UNDERSTANDING CONSERVATISM

INTRODUCTION

Conservatism is an influential standpoint in politics, but it is something that Marxists have not attempted to analyse, possibly because of its reactionary nature. But it is important to understand this political approach because it is very influential within the working class, and so represents a formidable adversary in relation to the tasks of developing support for the struggle for socialism. One of the major ideologues of conservatism is Roger Scruton. He has outlined his standpoint in his book: 'The Meaning of Conservatism'(1) He is concerned to emphasise that traditional conservatism is not necessarily identical with liberal support for the minimal state and complete freedom of capitalist enterprise. Hence he does not consider that freedom is the most important principle of conservatism. Instead he maintains that what is crucial in defining conservatism is support for the role of authority: “The political battles of our time concern, therefore, the conservation and destruction of our institutions and forms of life: nothing more vividly illustrates this than the issues of education, devolution, the role of the trade unions and the House of Lords, issues with which the abstract concept of freedom fails to make contact. In all such issues the conflict concerns not freedom but authority, authority vested in a given office, institution or arrangement.”(2) This is an important point because it indicates how conservatism is based on promoting support for the established authority within the British political system, and the Conservative party is generally considers to be the one of the major expressions of the traditional institutions within society. Hence one of the most important aims of Conservatism is to obtain support for the prevailing elite amongst the general population. It recognises that if people are deferential towards authority, and so accept the role of the Conservative party as the natural party of government. Such a development will mean that the aspiration to change society will be undermined. This means it is one of the task of the Conservatives to discredit the view that the Labour party could be a suitable party of government. Instead the Conservatives appeal to a sense of inferiority within the population and in this manner appeal to an attitude that implies that they represent the 'natural' rule of an elite within society.

However this sense of superiority within the Conservative party has been undermined by the BREXIT controversy. The referendum on the membership of the EU indicated that the Tory party was seriously split on this issue. The result has been that its claim to be a party of government has been seriously tested. This problem was intensified by the contradictions generated by the 2017 referendum. The outcome of this situation is a Cabinet with many divisions and the apparent connection of the Conservatives with the claim of being a stable authority is in tatters. Only the influence of popular nationalism has ensured that the rule of the Tories has continued. The traditional deference of a section of the electorate has been seriously tested. In this context it is not surprising that many people are turning to a Labour Party with a radical message. But the Labour Party can never win an election by claiming to be the party of natural authority, instead it must outline the message for change. Hence it has to establish the importance of class as against that of nation and established authority. In a recent television interview Scruton effectively acknowledged the ideological malaise of the Tories by making a blunt appeal for nationalism. Hence he effectively admitted that if the Conservatives are to have any hope of winning the next election they must make a Trump type of appeal to populism. However, such an evolution would have its own challenges because it would mean that in uncertain terms the Tories would no longer be the party of established authority and limited change. Instead what will be occurring will be a transformation of the Conservatives in order to appeal to the continuation of popular nationalism. But such a trajectory could undermine the influence of deference which has traditionally ensured that the Tories have been able to obtain elected office. Thus Conservatism is in a state of flux. With this in mind this study of Conservatism has to allow for the fact that it presently seems to be in a state of transformation. Indeed the very relationship of the Tories to big business is being called into question. In this situation the Labour Party has the historical opportunity to revive an appeal to class. It can utilise the continuation of austerity in order to make the argument that the time has come to curb the power of free market capitalism. To some extent these arguments are being made, but the Labour Party still lacks a coherent view about BREXIT. This problem is to some extent caused by the reluctance to antagonise those working class voters who are in favour of leaving the EU. This indecision has to be overcome if an appeal to all sections of the working class is to be developed.

THE CONSERVATIVE APROACH

Scruton is explicit that Conservatism is what the word implies. Therefore it is about conserving what has been traditional and enduring within society and in this manner only being in favour of limited change in accordance with these principles. In this sense there is no aim orientated to the future in order to be realised in accordance with the aims of a utopian imagination, but instead whatever social arrangement in the present is effective and has coherence should be supported. Thus the promotion of social unity in terms of the role of the Conservative party in government is effectively the major aim. What is not connected by Scruton to this analysis is the understanding that the character of the Tories means that they must be a party that supports the prevailing economic system which is capitalism. Therefore in ideological terms they must present capitalism as being a traditional and natural economic system which it would be disastrous to replace. So, one of the major political aims of the Conservatives is to promote the popular support of capitalism within all sections of society, and so discredit the alternative of socialism. In this manner they suggest that the Labour Party cannot be a natural party of government because it reluctantly administers capitalism whilst secretly aiming to introduce socialism. (This argument could not be used during the Blair years!) But Scruton admits that the emphasis of the Conservatives on the tasks of government means that it can only contrast the virtues of tradition against what seem to be the superior moral ideals of equality and social justice. It is interesting that Scruton does not deny the superiority of socialism in this regard, but merely suggests that socialism cannot implement these ideals in practice. Consequently he has to reluctantly admit that conservatism seems to be without any inspiring aims because of its major concern is with the role of government: “They are concerned solely with the task of government, and this attitude defies translation into a shopping list of social goals. They look with scepticism upon the myths of equality and social justice, they regard universal political agitation with distaste, and the clamour for 'progress' seems to them no more than a passing fad, serious only insofar as it constitutes a threat to the political order.”(3)

This admission of a lack of an inspiring ideology indicates that the Labour Party has not been able to consistently promote its egalitarian ideals in a convincing manner. It has compromised its ability to appeal to the electorate when it has accepted conservative type criticisms of its aims. However, whilst it is true that Blair got elected because of its own appeal to being a natural party of government, this development could only be temporary because eventually people would return to supporting the most authentic expression of a governing party, which was the Conservatives. The point is that Blair's pragmatism was effective as long as the economy was relatively successful. His regime was bound to be ended when boom no longer occurred, and so the Tories could re-assert their view that only they could manage capitalism. Hence in this manner they could persuade a deferential electorate that austerity, or the continuation of a crisis economy, was the only credible policy. This success was based on the mythology that Gordon Brown had somehow created what was a worldwide slump. The success of this myth making indicates that the process of distorting the truth is often an expression of the role of Conservatives in government. But the success of this process of generating illusions can only be successful if the electorate is receptive to such claims. In other words the role of Conservative governments can only be truly effective in a situation of a low level of class consciousness. For example the Tory government of 1970-74 was effectively overthrown by the role of mass militancy, whist Thatcher was able to defeat the miners because of the ideological influence of the 'Falklands factor' or popular nationalism. But the rise of the anti-Poll tax movement also created a new crisis for the Tories. Nevertheless mistrust of the Labour Party alternative meant that Major was able to win elections. The constant ideological factor in this equation was popular deference in favour of the Tories, which Marxists have never analysed properly.

Scruton also maintains that conservatism represents the promotion of legitimate authority. (4) It is interesting that he does not connect this standpoint to the role of democracy for establishing and providing the popular support for the role of the political system. Instead what he considers to be a legitimate authority is something that has proved to be durable and has been able to indicate it is not an arbitrary power. What has been established is something that is both traditional and enduring like the role of the family. But what he considers to be accepted practices and institutions to which people are inspired to support is not being advocated in terms of some sense of justice. Instead what is suggested is that the role of tradition is the most important motive for the loyalty of the people: “Conservatives place their faith in arrangements that are known and tried, and wish to imbue them with all the authority necessary to constitute an accepted and objective public realm. It is from this that the respect for tradition and custom arises, and not from any end - such as freedom – towards which these practices are seen as a means.”(5) It is interesting that Scruton ignores the fact that recent conservatism, in the form of Thatcherism, has been prepared to support the transformation of ancient institutional practices in the name of freedom, or the aspiration to enhance the power of capital within society. It has been the Labour party, in the name of custom and tradition, which has attempted to maintain things as they are in terms of the maintenance of the welfare state. In other words we could argue that the support of tradition and the prevailing institutions is conditional for contemporary conservatism. It has been an instrument of change when the existing forms of authority have become considered to be inadequate in relation to the interests of the forces of capital.

