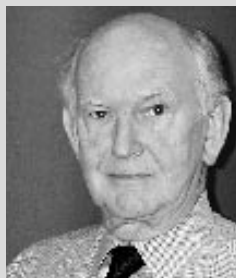


What It Means To Be Conservative

Owen Harries

It is not altogether easy to write on conservatism. For one thing, if your readership is at all a representative sample of the educated middle class, chances are that it will be hostile to your topic, or at least sceptical of its claim to deserve serious intellectual attention. A long time ago, John Stuart Mill famously dubbed the Conservative Party the ‘stupid party’. Mill was, of course, a liberal—but then so are most intellectuals (small ‘I’, naturally). The English conservative, Roger Scruton, has recently written of his own experience growing up in the middle of the 20th century: ‘. . . [A]lmost all English intellectuals regarded the term “conservative” as a term of abuse . . . [it was] to be on the side of age against youth, the past against the future, authority against innovation . . . spontaneity and life.’



Owen Harries is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. This is an edited version of a talk given to the Blackheath Philosophy Forum in March 2003.

As far as Australia is concerned, things don't seem to have changed much if a recent review of several new books on Don Bradman is anything to go by. At one point the author (Graeme Blundell) listed Bradman's alleged failings: he couldn't cope with sticky wickets, he was shaky against short-pitched balls—and he was (shudder) a 'social conservative'!

As well as hostility, there is likely to be ignorance. This is partly the fault of conservatism and conservatives themselves; it arises from the nature of the beast. For conservatism does not lend itself easily to schematic, didactic exposition, and conservatives do not readily engage in it. The best conservative writers tend to approach the subject partially or obliquely, in scattered essays, or by anthologising examples, or in the course of controversy over a particular issue. In introducing his anthology, *The Conservative Tradition*, R. J. White defensively (or perhaps smugly and archly) claims that, 'To put conservatism in a bottle with a label is like trying to liquify the atmosphere or give an accurate description of the beliefs of a member of the Anglican Church. The difficulty arises from the nature of the thing. For conservatism is less a political doctrine than a habit of mind, a mode of feeling, a way of living'.

Again, Michael Oakeshott—perhaps the most influential conservative thinker of the last century—begins his essay 'On Being Conservative' by acknowledging that, 'It may be true that conservative conduct does not readily provoke articulation in the idiom of general ideas, and that consequently there has been a certain reluctance to undertake this kind of elucidation'.¹ And he immediately goes on to make it clear that he is not concerned to correct this deficiency, but rather to describe the disposition to be conservative—to discuss, that is, a cast of character rather than a set of ideas.

At the local level, I consulted the anthology of *Quadrant* articles, drawn from 25 years of publication. *Quadrant* is Australia's leading conservative journal. But the anthology does not contain a single article that attempts to set out the tenets of the conservative position systematically; plenty of articles that use conservative arguments in an ad hoc way, but not one that tried to give a coherent answer to the question: What is Conservatism?

Bearing this resistance to formal treatment in mind, it is perfectly in character that what is

R. J. White defensively (or perhaps smugly and archly) claims that, 'To put conservatism in a bottle with a label is like trying to liquify the atmosphere or give an accurate description of the beliefs of a member of the Anglican Church. The difficulty arises from the nature of the thing.'

widely accepted, both by conservatives and others, as the ablest and most influential statement of conservative views—Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—is not a systematic statement of a position but an inspired polemic reacting to a particular political situation: a huge, unprecedented upheaval in the most illustrious and powerful country in Europe. In that polemic is embedded, in unsystematic fashion, the tenets of a political philosophy. The reader has to do his own work in abstracting the latter from the former. My abstraction will be very selective and will not do anything like justice to the richness of the complete work.

The limits of politics

Two initial points about Burke's *Reflections*: First, it was published in 1790, that is before the most violent manifestations of the Revolution—before the terror, the regicide, the Revolution devouring its own children, and the emergence of a military dictatorship. Thus, Burke was writing with foresight, not hindsight.

Second, at the time it was published, the Revolution was still hugely popular in England, seen as an immense liberating step forward for mankind by the enlightened opinion of the day. Most of us are familiar with Wordsworth's 'Bliss was it then to be alive' reaction, and with that of Charles James Fox: 'How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! And how much the best!'. In launching his denunciation of the Revolution, then, Burke, was not expressing a popular opinion among thinking Englishmen, but rather going against the tide. Among other things it was to cost him his close friendship with Fox.

