which might imply that men and women are citizens, and not merely consumer workers, but because this particular institution threatens to take away its power of direction of the British economy. On the other hand it cannot commit itself to a distinctively national stance since this would require a protectionist attitude to the sterling exchange rate and to key national—or even nationalized—industries ...’

This is not a dilemma which will be resolved by a mere change of ‘style’ or personnel at the top of the government. Those Conservatives, both inside and outside the Cabinet, who are said to be more ‘European’ than Mrs Thatcher was may refer less frequently than she to the sovereignty of Parliament, or to an equally illusory popular capitalism, but only in order to free themselves to speak more unashamedly of increasing the powers of central government. They will not thereby reduce the conflict between the ambitions of their particular interest-group and the Europeanization of the British economy, which has already progressed so far. Nor will they reduce the gap between the pagan economic liberalism of their current ideology and the Christian inheritance of both the major groupings in the European Parliament—the Socialists and, perhaps more relevantly, the Christian Democrats, with their commitment to subsidiarity, federalism, and limited intervention, as the only tried and practicable ways of moderating the destructive social effects of the free flow of international capital.

The second weak point in the Thatcherist position, it seemed to me in 1988, was its (necessary) neglect of constitutional issues, its inability to define a British national identity. What I did not foresee was that the constitutional and the European problems would so soon and so powerfully combine, for discussion of a European Central Bank, especially if it is to be politically independent, (and if a single currency comes, can a single bank be far behind?) must inevitably focus attention on both weak points simultaneously. And we may rely on the newly liberated nations of Eastern Europe to ensure that the relation between the economic and the political orders remains at the centre of international discussion for a long time to come. As the contradictory structure which enveloped Britain in the 1980s begins to crack asunder, all those who believe in the possibility of a truly political and non-materialist definition of society should prepare themselves for a fundamental debate on what it means to be a citizen of Britain and of Europe.

NICHOLAS BOYLE