But the present situation represents a dilemma for Conservatives because the referendum in favour of BREXIT was a result that big business did not want. Hence the Tories have to implement a change that business does not approve of. The result is ideological crisis and the generation of a situation in which the relationship between business and the Conservatives has become problematical. The only answer to this tension is for the Conservatives to tell big business that it is acting in their interests. Indeed this would reassert the traditional relationship that has occurred in the past. But the point of this situation is that empirical events, or the apparent urgency of creating what seem to be radical changes in policy, as with Thatcherism, means that the theoretical premises of Scruton's approach are continually tested. Hence it can be argued that Conservatives are often in favour of change which may undermine the traditional forms of authority if they consider that it is necessary for capitalism, or will enhance their popular support. Indeed it could be argued that it is not possible to administer government without contemplating the possibility of change.

However Scruton seems to be right to consider that the principle of allegiance is greater than that of individualism for conservatives: “It is allegiance which defines the condition of society, and which constitutes society as something greater than the 'aggregate of individuals' that the liberal mind perceives. It is proper for conservatives to be sceptical of claims made on the values of the individual, if these claims should conflict with the allegiance necessary to society, even though they may wish the state (in the sense of the apparatus of government) to stand in a fairly loose relation to the activities of individual citizens.”(6) However, in the recent period it could be argued that Conservative ideology has become modified in that the concept of allegiance has been transformed in terms of upholding the role of the individual in favour of the importance of economic freedom. This standpoint has been connected to the emphasis that the role of the state should become accommodated to the importance of individual economic activity. In this manner there has been a convergence between liberalism and conservatism. Scruton denies this development because he associates liberalism not with its economic implications but instead as a form of expression of left wing discontent within society. His standpoint indicates that he seems unwilling or unable to define the relationship of Thatcherism to Conservatism. This is because of his reluctance to accept that individualism can be part of conservative values. Hence what he is describing is effectively conservatism in the past.

Scruton is more persuasive when he suggests that one of the major aspects of conservative ideology is the role of the patriotism, or love of country, which is differentiated from nationalism that is considered to be the justification of national self-assertion. But patriotism is connected to admiration for the traditions of a given country: “It is a country, a particular history, a particular form of life that commands the respect and energy of conservatives, and while they may have an imaginative grasp of other real or ideal arrangements, they are not immersed in them as they are immersed in the society that is their own. No utopian vision will have force for them compared to the force of present practice, for while the former is abstract and incomplete, the latter is concrete, qualified by familiar complexities that may be understood without describing them. To the extent that there are arrangements that have been proven in social life, and which have the power to command the loyalty of their participants, to that extent is there variety among the forms of conservative politics”(7) Thus the question of what is defined as patriotism is considered as support for traditional institutions, and durable forms of authority. In this manner it could be said that conservative conceptions of patriotism are also the most popular manner in which mass support is obtained, and so forms opposition to any conceptions of change or socialism. The very notion of change is considered to be invalid – unless that change is deemed to be in the interests of capital – because it is understood to be unpatriotic, or undermines the durability of the established institutions of society. The apparent fact that change apparently goes against the interests of traditional authority means that conservatives should oppose it according to Scruton because it represents the attempt to reject what has become important to any genuinely patriotic citizen of the country. Such a viewpoint is not a description of what conservatism is in practice, but what Scruton has outlined is how it defines itself as an ideology which is attempting to obtain mass support in opposition to rival trends such as those represented by the Labour party. Thus what is being argued is that only as a Conservative is it possible to know what is meant by patriotism. Only Conservatives genuinely love the country because they support its institutions and forms of legitimate authority. In this manner they appeal for support and in particular attempt to undermine the popularity of the Labour party.

However, the BREXIT referendum apparently indicated an ideological dilemma because the apparent interests of business seemed to contradict with the importance of patriotism. To be in the EU was in the interests of capitalism and economic progress, but to leave the EU implied the promotion of the independence of the country and opposition to the EU super state. Thus it is not surprising that the Conservatives effectively split over this issue. To directly uphold the interests of capital meant undermining their claim to be the major patriotic party, and so could result in a loss of support. Hence it was not surprising that the majority of Tories choose the traditional approach of patriotism despite its apparently adverse consequences for business. But such a development implied that the Conservatives could become a populist party and so would no longer consistently uphold the aims of capitalism. In order to uphold the ideology of patriotism the other aspect of what it is meant by conservatism was being opposed. It could be argued that Conservatism as an ideology of custom, tradition and patriotism, such as support for existing institutions like the monarchy is being supported, whilst the more modern and innovative demands of capital are being treated with distrust. In the past it has generally been possible to support both the aspects of Conservatism because defence of capitalism could be considered to be an integral aspect of patriotism, or defining what was meant as upholding the national identity in opposition to the internationalism of socialism. In this manner mass support could be obtained both for capitalism and for the conception of the conservative nation, or the standpoint of patriotism. But the ideological complexity of the BREXIT referendum has challenged this ideological integrity of conservatism. Instead in practice there was a choice between the aims of capital and the promotion of employment or the alternative claims of the glory of the nation and defence of its patriotic integrity. As a result the very ideological cohesion of Conservatism was being challenged. Many Conservatives effectively choose the interests of nation and attempted to deny that this meant the rejection of the contrasting claims of capital. Indeed, the right wing Tories acknowledged that they had no alternative if they were to relate to the popular nationalism within the UK. The apparent claims of popularity meant that patriotism was promoted at the expense of the interests of capital, which meant that an unprecedented ideological crisis has developed for the Conservative party. Its political interests are to try and resolve this situation, and it could be argued that if the UK could retain membership of the single market and customs union then such a resolution of the problems could be achieved. But it seems that this apparently sensible standpoint is being rejected in the name of the electors who opposed the membership of the UK in the EU. The continued impetus of popular nationalism seems to continue to undermine any resolution of the situation which could favour the interests of capital.

Scruton contends that the importance of tradition is an important part of conservatism in terms of support for established laws, customs and institutions. But this approach is undermined by the ideological crisis for the Conservatives concerning BREXIT. They have to uphold the logic of something that is entirely unprecedented for them, which is to undermine the interests of capital in the name of mass support. Therefore what is traditional for them in this situation becomes defined in terms of the crude conception of how to uphold electoral popularity, and so the sense of historical continuity, that was an essential aspect of conservative ideology, is being continually challenged by the tensions of the present situation. The only aspect that possibly continues to maintain the coherence of the Conservatives is that big business within the UK has been traditionally subservient to its political agency. Despite the problems for capital it is still reluctant to undermine the domination of the Conservatives. Only this aspect is able to explain why the populist trajectory of the Conservatives is not being challenged. The dilemma they have is that the apparent claims of democracy, in terms of what is genuinely popular, are in contradiction with the interests of capital. Such a situation is novel, and cannot be resolved in a simple manner. Instead they have to hope that the ultimate settlement between the EU and the UK government can satisfy the conflicting claims of the electorate and the interests of capital. This possibility is enhanced by the Labour Party's own internal crisis on the question of the relationship of the EU to the UK.