Central to Burke's reaction to the Revolution was a profound hostility toward what he called variously

‘speculation’, ‘metaphysics’ or ‘theoretical reasoning’ as applied to social and political questions, and his conviction of the danger of such applications. He was writing, remember, at a time when the revolutionaries in France seriously believed that they could reconstruct the world from scratch by the application of general, abstract principles—even to the point of introducing a new calendar to mark the beginning of that new, enlightened world. And in holding this belief they were not exceptional but representative of the most sophisticated opinion of their time, putting into action belief about the power of reason that had been energetically propagated by representatives of the Enlightenment in preceding decades.

Burke rejected that belief for two reasons, the first having to do with the nature of society and politics, the second with the nature of human beings and their rational faculties.

Burke was writing at a time when the revolutionaries in France seriously believed that they could reconstruct the world from scratch by the application of general, abstract principles—even to the point of introducing a new calendar to mark the beginning of that new, enlightened world.

When he wrote *Reflections*, Burke had been intimately engaged in politics at a high level for three decades. He saw that activity as an infinitely complex, difficult and delicate one. The number of factors at work were many and the ways they interrelated were complex. Politicians had to act in concrete, discrete situations, not in general or abstract areas:

The science of constructing a Commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught *a priori*. It is a matter of the most delicate and complicated skill. A statesman differs from a professor at a university.

The latter has only the general view of society; the former, the statesman, has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas, and to take into his consideration. Circumstances are infinite, and infinitely combined; are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous but stark mad—he is metaphysically mad.

In other words, discrimination in terms of circumstances trumps consistency in terms of principle and logic, and insistence on consistency regardless of circumstances and consequences is likely to be disastrous. If stated in these terms this seems obvious, think of it the next time someone insists that because we act in one way toward country X (say with respect to human rights) it would be hypocritical and wrong not to act in the same way to country Y, regardless of the difference between the two countries or of the difference in our relationships with the two. As Dean Acheson, one of America’s greatest Secretaries of State, once put it, ‘I am not in the slightest bit worried because somebody can say, “Well, you said so and so about Greece, why isn’t all this true about China?” I will be polite. I will be patient, and I will try to explain why Greece is not China. But my heart will not be in the battle.’

The sociologist Max Weber was making the same point in more general terms when, in his essay on ‘Politics as a Vocation’,² he distinguished between two fundamentally different maxims concerning ethical conduct. There is, first, what he terms ‘the ethic of ultimate ends’, which decrees absolute and unconditional fidelity to principle (in religious terms, ‘The Christian does right and leaves the result with the Lord’; in secular terms, ‘One must be faithful to the principles dictated by reason and morality, regardless of consequences’). And there is, second, ‘the ethic of responsibility’, which decrees that one has a responsibility to take into account, as best one can, the foreseeable circumstances and consequences of one’s actions. The second, Weber believed, is the approach appropriate to political life. The responsibility of a political leader is to the well-being of his people, not to the purity of his soul, and the two do not necessarily coincide always.

Society, for Burke, is neither a collection of loosely related individuals, nor a mechanism with interchangeable parts. It is a living organism and anything that affects the well-being of any part of it will affect the whole. It is therefore, he insists, 'with infinite caution that any man ought to venture on pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purpose of society'. Prescription is a solid argument in favour of an institution or practice.

Although he did not use the terminology, there are two problems of which Burke, and conservatives after him, have been acutely aware. The first is that of *unintended consequences*—that, because of the complexity and interconnectedness of things, in initiating change on an ambitious scale, almost invariably more is set in motion than the initiator had in mind and the end result may be quite different from the intended one. Thus, in Burke's words, 'very plausible schemes with very pleasing commencements have often shameful and lamentable consequences'.

Or, if not more shameful ones, at least disappointing and disconcerting ones. A recent example: John Howard decides to subsidise first time home-buyers. The result? The subsidy gets capitalised into house prices; houses become more expensive, first time home-buyers end up being no better off; all other buyers are worse off. Another example provided by the Institute of Economic Affairs: To stop elephants being killed for their ivory, the ivory trade is banned. This makes ivory scarce. Prices immediately go up and the rewards for poaching become greater. More people engage in it, and we end up with more elephants being killed than there were before the ban was introduced.