Scruton is distrustful of the virtues of democracy and compares it unfavourably to what he considers to be the superior culture and tradition of the rule of the aristocracy. He is in favour of the role of party politics, and implies that it is the method by which coherent government can be established, but he dislikes the power of the Prime Minister and the role of the Cabinet. But he makes no mention of the role of the people in electing a party to power. This omission of the importance of the role of the electorate is not surprising, because ultimately he is in favour of the power of the House of Commons being moderated by the wiser role of the House of Lords. The point is that his apparent indifference to the role of popular sovereignty is because of the Conservative dread that at some point the people might vote for a genuinely left wing Labour government. This mistrust of the people has been recently generated by the ascendency of Corbyn to leader of the Labour Party. The apparent electability of Corbyn was dismissed, but the result of the recent election indicated that a left wing Labour Party had become popular. Hence the Conservative party has two major problems, firstly the tension between the contending claims of capital and popular nationalism, and secondly the promise of popular sovereignty that a left wing Labour government may be elected. In this context the demand to form an authoritarian administration that ignored the mandate of the people could become irresistible.

The possible answer of Scruton to these issues is that the role of politics should preside over the importance of economics. This view seems to suggest that politicians should retain their sense of independence from economics, and so should not adapt to any apparent fashionable economic theory. This is an implicit argument in favour of the continuation of the initiative of Conservative politicians to be able to define what should be economic policy, and as a result not adapt to and become the mere instrument of any given economic policy. However, whilst Scruton is in favour of capitalism within this context, he is also not against the role of public services such as the post office. Thus he is critical of what he considers to be the apparent recent Conservative tendency to accommodate to economic theories such as free market liberalism: “The Conservative party has come under the influence of successive economic theories. But we must remind ourselves that no economic theory makes proper sense unless conjoined to some adequate political doctrine (a doctrine which defines the nature and rights of the social arrangement to be served.)..... It is as much to political doctrine, as to any economic theory that Conservative restrictions on capitalist enterprise have been due.”(8) Thus it is based on the primary motives of politics that the Conservatives have defended capitalism because it should be recognised that only in these terms will they continue to be electable. Hence Scruton is implicitly criticising people like Thatcher for undermining the electability of the Tories because of the acceptance of free market ideology: “And it is perhaps no accident that, when the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher abandoned this conception of the state economic role, and took up the banner of liberal economics, it was in time deserted by the electorate, so that the old alliance of interests which it had for a century represented suddenly fell apart.”(9) Hence the primary importance of politics has to be maintained if the Conservatives are to continue to be electable. What is popular with the electorate has to be combined with support for capitalism. The problem is that this stand point has become undermined by the referendum on EU membership. Whilst the electorate did not consciously vote against capitalism, the interests of big business have been compromised by the result. This has meant the tough choices have had to be made by the Tories concerning their now contradictory interests of allegiance to both capital and to the electorate. In the past such tensions could be resolved, as with the acceptance of Keynesian economics in the 1950's, which corresponded to the requirements of economic boom and the interests of the people. But similar choices do not seem possible in the present situation. Indeed, the Tories are also confronted with a similar dilemma in terms of the continuation of austerity or the promotion of a moderate boom. Thus there is a discrepancy between the choices posed by the emphasis on politics or economics. The result of such tensions is a historic crisis for the Tories.

In other words the aim of people like Scruton to uphold the role of the Conservatives as the supreme party of state and government is under challenge by the tensions of the present situation. This means that his definition of a cohesive state is being undermined by the contradictions generated by the contemporary political circumstances: “I have tried to show, through a series of examples, how the powers that flow through civil life can seek and achieve establishment in a constituted state. Establishment is the great internal aim of politics: the aim of government. It is through this that the forces of society become subject to the powers of the state, by finding authority through the authority of the state. The conservative belief is that the order of the state must be objective, comprehensive, and felt to be legitimate, so that the contrasting conditions of society can achieve their ideological fulfilment by being subject to a common sovereign power. Without this completion in establishment civil society always remains on the brink of fragmentation.”(10) But this ability to preside over a stable state and promote a sense of legitimacy is being undermined by the present situation because of the tensions between the competing claims between capital and popular nationalism. In the past this tension has been resolved, or else the Tories tended to uphold the interests of capital. But now they have to make a choice, and the problems this creates means that the stability of the state is called into question.

Scruton has made it explicit that in this situation he favours the aspirations of popular nationalism. This is because he considers that the issue of national identity is integral to what it means to be a conservative. He contrasts the role of the nation to the European Union in the following manner: “The nation state is a state in which law springs from within, expressing the mutuality and allegiance of the people. In such a state there is clear perception of the limits to law, and a jealous attachment to freedom. The European Union grew from hostility among the post-war elites to the idea of nationhood. Nations they believed cause wars, whereas unions settle them. Hence arose a system of trans-national regulation, which called on no national loyalty for its endorsement, and which was imposed as law without having the moral force of law. The resulting bureaucracy has set itself the task of dissolving national loyalties, by dividing the continent into regions rather than nations. In this way local loyalties will be severed from legal sovereignty and laws will be imposed on communities from outside. It should be evident that there is no prospect for conservative politics in such a situation.”(11) This perspective firmly considers the character of the EU as an expression of undermining the national identity of countries like the UK. In this context the cause of leaving the EU is considered to be an expression of the politics of what is considered to be genuine conservatism. But the logic of this approach is to imply that the aims of authentic conservatism is opposed to the interests of capital. Hence Scruton has anticipated the tensions of the referendum campaign. However his perspective can only undermine the historical relationship of the Conservative party with the interests of capital. Thatcherism had managed to express the unity of nation and capital in terms of strategy of opposing the interests of labour and promoting wars like that which occurred over the Falkland Islands. But her later dislike of the EU indicated the tensions in her position, what was more important nation or capitalism? Scruton attempted to resolve this contradiction in terms of the promotion of the glories of the nation state. But he could only outline this standpoint in theoretical terms, but this had no practical significance. Instead the Cameron administration upheld a position of support for capital which included the recognition that the EU market was important for the interests of business. But the resurgence of UKIP, and the pressure of the Tory opponents of the EU, led to the decision to call a referendum. This development led to the generation of popular nationalism and the result was that the UK should leave the EU. The Tory party had proved that it could not defend the interests of capital adequately. Nevertheless the Conservatives are uncomfortable about being the expression of the party of the people, and for this reason they continue with austerity economics. Therefore they have become the party of indecision, and as a result of this situation the Labour Party has made advances.

In other words the issue of what presently consists the character of British conservatism is uncertain. It is unconvincingly trying to adopt populistic themes and yet also trying to retain its connections to capital. In different circumstances the forces the interests of big business would reject their relationship to the Conservatives, but they know that they do not have any other expression of their interests. But the capitalists do not like the fact that the Tories are presently the flawed expression of a popular nationalism. This strategy has its problems because popular nationalism is also being undermined by the continuation of an economic situation of austerity, low wages and the decline of public services. Hence it is possible that popular nationalism could become transformed into becoming a more genuine and undistorted expression of working class interests. Such a development would mean that the Conservatives would be without their mass base. The economic and political situation has the possibility to be very challenging when the UK leaves the EU, and the UK could no longer have effective access to the single market. In these circumstances the only thing that could prevent the decline of the Conservatives would be the issue as to whether the Labour Party will be able to take advantage of what could become a favourable situation. Does the Labour Party have sufficient belief in itself to win an election? Can it win back the mass support of those voters that have been attracted to the banner of popular nationalism? Consequently if the Labour Party is unable to realise the potential of what could be a favourable opportunity, it is still possible that the Tories could continue in government. But the situation would remain uncertain because of the problems of the post-BREXIT circumstances.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATISM

The analysis of Conservatism is not complete. We still have to outline what is meant by conservatism in a manner that is independent of the role of the Conservative Party in the UK. In order to carry out this task it is necessary to analyse a book by John Kekes called 'A Case for Conservatism'(12) He contends that this approach is about defending what is good and durable in traditional arrangements within society that contribute to the concept of the good life. In this context alternatives to this perspective are inferior because they promote an understanding of society in terms of the illusions of a utopian imagination. This means that the approach of conservatism as a political doctrine is connected to a natural conservatism of people who are motivated to retain what they considered to be important in the present. People prefer what is familiar and mistrust what is novel and experimental. Consequently the motivation of conservatism is generous because people want to extend to others the benefits they may enjoy within existing society. These motivations of natural conservatism are practically expressed in terms of the establishment of stable rules in order to govern society: “The conditions are of a civilized existence in which there are rules that prohibit destructive conduct, provide ways of adjudicating conflicts, assign responsibility for the production of basic goods, and maintain the means to their own enforcement. Such rules are essential to order, security, prosperity and hope, and they are conditions of good lives, no matter how differently they are conceived. When the rules hold, civilized life is possible; where they do not, barbarism looms – a state in which anything goes because nothing is prohibited or required.”(13) It is necessary to outline that the aims of socialism are not against the establishment of stable rules and laws to guide society. Nor is it wrong from this perspective to value what is in the present and which makes improvements to the quality of life. We have learnt from the horrors of Stalinism that the importance of the rule of law is vital if the development of arbitrary and despotic bureaucratic domination of society is to be avoided. Nor is the ideology of socialism merely a justification for the modern and the whims of fashion. Instead we can cherish what is inherited from the past such as family, community and the culture of society. In contrast it is capitalism which has an incessant desire to change everything in the name of profit, and is no respecter of traditions and rejects the value of stability and continuity. Thus the natural conservatism that Kekes has outlined is in contrast to the emphasis on novelty of capitalism, and it could be argued that in order to genuinely establish a society based on the virtues of tradition and stability requires the realisation of socialism. Only in this context would innovation and change not undermine the coherence and togetherness of society. It is capitalism which has undermined the strength of traditional communities, closed industries and led to neglected areas. Such a situation can only be ended by a system that is not based on the profit motive. The point is that the virtues of natural conservatism are not consisted realised by a system dedicated to profit which has led to the decline of genuine family traditions and instead promoted the increasing role of the isolated individual.

Keke also argues that conservatism is based on support for existing political arrangements unless they are so flawed that they require change and improvement. Thus his criteria is that the political system must uphold the principles of what he defines as the good life. The only alternative to this standpoint is to justify what he describes as the application of an ideal imagination, which if put into practice may uphold something worse than the present. He believes that this type of society would be able to resolve differences in terms of compromise and agreement. The definition of the good life is as follows: “These conditions.... are: civility (reciprocal good will among citizens), equality (in the legal and political status of mature and responsible citizens), freedom (from interference and to live according to one's conception of a good life), healthy environment (the absence of pollution), justice (criminal and distributive), order (maintained through the rule of law), peace (domestic and international), prosperity (high enough living standards to provide citizens with the means to live according to their conception of the good life), rights (guaranteed by a written Bill of Rights, precedent or unwritten traditions) security( from physical violence and social coercion), toleration (non-interference with unpopular ways of life and conduct), and welfare (a decent level of education, employment, health care, housing and nutrition).”(14) It is interesting that this list has generally not been realised in most capitalist countries. Indeed in this era of austerity it would be denounced as an unrealistic attempt to promote state intervention and the development of a welfare state. But most importantly, this list is not the programme of most conservatives, who instead have generally become the advocates of the minimal state. It could be argued that it would be socialists and ecologists who would be most sympathetic to this conception of the good life, and it would actually be denounced by many conservatives as interference with the activity of the free market. Thus the problem is that Keke's conception of the good life is an idealised view that relates to his own preferences of what it means to be a conservative. The list of demands does not connect accurately with how conservative politicians consider their political approach. So it appears that Keke is the only true conservative, and that he is effectively opposing a political approach that has endorsed economic liberalism and the free market! But he would suggest that the opponents of conservatism would only emphasise the importance of a few of these demands, and so neglect others. For example it might be argued that socialists would place importance on the role of welfare and so be indifferent to the issue of freedom. However, this criticism represents a caricatured view about the concerns of socialism, and instead it could be suggested that it is supporters of this standpoint who would be the most motivated in order to realise the list of demands that constitute the good life. In contrast it could be suggested that conservatives generally are less interested in the establishment of welfare and often have a very unequal conception of what they would mean by prosperity. Most importantly, Keke has not connected his list of the items of the good life to what is possible under capitalism. In periods of boom it may be possible to realise all of his demands, but under a situation of recession it may not be feasible to promote prosperity and the aims of welfare. Indeed, Keke's admits that his demands may not be realised in full, or in a consistent manner. Instead he is admitting that they represent an ideal which Conservatives should aim to realise. Arguably not many capitalist societies have been able to promote his various criteria of the good life. It would have been more realistic for Keke to outline how the good life can be upheld in the situation of the limitations imposed by capitalism. Instead of carrying out this task his conception of the good life represents an ideal that has in practice often serious difficulties about its realisation. Thus it could be argued that capitalism is often able to realise demands of freedom and tolerance more successfully than the promotion of equality and welfare, or the provision of adequate public services. This point is especially relevant to America where state intervention is considered to be an infringement on the rights of economic freedom, and so public services are often of an inadequate character.

In other words the problem with the views of Keke is that whilst he outlines what he means by conservatism in terms of principles, he does not connect this approach to any adequate conception of what actually occurs in reality. Hence he can outline in theory what is meant by conservatism, but we do not establish whether this standpoint can be realised in practice. However, he does try to establish some sense of realism in that he contends that each particular society should decide how the aims of the good life should be realised. This means that there is flexibility in his standpoint. Therefore in this manner it could be argued that his approach is more flexible than either liberalism or socialism which would emphasise the importance of which particular aims should be established. But his major criticism of the opposing doctrines to conservatism is that they would attempt to transform society in terms of their aims, which could undermine the gains that have been made in the realisation of the good life. He would contend that conservatism is about upholding and conserving the political arrangements that have been conducive to realising the good life. (15) But this standpoint assumes that society will be capable of establishing the aims of the good life without the necessity for radical change. But what if society actually requires effective transformation in order to realise the good life? What the attitude of the conservative be in this situation? We know from historical experience that when a situation requires reform and dramatic change that conservatives has generally been against it. For example the Conservative party in the UK opposed the formation of the National Health Service. Hence what actually motivates Conservatives is conserving what exists in the present and so the issue of what represents the good life becomes irrelevant. Only on a few occasions do Conservatives promote change, and this is usually for electoral reasons. When Conservatives have been radical this is on the basis of actually undermining aspects of the good life in favour of the aim of boosting the prosperity of capitalism. The criticism being made is that the actual criteria by which Conservatives uphold the importance of the various aspects of the good life, which may involve change in this context, is whether this situation corresponds to the interests of capitalism.