The second, and related problem, is that of *latent function*. As well as their ostensible and apparent functions, institutions often perform other hidden functions of a very important nature—something that may not become apparent until we experience the consequences of those institutions being dismantled. To quote Burke: 'In states there are often some obscure and latent causes, things which appear at first view of little moment, on which a very great part of the prospect or adversity may most essentially depend'. What Burke understood intuitively and pragmatically was to become an important insight in anthropology and sociology in the 20th century, when the study of the latent

function of institutions and practices that seemed often to be without serious purpose, or to be merely decorative or even obsolescent, became a major growth industry.

One example, not without relevance to recent Australian history: In his book, *Political Man*, first published in 1959 and widely regarded as a classic of its kind, the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset observes the apparently 'absurd fact' (his words) that 10 out of the 12 stable European and English-speaking democracies are monarchies. (Britain; the Scandinavian and Lowland countries; Australia, New Zealand, Canada). This, to Lipset's mind, could not be an accident and he looks for an explanation. He suggests that during the rapid and profound social and economic changes of the last 100 years—changes which apparently were making the institution of monarchy increasingly irrelevant and obsolescent—the preservation of the institution played a crucial role in reassuring and retaining the loyalty of those groups who were losing as a result

Society, for Burke, is neither a collection of loosely related individuals, nor a mechanism with interchangeable parts. It is a living organism and anything that affects the well-being of any part of it will affect the whole.

of the changes—the aristocracy, the traditionalists, the clerical and rural sectors. The persistence of the central institution of monarchy was reassurance that the world they knew and valued was not totally lost, that there was continuity, that the new social and political order could be adapted to and lived with. On the other hand, in countries which in one way or another dispensed with monarchy (for example, France, Germany and the successor countries of the Habsburg Empire after World War I), reconciliation and stability proved much scarcer commodities.

Thus, concludes Lipset, the changes which apparently made monarchy more anachronistic and useless in some respects actually increased its importance as a source of legitimacy and as an 'important traditional integrative institution during a transitional period'. Lipset was writing nearly half a century ago, and whether today's

monarchies are still performing that important latent function—whether, for example, in Australia it has helped reassure those who have been losers as a result of significant economic and social changes in recent decades—is an open question, though a Burkean conservative would still maintain that, as a long-lasting institution, the presumption should be in its favour.

Another example: The historical treatment of birth out of wedlock, of illegitimacy. A couple of generations ago, liberals, with considerable justification, considered the treatment of illegitimate children and their mothers to be harsh, and also to be unnecessary and wrong. Conservatives tended to consider the stigmatisation of illegitimacy to be harsh but also necessary, because it was required to preserve the integrity of the most basic and vital social institution, the family. Liberals won the argument and their view prevailed. The stigma was effectively removed from illegitimacy. Very quickly, families without fathers proliferated. By the mid-

They were all arguing against the prevailing intellectual tide of the times, the Age of Enlightenment, which insisted on the primacy of reason and which saw customs and habits and prejudice as impediments that should, and could, be swept aside to restore the human mind to its pristine state as a clean slate—the famous *tabula rasa*—on which reason could then write its message.

1990s in the United States, some very disconcerting statistics were being pointed to: two-thirds of rapists and three-quarters of adolescent murderers had grown up without fathers in the house. Again, when a father was present in the household, teenage girls got pregnant 50% less frequently than when one was not. In the judgement of many conservatives, the social cost of effectively legitimising what had been illegitimate had come very high.

Conservatives may be more attuned to the appreciation of latent function than are liberals

precisely because they tend to be more concerned with stability and what might disturb it, and because they have an organic view of society that stresses the interconnectedness of things. If one's focus is on individual rights and needs, on the other hand, and if one thinks in terms of rational patterns, then one may be less alert to latent functions.³

The denial of human nature

If the complexity of the object of change—society, the political order—was one reason why Burke feared radical and rapid change, a second and just as powerful reason was his reservation about the proposed engine of change; that is, the role of reason in human affairs. Burke rejected the Enlightenment view of man as a predominantly rational, calculating, logical being. His rational side exists, but it is a small part of his total make-up. 'We are afraid', said Burke, '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'. Habit, instinct, custom, faith, reverence, prejudice—the accumulated practical knowledge acquired consciously and unconsciously through experience—all this was more important than abstract reasoning. Collectively, and for better or worse, it constituted man's nature, his human nature.