Keke suggests that Conservatives are not against the rational approach of applying reason for understanding society, but they are against rationalism and the reduction of society to being the expression of historical laws, as with Marxism. He also admits that there is a sceptical tendency within conservativism which prefers to define what is important in terms of faith instead of reason. There are also absolutists who contend that objective values are important, and which can guide the activity of society, but this is contrasted with relativists who consider that there are competing values and that consensus is required in order to resolve differences within society. Both approaches can justify repression, absolutism in terms of the imposition of rationally defined values, and relativism can result in adherence to the tyranny of custom and the rule of the majority. Hence what is required is plurality which whilst it recognises the role of diverse values also insists on the realisation of the principles of the good life. Such a perspective implies that reason can be utilised in order to establish how the traditional arrangements of society can be connected to the realisation of the good life. However, this analysis ignores the fact that it will generally be the tendency for Conservatives to reject the role of reason in favour of the sceptical emphasis on custom and tradition in terms of how they consider that society should be developed. This is because a rational standpoint is associated with ideas about change and the undermining of traditional arrangements. Keke argues that the principles of reason can be disconnected from the perspective of rationalism which upholds views about progress and historical change, but this view is problematical and seems to gloss over the importance for Conservatives to appeal to the legitimacy of tradition in terms of an emphasis on the role of the given authority, institutions and customs. Thus it would seem to be an expression of wishful thinking to consider that pluralism is consistently realised in this situation in which scepticism about the role of reason would seem to be the primary basis to define the criteria by which conservatives justify support for what is considered to be a traditional order. In this situation custom must have precedence over reason.

Keke also outlines how to a Conservative society must be based on the role of individual autonomy and the good society. If individual autonomy is too important than this can only undermine the cohesion of society, but social cooperation should not be extend to point of denying the freedom of the individual. What establishes the relationship between these two aspects of society is the role of tradition: “A tradition is a set of customary beliefs, practices, and actions that has endured from the past to the present and attracted the allegiance of the people so that they wish to perpetuate it.”(16) He contends that a society based on the importance of traditions will be one that upholds the principle of the role of limited government: “The political arrangements of a limited government will interfere as little as possible with the many indigenous traditions that flourish among people subject to it. The purpose of its arrangements will be to enable people to live as they please, rather than to force them to live in a particular way. One of the most important ways of accomplishing this is to have a wide plurality of traditions a bulwark between individuals and the government that has power over them.”(17) What is not explained in this particular analysis is that Conservatives will have preferences for traditions which justify the importance of the institutions of society like the monarchy, or which refer to national traditions from the past. But, they will also disapprove of traditions of collective class struggle, as represented by the trade unions, or left wing parties. Therefore the Conservative will support traditions that consolidate a sense of national identity and which implicitly deny the possibility of a different future from the character of the present. Thus the influence of traditions is not an expression of a natural development within society, but instead is related to ideological bias, or that which favours opposition to social change. Thus the traditions of the trade unions or socialist parties are treated with disfavour by conservatives, and considered to be an expression of opposition to the national interest. Thus the conclusion of the emphasis on the role of tradition is that the Conservatives represent the natural party of government because they are the most traditional and in this manner correspond to the interests of the nation. This standpoint has to be contested by left wing parties.

Keke maintains that Conservatism is a pessimistic doctrine in so far as it emphasises the importance of the limitations of human nature and the tendency for humans to do wrong things. But they will also maintain that political arrangements can overcome this aspect in the behaviour of humans. This is a valid point, and it can be suggested that Marxists have underestimated the capacity for humans to do wrong things. This expression of human irrationality was indicated by the actions of the Stalin regime which completely undermined the emancipatory promise of Marxism because of its despotic actions. But the alternative to the flaws in human nature is not to deny the necessity of change, but is instead to create a type of society based on the accountabilty of the regime to the people. Or an authentic socialist society.

Keke provides the following definition of Conservatism: “Conservatism therefore not a mindless defence of whatever happens to be the prevailing political arrangements by those who benefit from them. Political arrangements must be good to merit conservation, and what makes it good is that they enable the people of a society to make good lives for themselves. Because the defence of such arrangements is in everyone's interests in a society, conservatives are committed to the good of everyone in their society, not just to their own. Nor are conservatives led to defend the prevailing political arrangements by instinct, natural affection, custom, or a priori commitments. They defend them because they work, that they work is shown by their history, and it is through reflections on that history that the reasons for conservatism are found. This understanding of conservatism is deepened by adding to it an explanation of the basic conservative beliefs concerning scepticism, pluralism, traditionalism, and pessimism that form its basis.”(18) It would seem to be a naïve view to believe that Conservatives would be motivated to change society if it did not correspond to what could be defined as good political arrangements. Instead it could be argued that Conservatives are generally committed to upholding and maintaining society against the prospects of change because of reasons of custom, tradition, and a general association of the concept of improvement with the agenda of the left wing. The only change that is contemplated is one that would promote the aims of the forces of capital in order to undermine the strength of the labour movement. Thus Keke is being more realistic when he defines what Conservatives consider to be an acceptable political system in the following manner: “Good political arrangements protect those traditions and the freedom to participate in them by limiting the government's authority to interfere with either. Their protection will involve making necessary changes in them, but it will aim to keep these changes as small and specific as possible.”(19) This comment outlines in a more explicit manner that because the Conservatives value the traditions of society they will therefore aim to make only modest changes, and this development corresponds to the view that society is basically efficient and durable and not in need of drastic improvement. In this context the issue of change in accordance with the aims of the good life becomes essentially irrelevant and unnecessary. Instead the Conservatives act in order to uphold the arrangements of society from being changed and modified by oppositional forces. This task is connected to maintaining capitalism as the system that is considered to be the most efficient, and so should be preserved and defended against those that would argue in favour of alternatives. Such a defence of capitalism becomes connected to the emphasis on the importance of upholding the continuity of tradition. Hence it is suggested that capitalism is part of the national identity. The point is that Keke apparently over-estimates the motivation of Conservatives to promote change because of the connected commitment to the aims of the good life. Hence he effectively defines Conservatism as a form of reform rather than the expression of reaction. But the actual empirical character of Conservatism is not to be guided by any sense of what is the good life, rather it is instead opposed to change in the name of the continuity of tradition. Only electoral pressure brings about an empirical recognition that change might be possible. For example, the influence of popular nationalism on the attitudes of the present Conservative government in the UK has led to promise that measures will be take in the interests of working people. The situation of austerity will be relaxed in order to carry out these proposals. But if this situation had not been necessitated by a tense electoral situation nothing will have been done in term of supporting measures of reform. Indeed it could be argued that the situation is still more of a promise than an actuality. Thus the Conservative government still relies on exploiting the influence of popular nationalism and has not actually carried out effective measures of reform. This is an indication that even under adverse circumstances the Conservatives are reluctant to implement measures of welfare and improvement of public services. They are a party of no change, regardless of Keke's emphasis on the importance of realising the good life.

Keke argues that one of the most important difference between Conservatism and Enlightenment ideologies like Socialism concerns a pessimistic versus an optimistic view of human nature. He argues that it is an illusion of socialism to suggest that if equitable social arrangements are established in society then this will resolve the problem of flaws in human behaviour: “Political arrangements are made by people. If they are good, it is because they are made well; if they are bad it is because their makers made them so. If the prevalence of evil is the result of bad political arrangements, then it must ultimately be because of the deficiencies of their makers. If people would act in morally acceptable ways were it not for bad political arrangements, then how could it be that bad political arrangements come into being? Who would make them bad? If people were made into evil doers by bad political arrangements, then how could political arrangements ever be improved? If people are not totally at the mercy of political arrangements, and they can actually diagnose them as bad and try to improve them, then it must be possible to act contrary to bad political arrangements. And if that is possible, then the prevalence of evil cannot be the result merely of bad political arrangements, because the people who allow themselves to be influenced by them, even though they could act contrary to them, must also be responsible. Human beings are no doubt malleable enough to be influenced by political arrangements. But they are not sufficiently malleable to be without innate tendencies that makes them receptive to both good and bad influences.”(20) This view is illogical. It is one thing to suggest that socialists may be over-optimistic to believe that a change in the political system will bring about a complete transformation of human behaviour. But the opposite conclusion is that if it is accepted that people are inherently bad, or at least a significant minority are, how will it then be possible to reform or improve society? Only if we assume that people in their majority are good can we provide any reasons for either the reform or modification of society for the better. Furthermore, we can make the reasonable claim that a better type of society will improve the behaviour of people, even if some people continue to be bad. Thus it is problematical to assume, as Kekes does, that doing wrong is an inherent part of a flawed human nature. Instead it is what has occurred in a person's history which will influence their actions. And in this manner it can be argued that if society is changed for the better than people will improve in terms of their standards and behaviour. However, this does not mean that all forms of bad behaviour will be overcome.

The problem with the approach of Keke's is that because he assumes that people are flawed, the only result can be a flawed society. This point is established by the following comment: “Pessimism, however, rejects as shallow the hope that a society will be successful in finding political arrangements that will sublimate evil. Political arrangements are made and implemented by people whose propensity to cause evil is likely to be neither stronger nor weaker than that of others. There is no reason to suppose that there is such a thing as 'the best' political arrangements, or that if there were, their creation and implementation could somehow escape the evil propensities of the people in charge. Whatever arrangements people make is bound to reflect their propensities, and since the propensity to cause evil is one among them, all arrangements will always be imperfect. The aim is to mitigate their imperfections as much as possible in the historical circumstances of the existing societies.”(21) The problem with considering that being flawed is a part of human nature is that a pretext is provided for the continuation of the imperfections and limitations of society. The limitations of what it is to be human can always be blamed for the inability to improve the conditions of society. In this manner the problems with capitalism can be evaded and instead what is the major issue is the role of the flaws of human nature. This standpoint ultimately justifies the continuation of the status quo because it is argued that any attempt to change society will be undermined by similar problems. However, Marxists also have to learn from history that flawed personalities like Stalin can undermine the emancipatory promise of society. This is why the state has to be limited in its power by the role of democratic accountability. Whilst we should not be pessimistic about human nature, we also should not be naïve about its flaws.

In the discussion of justice, Keke contends that an inexorable situation of scarce resources means that justice cannot be realised in terms of strict equality: “It is useless to try and avoid such injustice by distributing scarce resources equally among all the deserving people because the equal distribution of scarce resources often results in the even greater injustice of no one getting what is deserved.”(22) But the issue about what is equality does not imply some impractical allocation of resources in terms of absolute similar amounts of goods for each person. Instead it implies that some people will receive more than others in accordance with the criteria of merit and skill. Thus the question of whether equality is realised depends on the application of an agreed sense of what is fairness. This will mean the development of public services in order to realise social needs and the understanding that a minimum level of provision is needed in order to attain what is necessary in order for subsistence. Instead of discussing these issues, Keke comments that: “The aim of justice is to reduce injustice. It is reason enough for the pursuit of justice that it will make lives better. And it is a bad reason for weakening the commitment to justice that what is gained from its pursuit is not as good as it might be if the human condition was different.”(23) Hence it is part of the human situation that justice is not feasible. The most that can be achieved is that the worst features of injustice can be overcome. This is a standpoint that represents the most reactionary features of conservatism. It is being admitted that according to conservative doctrine the attainment of justice is not feasible. But if this view was strictly true it would also mean that the aim of the good life was impossible, because it must be connected to a perspective of what is just. In other words, the perspectives of conservatism are not practical aims and instead are the expression of an illusory idea about what should constitute a decent society. However, what is not explained is why justice is not possible? There is vague mention by Keke about conflicting priorities within society, but this view does not constitute an adequate reason. He comments: “The adjudication of conflicts involving political compromises must be seen as, therefore, as the management of injustice. Given the contingency of the plurality of conflicting values and the need for compromise, injustice will be a permanent, unavoidable, and frequent feature of political life.”(24) This is a very feeble rejection of the possibility that a process of realising compromise between the different interests within society cannot establish justice. If Keke believes that it is possible to develop a moral authority in order to promote the good life, why should this process not also realise justice? Or is he implying implicitly that the attainment of the good life is not just? Ultimately, he is maintaining that justice is not possible because it is connected to the aim of equality. What upholds his apparently inconsistent reasoning is the assumption that the capitalist society that Conservatives advocate will not be able to realise equality and justice. Instead in this form of society there will be an unfair allocation of resources. But such a viewpoint makes a nonsense of the concept of the good life that contends that competing interests within society can be reconciled in terms of a common morality and tradition of compromise, and which would in this manner establish justice. Instead he is suggesting that the autonomy of individuals, which is based on competing values and interests, would deny the possibility to realise justice. But if this was the situation it would also mean that society could not unite in order to attain the aims of the good life. Ultimately his acceptance of the importance of individualism undermines the conception that society can realise common social aims in terms of the good life. However such a conclusion must deny the practical feasibility of both the good life and the principle of justice.

There is also a contradiction in his approach because he argues that differences within society about political arrangements can be resolved in terms of the application of reason and the related agreement about the values that constitute the good life.(25) Primarily he regards the role of tradition as resolving the tensions between the contrasting demands of social authority and individualism and so enabling common agreement about the good life to be realised: “Traditionalists favour political arrangements that foster traditions that have continued to attract the allegiance of a significant number of people living in a society because participation in such traditions is an indispensable part of good lives. They oppose political arrangements that foster either social authority or individual autonomy at the expense of those that foster traditions. Their reason for this is not that there is something intrinsically wrong with social authority or individual autonomy. On the contrary traditionalists regard both as important to living good lives provided that they are kept within their appropriate places.....Traditionalists think that the political arrangements that favour tried and true traditions are the best ways to assign appropriate importance to both social authority and individual autonomy and to defuse the tension between them.”(26) Thus the assumption being made is that the role of tradition overcomes the tendency for individual autonomy to fragment the interests of people within society, and it also enables the problem of a dominant social authority to be overcome. In this manner people can freely unite in order to promote the aims of the good life. Hence tradition provides the cohesion, social cooperation and solidarity required in order to aspire to realise the values of the good life. Thus the distinct interests expressed by individual autonomy can be reconciled with the aims of society in terms of the influence and common values expressed by tradition. It is part of the very fabric of society that it attempts to realise the good life: “Individuals learn from traditions about the possibilities of life, and the goodness of their lives depends on making some possibilities of some traditions their own. They make good lives for themselves by participating in traditions. This is why the political arrangements of a good society will recognize that participation in traditions is a condition of good lives...and moral identity on the social level, but also traditions on the individual level of political morality.”(27)