Burke was not alone in expressing these views. The great Scottish philosopher, David Hume, had insisted on the importance of habit and custom in the human make-up a generation earlier. And a year or two before Burke wrote, across the Atlantic the shapers of the American Constitution and authors of *The Federalist Papers*—Alexander Hamilton and James Madison—were insisting that in constructing a political order, the aggressive, selfish, acquisitive aspects of man's nature must be taken fully into account. 'A man must be far gone in Utopian speculation', thought Hamilton, 'to forget that men are ambitious, vindictive and rapacious.'

They were all arguing against the prevailing intellectual tide of the times, the Age of Enlightenment, which insisted on the primacy of reason and which saw customs and habits and prejudice as impediments that should, and could, be swept aside to restore the human mind to its pristine state as a clean slate—the famous *tabula rasa*—on which reason could then write its message. At the same time as Burke was responding to the

Revolution, his radical-anarchist contemporary, William Godwin—now forgotten but a very influential and representative intellectual figure in his time—was writing of children as ‘a sort of raw material put into our hands’, their minds ‘like a sheet of white paper’. Dealing with adults, the task was to erase what, over time, had disfigured the white sheet. It was in that act of restoration that the revolutionaries in France saw themselves engaged. For them, what passed for human nature was not something to be taken into account as a given, and either accommodated or curbed, as the authors of *The Federalist Papers* believed, but to be altered.

Thomas Sowell, the American historian of ideas, has generalised this point:⁴ In their approach to political and social policy, those with a strong faith in reason and the malleability of human minds—who believe in the possibility of the perfectibility of human beings—will insist on the need to *solve* problems, and the need to take all necessary steps to remove all impediments to their solution. On the other hand, those of a conservative disposition who accept an intractable human nature as a given, and who do not believe that reason can always and necessarily remove the conflict between competing wills and interests, will think much more in terms of *compromises* and *trade-offs*—of improvement rather than solution, of working around the shortcomings of human nature.

One might see this as the crucial difference between the French revolutionaries, with their notion of restarting history from day one and creating an entirely new set of perfectly rational political institutions, and the American revolutionaries, who when it came to framing a Constitution, put their faith in checks and balances and the separation of powers, to accommodate competing interests and to keep in control the effects of mankind’s aggressive, acquisitive and competitive instincts (what Christians would term ‘original sin’ and which could not be fundamentally altered).

This conflict between the *tabula rasa* school and the human nature school has continued ever since and has been, and is, central to many debates about social and political policy. Many of the new sciences of human behaviour—evolutionary psychology, behavioural genetics, cognitive neuroscience—bear on it. For a very readable and informed current account of the state of play, consult Steven Pinker’s recent bestselling book, *The Blank Slate: The*

Modern Denial of Human Nature. Pinker, who is a Professor of Psychology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, asserts in the preface that,

When it comes to explaining human thought and behaviour, the possibility that heredity plays any role at all still has the power to shock. To acknowledge human nature, many think, is to endorse racism, sexism, war, greed, genocide, nihilism, reactionary politics, and neglect of children and the disadvantaged. Any claim that the mind has an innate organization strikes people not as a hypothesis that might be incorrect but as a thought it is immoral to think.

Part of the book’s value is that it provides copious examples to support these assertions. Several 100 pages later he concludes that ‘the new sciences of human nature really do resonate with assumptions that historically were closer to the right than to the left’. While that may be true, it is surely also true that in much of social policy and many of the social sciences, blank slate thinking still prevails.

Burke may be seen as anticipating Tocqueville in stressing the importance of civil society and intermediate, voluntary, participatory associations, as against the state; the actual particular wills of people going about their particular lives, as against the abstract General Will espoused by the Revolution.

Continuity and change

Turning back to Burke, I want to touch briefly on three further points before saying something about the enduring relevance of conservatism today.

First, in contrast to what was happening in France, where everything was concentrated at the centre in Paris, Burke put great emphasis on the local, the proximate and particular: ‘To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections.’ Here Burke may

be seen as anticipating Tocqueville in stressing the importance of civil society and intermediate, voluntary, participatory associations, as against the state; the actual particular wills of people going about their particular lives, as against the abstract General Will espoused by the Revolution.