Yet after outlining what seems to be a coherent argument in favour of connecting the role of tradition and the good life, it is also argued that justice is not feasible. Possibly what resolves this contradiction is the acceptance of a pessimistic view of human nature, which implies that humans are too flawed to be able to realise justice. This understanding is connected to what Keke considers to be the inexorable limitations of the problem of scarcity: “Justice conceived in this manner cannot be achieved because of there is a non-culpable scarcity of resources that makes it impossible to satisfy all the legitimate claims to security, health, education, good jobs, appropriate recognition, pleasant housing, enriched opportunities for leisure, and so forth.....Even if the political arrangements of a society did not fall short of the ideal on account of the prevalence of evil, they would still fall short because of the unavoidable limitation of justice. But of course evil is prevalent, and that makes the administration of justice suffer from avoidable limitations as well.”(28) If we were to extend this argument to its completed logic this would imply that it is not feasible to create the good life society. The limitations of human nature would undermine the possibility to realise the good life. Hence because of what seems to be an inherent scepticism and pessimism with the conservative approach it can still be argued that the only credible view of how a better society can be created is based upon the aspirations of socialism. It could be argued that the standpoint of socialism is based on the flaws of over-optimism, but this seems to be preferable to the effective justification of the limitations of the present by conservatism. Keke has tried to present the advantages of the present in the most attractive form of the concept of the good life, but the limitations of his approach is expressed by the fact that he admits that justice is not feasible and equality is impracticable. Hence the implicit conception of the good life that is being justified is that of capitalism and this means virtues are being made of its various limitations. Indeed he ultimately admits that the good society is impossible and that we have to accept what is possible within given limitations: “The ideal of a good society that makes good lives possible for those for those who live in it is unobtainable, but it can still be approximated. And for its approximation it is possible to call on moral resources that act as a counterweight to contingency, evil and injustice. These resources are political arrangements that have historically been shown to make lives better; the intrinsic attractions of living a satisfying and beneficial life and the sense of justice that is outraged by the conspicuous discrepancy between what people have and what they deserve to have. These moral resources can be used to approximate to the ideal, and in a society that aims to be good, they will be used. How effective they will be depends on the strength that the countervailing forces of contingency, evil and injustice have in particular societies at particular times. The clash between these forces is one unavoidable feature of human lives. The outcome is never certain, and so it always reasonable to do what can be done to favour the side that is – fallibly – regarded as the good.”(29) In other words it is argued by Keke that the conservative perspective is also utopian and is likely never to be realised. Instead we have to accept the limitations of the present.

UNDERSTANDING THE DILEMMAS OF CONTEMPORARY CONSERVATISM.

The Conservative doctrine is connected to allegiance to the nation. But this apparent standpoint is under question because of the trans-national character of the European Community. However, the interests of business consider that they benefit from the economic coherence of the EU, such as access to the single market. Therefore it would appear that the Conservative ideology is undermined by what appears to be divided loyalties. Roger Scruton outlines the importance of the nation in the following terms: “National loyalties, therefore, aid reconciliation between classes, interests, and faiths, and form the background to a political process based in consensus rather than in force. In particular, national loyalties enable people to respect the sovereignty and right of the individual.”(30) What the apparent connection between Conservatism and national identity represents is the ideological ability to obtain mass support for this doctrine within the working class. The result is the ability to win elections. But the interests of capital are increasingly global, and this point is indicated by the trans-national character of the EU. When the membership of the EU was not put into question by sections of the Conservative party it was possible to reconcile the apparently contradictory aims of upholding national identity and the importance of the international aspects of capitalism. But pressure on Cameron led to the calling of a referendum on the issue of membership of the EU. This meant that it became apparent that the Conservative Party was being divided by apparently conflicting loyalties. The importance of political priorities were becoming in conflict with the economic interests that the Conservatives upheld.

But Conservatives like Scruton consider that this apparent dilemma has to be resolved in favour of the nation, which would imply leaving the EU. He comments that: “We in Europe stand at a turning point in our history. Our parliaments and legal systems still have territorial sovereignty. They still correspond to historical patterns of settlement that have enabled the French, Germans, the Spaniards, the British and Italians to say 'we' and to know whom they mean by it. The opportunity remains to recuperate the legislative powers and the executive procedures that formed the nation states of Europe. At the same time, the process has been set in motion that would expropriate the remaining sovereignty of our parliaments and courts, which would annihilate the boundaries between our jurisdictions, which would dissolve the nationalities of Europe in a historically meaningless collectivity, united neither by language, nor by religion, nor by customs, nor by inherited sovereignty and law. We have to choose whether to go forward to that new condition, or back to the tried and familiar sovereignty of the territorial nation state.”(31) At one time this view would be dismissed as an expression of a minority standpoint that ignored the interests of capitalism. But the EU referendum led to a popular expression of nationalism by sections of the working class, and led to the rejection of membership. The Tory government now had the responsibility to carry out the process of leaving the EU. In these circumstances the minority views of people like Scruton became the accepted wisdom of the Conservative party. But this meant the interests of big business were being relegated to a secondary condition in order to uphold the popularity of the Tories. Such a situation had never been envisaged because it had always seemed possible to unite the interests of nation and capital. Indeed this unity historically took the form of imperialism in the era of building empires.

Since the dissolution of Empire, the connections of business and nation was increasingly expressed in the context of world trade and the globalisation of the economy. Hence the view of Scruton seemed to be isolated when he calls for a return to a protectionist economy: “The problem posed by the global economy and the outreach of the multinationals can be solved in a similar spirit. It is only free market dogma that persuades people that free trade is a real possibility in the modern world. All trade is massively subsidized, usually in the interests of the stronger party...And all trade is or ought to be subject to the prohibition and restriction in the interest not merely of local conditions but also of moral, religious and national imperatives.”(32) This used to be a minority view, but since the referendum result it has become orthodoxy, with many views being expressed about rejecting the merits of the single market. It is necessary to establish that what has occurred is an unprecedented situation. The overall history of the Conservative party has been based on the promotion of the interests of capital as being in the national interest. As we have indicated this connection is in order to be able to make the inequalities that are associated with capitalism acceptable to the people because this situation is based on connecting the character of the economic system with the national identity. But in order to promote BREXIT it is necessary that the conception of the national interest be defined in a manner that is differentiated from the global interests of capital. What becomes primarily important are the political themes of independence, tradition and opposition to free movement of labour. Hence the role of the political is being promoted at the expense of the economic. It could be argued that such a perspective can only benefit the Conservatives because this development means they can uphold and defend a nationalist perspective that will appeal to the majority of the electorate. But what this populism means is that the Conservatives lack a credible economic standpoint, and instead can only defend the project of austerity, or the policy of Cameron and Osborne. However, this flimsy standpoint means that they become vulnerable to the criticisms of Corbyn about the neglect of public services. Thus the policy of nationalism cannot gloss over the fact that the Tories lack a credible economic programme and have alienated the interests of business.

At present the limitations of the present Conservative project are still to some extent overcome by the popular appeal of nationalism. This aspect is connected to the role of deference and the view that the Tories are still the natural party of government. But the uncertainties caused by BREXIT mean that the very ideological credibility of the Conservatives is being called into question. The problem is that the logic of BREXIT could result in the effective isolation of the UK without any secure markets in the EU, and without any other major trading partners. However they seem to be indifferent to this possibility because they lack any strategy to retain a connection with the single market and the customs union. In these potentially dire circumstances the ability to appeal to popular nationalism would be called into question. What is called for is the elaboration of a credible economic policy which would be able to tackle these serious economic issues. But the very influence of popular nationalism is undermining this promotion of a credible economic standpoint. Under these circumstances the alternative of Jeremy Corbyn could flourish. The idea of rejuvenating the welfare state would seem to be the only serious policy. A socialist culture would flourish in this situation. The only basis in which the Tories could oppose this challenge would be to assert a sensible economic policy based on establishing a close connection between the UK and EU. Thus they need to reject popular nationalism if they are to be able to uphold a credible standpoint. But this stance could mean undermining the present mass base of the Conservatives. In this context the prospects are not favourable to its future advance. All of these contradictions and tensions could have been avoided if Cameron had not called a referendum on membership of the EU. This would have meant the pro capitalist basis of the Conservatives would not have been called into question by the upsurge of popular nationalism caused by BREXIT. Instead the UK would have remained part of the EU, and this context would have been able to promote pro-capitalist politics. But after BREXIT, the UK has an uncertain economic future, and could undergo serious crisis and decline. It has been crude political calculation which has led to this challenge to the UK's economic credibility. If the Tories are able to overcome the problems of this situation it will only be because of the limitations of the opposition led by Corbyn.

WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY AIMS OF CONSERVATISM?