Second, as against the abstract Rights of Man proclaimed by the Revolution, Burke spoke of the particular and existing rights that man actually possessed and enjoyed. He sometimes used the term natural rights, but meant by it the historical, prescriptive rights inherited within the context of particular societies and legal systems: the right of Englishmen, or Americans, or Indians or Frenchmen—not of ‘Man’ in the abstract. Again, the particular are contrasted to the general, and the historical to the theoretical and abstract. Rights are powers possessed and enjoyed rather than claims asserted.



Edmund Burke

For Burke, historical continuity was central to his understanding of society. In one of his most striking and most often quoted phrases, he described society as a ‘partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born’. That is, the present is not the property of the living, to make of it whatever they will. It is an entailed estate held in trust; morally, those who hold it have a fiduciary responsibility to hand it on in good condition. (Note that in this important respect, though in few others, there is an unexpected affinity between conservatives and the Greens.) This trust the revolutionaries were in the process of betraying. In the name of reason, liberty and equality they were destroying all the historical institutions of legitimate authority.

And with authority gone, the result would be not liberty but increasing dependence on naked force to compel obedience and maintain order. With extraordinary insight, and no historical precedence to guide him (the concept of totalitarianism was still to be invented), at the very outset of the Revolution, when euphoria and optimism and idealism reigned, Burke intuited and insisted that it must end in terror and dictatorship.

Third, Burke has frequently been represented as a reactionary. Even Isaiah Berlin once declared

him to be one, only to be set upon furiously and rightly by Burke’s biographer and fellow Irishman, Conor Cruise O’Brien.¹⁵ Burke was not defending or advocating a return to an aristocratic or monarchic order. He was defending the mixed system that existed in the Britain of his day—a mixture of aristocratic, commercial, oligarchic and democratic elements. It was a society in which the Industrial Revolution was well under way, and Burke was a friend and admirer of Adam Smith. The admiration was reciprocal: Smith once said that no one understood *The Wealth of Nations* as well as Burke did, while Burke said of that work that, ‘In its ultimate results’ it was ‘probably the most important book ever written’.

Again, Burke eloquently argued the case of the American colonies against the British government, insisting that all they were asking for—and rightly asking for—were the traditional rights of Englishmen. Equally eloquently and with great determination, he defended the rights and customs of the population of the Indian subcontinent against what he insisted was the rapaciousness, corruption and greed of Warren Hastings and the East India Company. And as a Whig he opposed George III’s attempts to restore and enlarge monarchical power.

Far from opposing all reform he insisted that, ‘A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation’. The issue was not reform versus no reform; it was between the view that reform was an easy and simple matter that could be engaged in sweepingly and ambitiously, and the view that it was a matter that required prudence and was best approached incrementally, testing the ground carefully as one proceeded.

The fact that Burke sometimes sided with those in authority, and sometimes with those resisting it and even revolting against it, has led to another charge against him—that he was inconsistent and opportunistic. That charge is particularly feeble. Burke was perfectly consistent in that he opposed the abuse of power, whoever was abusing it—king, corrupt company, intellectuals or mob. Another of his biographers, the liberal John Morley, put it best when he said that Burke often changed his front but never changed his ground.

Conservatism and neo-conservatism

When, in what circumstances, do conservative ideas become relevant and attractive? The obvious and usual answer to that question is given by Michael Oakeshott: when there is much to be enjoyed, and when that enjoyment is combined with a sense that what is enjoyed is in danger of being lost. It is the combination of enjoyment and fear that stimulates conservatism.

That seems convincing until one considers: if one is living in and enjoying, say, a liberal or a social democratic or a capitalist society; and if that society suddenly comes under threat, why can't one defend it with liberal arguments, or social democratic or capitalist arguments? Why does one need conservative arguments?

An interesting answer to that question was advanced by a young Samuel Huntington, about 40 years before he wrote *The Clash of Civilizations*, the book that made him famous beyond academic circles. In an article on 'Conservatism as an Ideology', published in 1957 in *The American Political Science Review*, Huntington observes that unlike nearly every other ideology, conservatism offers no vision of an ideal society. There is no conservative Utopia. Indeed, conservatism has no substantive institutional content. It can be, and has been, used to defend all sorts of different institutional arrangements, from traditional to feudal to liberal to capitalist to social democratic ones. That is because it is concerned not with content but with process: with change and stability, particularly as they affect political institutions. Its true opposite is not, as is often said, liberalism but radicalism—which is also about change. Conservatism advances arguments that stress the difficulty and danger of rapid change, and the importance of stability and continuity and prudence; radicalism expresses enthusiasm and optimism concerning innovation, and boldness in embracing change.

So when does conservatism become an appropriate ideology? It is, maintains Huntington, the product of intense ideological and social conflict, when consensus breaks down, and when an existing institutional order can no longer be defended in its own terms. 'When the challengers fundamentally disagree with the ideology of the existing society and affirm a basically different set of values, the common framework of discussion is destroyed.' When, say, it is precisely liberal values and institutions that are

being rejected, there is no point in appealing to those values to defend them. It is then that conservative arguments become indispensable: arguments which defend the established institutions precisely because they are established, which warn against the destructive affects, the unanticipated consequences of overturning them. When radicalism prevails, conservative arguments must be resorted to in order to counter it.

Huntington observes that unlike nearly every other ideology, conservatism offers no vision of an ideal society. There is no conservative Utopia. Indeed, conservatism has no substantive institutional content. It can be, and has been, used to defend all sorts of different institutional arrangements, from traditional to feudal to liberal to capitalist to social democratic ones.

What is particularly intriguing about Huntington's argument—made, remember, in the 1950s—is that it perfectly predicted what was to happen almost immediately afterwards in the 1960s. In that decade there was a sudden and powerful upsurge of radicalism, associated initially with the Civil Rights Movement and protest against the Vietnam War, but quickly going beyond that to reject the whole fabric of American society (with Amerika spelled with a K). American New Deal liberalism was denounced and rejected as 'Cold War liberalism' or worse; the radicals began their long march through the institutions.

It was in these circumstances that a group of liberal intellectuals—almost all of them members of the Democratic party, many of them prominent members of the New York Jewish intellectual community—began to oppose the radical movement, to defend American institutions and values with classic conservative arguments. They were attacked from the Left for doing so and derisively labelled 'neo-conservatives'. It was meant as an insult, but readily accepted by Irving Kristol—the godfather of neo-conservatism—and his colleagues. A neo-conservative has subsequently been variously defined

It is, I believe, largely an article of faith that the good America will ultimately prevail over the ugly and tawdry one—that the self-correcting mechanisms in the society will, with dedicated conservative support, do the job.

as ‘a liberal who has been mugged by reality’ and ‘a liberal with a 14 year old daughter’.

However defined, they became an important force in American politics and have remained so. Many of them joined the Republican Party. They are well entrenched in the think tanks of Washington. They brought with them intellectual and polemical skills that had been in scarce supply on the Right, and by the 1980s they had seized the intellectual initiative from the Left. It is not often that a political scientist is provided with compelling evidence so quickly to support his thesis as Huntington was in this instance.

What of the relationship between conservatism and religion? Not all conservatives are religious believers. Burke was, Hume was not. Oakeshott was not, Kristol is. But virtually all conservatives, whether they believe or not, attach functional importance to religion as a stabilising element. It is, or can be so, in several respects. In so far as the existing order is sanctified and seen as a manifestation of God’s will, it is obviously strengthened. In so far as it promises rewards in an afterlife, it can serve to curb the selfish and aggressive instincts of human beings and can reconcile people to accepting their lot in this one rather than rebel against it. And many would agree with Irving Kristol that religion is the most important pillar of modern conservatism because, in the long term, it is ‘the only power that can shape people’s characters and regulate their motivation’.⁶

In so far as a whole community has a religion in common, it can indeed be a powerful binding force. But with all that conceded, it is worth recalling also that at some stages of history religion has been a major destabilising force, particularly when there is religious division. It was a major element in the Thirty Years War, until the 20th century the most terrible that Europe ever experienced. In England it played an important role in the Civil War of the 17th century and the temporary overthrow of the

monarchy. When religion is taken seriously, and when there is more than one religion—or more than one version of the same religion—in competition, then far from being a unifying force it can become enormously disruptive. As the Muslim component of European societies becomes significant, and as the birth rates of Europe’s Muslims far outstrip that of Christian Europeans, that is worth bearing in mind. T.S. Eliot, a very religious and very conservative man, once reflected that ‘Ultimately, antagonistic religions must mean antagonistic cultures; and ultimately religions cannot be reconciled’.

Conservatives in general—and perhaps neo-conservatives in particular—have another and more fundamental problem today. The society that they are concerned to conserve and defend is a capitalist society. Capitalism delivers huge material benefits. But capitalism is also an enormous engine of change. It depends on, and operates in terms of what Joseph Schumpeter famously called ‘creative destruction’. It creates new industries and destroys old ones (and therefore old communities) almost overnight. It demands mobility rather than stability. It damages the physical environment. It has created and force-fed a popular culture that is, in many respects, incompatible with traditional values. It demystifies and subjects to intense scrutiny all social and political institutions.

How can such a system and conservatism ever be compatible? This is a question that American conservatives wrestle with constantly. And even as they celebrate the operational ideal of American capitalism, they deplore much of what they see around them as its product. It is, I believe, largely an article of faith that the good America will ultimately prevail over the ugly and tawdry one—that the self-correcting mechanisms in the society will, with dedicated conservative support, do the job.

But even if it does not, conservatives by temperament are suited to fighting protracted lost causes. They are used to pessimism, for they are pessimistic by nature and are disinclined to the doctrine, ‘If at first you don’t succeed, drop it’. They will give it a good go.

Are there other respects in which conservatism is relevant in today’s world? As far as Australia is concerned, the country has certainly experienced far reaching changes in recent decades—to its economy, to some of its social and cultural policies, to the

way in which its legal system functions in relation to these changes, to its immigration policy and the composition of its population, particularly in the big cities. To this point, the Australian political system and its institutions seems to be coping comfortably with these changes. There are some signs of strain—the crude right-radicalism of Hansonism at one end of the spectrum, the hysterical ‘I am ashamed to be an Australian’ stuff at the other—but nothing that is remotely system threatening.

What about the rest of the world? Well, there is the European Union, an incredibly bold and radical attempt to change the whole political structure and fabric of a continent—the laws, money, institutions, customs of the nation-states of Europe—and to replace them with a uniform system dreamed up and imposed by technocrats and bureaucrats. All this in a continent with very diverse traditions and systems, and not even a common language. The whole project has been engineered by elites, with little democratic control or popular support, and often with the people of Europe being lied to about the nature of the enterprise. There has already been a strong conservative reaction in some countries—notably Britain—but if things go seriously wrong opposition could quickly grow to formidable proportions, and the responsible elites could be thoroughly discredited, leaving an authority void at the top.

And to come right up-to-date, we have an American President now committing his country not only to ‘nation building’ in Iraq but to ‘region building’ throughout the Middle East—that is, the creation of democratic systems to replace the existing ones. The belief that democratic institutions, behaviour and ways of thought can be exported and transplanted to societies that have no experience or traditions of them—and that this can be done in a few years—is a profoundly unconservative, indeed a radical, belief. Conservatives traditionally have believed in the slow, organic growth of political institutions, not their imposition from without. Yet the most enthusiastic advocates of exporting democracy are American neo-conservatives, which perhaps suggests that their break with their earlier modes of thought has been less than complete.

At a time when America and ‘empire’ are increasingly discussed in the same breath—and with growing resentment—it is worth remembering

something Edmund Burke said at the height of British power in the 1770s, when Britain had recently added North America and India to its empire, when its economy was the strongest in the world, when it ruled the seas. That is, when it occupied a position not too different from the one occupied by the United States today. Contemplating all this power, Burke uttered a warning that seems to be pertinent in our present circumstances:

Among precautions against ambition, it may not be amiss to take precaution against our own. I must fairly say, I dread our own power and our own ambition: I dread our being too much dreaded . . . We may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard of power. But every other nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that, sooner or later, this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin.

Endnotes

- ¹ M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991).
- ² M. Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, *From Max Weber*, ed. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948).
- ³ c.f. John Stuart Mill’s observations of the difference between the Utilitarian, Bentham, and the Conservative, Coleridge: ‘By Bentham . . . men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? And by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it?’. Cited by Paul Binding, ‘Revaluation’, *Times Literary Supplement* (11 April 2003).
- ⁴ T. Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1987).
- ⁵ See the Appendix to C. O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmond Burke* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- ⁶ The seriousness Kristol attaches to religion is evident from the fact that when he was editor of *Encounter* back in the 1950s, he once rejected Oakeshott’s powerful essay ‘On Being Conservative’. In confessing that he had done so, Kristol agreed that in many respects the essay was a masterpiece, full of material that would merit the attention of anthologists for centuries. Why then did he reject it? Because it was ‘irredeemably secular’, and ‘Oakeshott’s conservative society is a society without religion’.