Ted Honderich has provided a useful summary of what he considers to be the major principles of conservatism. (33) He argues that conservatism effectively began with Edmund Burke's reaction to the French revolution. But his criticism of this event did not mean that Conservatism is merely about conserving what presently exists. It is against radical change such as revolutions, but is not opposed to limited reform that effectively maintains what is present within the prevailing form of society. This means that change should be opposed when it means the ending of what is familiar, or the alteration of what is fundamental, which means the undermining of identity. (34) Obviously this point is debateable because Conservatives have promoted drastic change when it is considered to be in the interests of capitalism, such as dismantling the welfare state and instead imposing privatisation of the economy. Hence Honderich is right to suggest that the very conception of what is sensible change is problematical for Conservatives. It would be dogmatic to claim that they are merely the party of upholding society against its modification, but what change they are definitely against is the threat of revolution which would result in the formation of a government with the aim of promoting socialism. Hence it is one of their most crucial tasks to obtain the support within the working class for the present economic system, and so to obtain mass support for the rejection of socialism. Thus the change that is not supported by Conservatism is that which would bring about the formation of a different type of society than the present capitalist one. In this context Honderich is right to suggest that New Labour under Tony Blair's leadership was a type of conservatism. It was for limited reforms which carried on the Thatcherite legacy, but was opposed to more radical change that would have suggested any possibility of socialism. In other words, there are a variety of types of Conservatism, but all are united by their opposition to the transformation of capitalism and the realisation of a different type of society such as socialism. Hence Burke did effectively invent Conservatism, in terms of opposition to revolutionary change. Only in this context is tradition and the established authority of a society upheld in opposition to any possibility of the development of an alternative as a result of popular and mass struggle. Thus what actually motivates conservatism is the rule of an elite, which upholds the system of capitalism and rejects socialism as the illusions of the potential for popular sovereignty.

Honderich contends that conservatism is against the importance of theory and is instead an advocate of the role of common sense. (35) This point is not strictly true because there are many examples of Conservative ideologues, but what they are often defending is opposition to what they consider to be dogmatic theories like Marxism. Such an emphasis is because they maintain that doctrines like Marxism must be dogmatic because they advocate revolutionary change. Instead what is credible and reasonable is what coincides with the continuation of the present form of society, or capitalism. In this sense they are in favour of what has been tried and tested within social reality, and so is not an expression of the supposed illusion of the utopian imagination. What this standpoint means is that the only credible system is capitalism, and that any supposed alternative like socialism is not feasible because it contradicts the apparent character of human nature which is motivated by the desire for economic gain. This also means that moral arguments in favour of alternatives to capitalism are not practical because they imply an over-optimistic view of human nature which is defined by the motivation of acquisition and increasing wealth. Thus as Honderich contends the approach of time and tested propositions is selective when it comes to the views of Conservatives. It does not mean the necessity to maintain the welfare state despite its durability, but instead the contention that what is truly traditional is the process of the accumulation of capital. But in order to uphold this perspective can mean undermining what is truly tested within society, such as the welfare state and instead this is replaced by the more contemporary and less traditional minimal state of the Thatcherite invention. Hence Conservatism, in its modern forms, can be a genuine process of innovation and change, which undermines what has become traditional within society. But it is able to overcome this apparent contradiction by maintaining that what is truly and genuinely an expression of national custom is the promotion of capitalism. In this context the welfare state is considered an aberration because its role is to modify the operation of the laws of the process of capital accumulation in the name of a more just distribution. The point is that what is valid or traditional, and so practical, is defined by what is considered to be required by capitalism at a given moment in time. This could mean adherence to the welfare state, as with the role of Macmillan and Eden in the 1950's, or the ending of the welfare state by Thatcher. But what Conservatism is adamantly opposed to is any justification of the alternative to capitalism, which is socialism. As Anthony Quinlan outlines: “Conservatives generally insist that different social arrangements are appropriate at different times and places. They do not, like classical liberals, or later doctrinaires like the Fabian socialists, endorse a timeless ideal of civilised order which should be imposed, if necessary by force, on those communities whose historical experience has not led them to it.”(36) This view would suggest that any attempt to introduce socialism is an expression of dogma because the only suitable form of society that would correspond to the traditions and interests of the people is one that is based on capitalism.

Honderich considers that it is difficult to establish the definitive principles of Conservatism. But this admission is not credible. Instead what is constant and consistent about Conservatism is its dedication to capitalism, and to promoting popular support for this standpoint in terms of its political role in trying to be elected to be the majority party in Parliament. Conservatism is in a constant struggle with the Labour Party, which is considered to be an expression of the alternative of socialism. However, this situation became complicated during the Blair years because New Labour could be said to be a modern form of the conservative approach. But what is a recurring feature of the many different forms of conservatism is that they all reject any form of socialism which is defined as an expression of a form of economic compulsion as opposed to the free activity of autonomous agents.(37) This approach is connected to the standpoint that people are self-interested rather than altruistic. Thus any social cooperation that occurs in this context is defined as a common aspiration for economic gain. In other words conservative values correspond most precisely with what seems to be the basis of the generation of profit within a capitalist society. Thus they favour the role of voluntary individuals engaging in economic actions based on the role of incentives. In other words these aspects are all part of what it means to be engaged in an economy based on the importance of profit. Honderich considers this point in terms of the freedom to acquire or uphold the right of private property, and to promote the introduction of law that facilitates this possibility. (38) Thus: “They defend or seek to have a wider range of things open to private ownership, which is to say not in cooperative ownership – not owned by central or other governments and administrations or by other specially authorized and socially responsible bodies. Conservatism, for part of its history, stood in opposition to liberalism. This opposition, in good part, had to do with forms of government that have since declined. In its most recent history it has more clearly stood with liberalism in opposition to socialism and to socialist strains in other ideologies. To a great extent this has been an opposition to an extension of public ownership and in particular an opposition to extensions or existing extents of the things that are public property.”(39)

Consequently with this comment Honderich is outlining how conservatism has recently become associated with the offensive of capital against labour. He describes how Conservatives have become in favour of privatising many forms of state property in the name of economic freedom and private enterprise. The apparent defence of the welfare state is limited to traditional institutions like the National Health Service. This means that in the name of ideology the issue of what is available to people becomes dependant on an ability to pay. The result is as Honderich explains: “That is, access to society's private resources is dependent to some considerable extent on being person or thing of an efficiently acquisitive or possessive class or type..... Therefore the conservative society as against others enlarges the total of what is distributed according to ability to pay, and decreases the total of what is distributed according to need.”(40) In order to justify a situation of what is terrible inequality it is necessary to discredit any public provision of goods and services as being an expression of socialism. The fact that past Conservative administrations were committed to the welfare state, including Churchill, is ignored. Instead in a sense modern Conservatism has re-invented itself in terms of being in favour of a minimal state and the most explicit defence of private enterprise at the expense of any public services. This development means that in order to obtain support from the working class it has been necessary to promote popular nationalism, as indicated by the war over the Falklands and other expressions of militarism. Thus in a limited manner it is not a coincidence that the offensive of capital against labour has occurred alongside various military interventions in the Third world. However, this combination of the interests of capital and nationalism has been undermined by the difficulties of BREXIT.

Honderich contends that the principles of Conservatism are not generally committed to democracy, or accountability to the people as a result of the role of elections. Instead their primary approach to the political system is that it should defend the interests of private property. Only in this context will they support the role of democracy. However, this point should be qualified. What the Conservatives have learnt from the results of elections is that they need not be reticent about the role of democracy because it has been possible for them to be successful because of an appeal to a sense of deference or nationalism within the people. They have been able to win elections because they could appeal to the voters as the natural party of government, and in that context to criticise their opponents for their lack of realism, or dogmatic adherence to supposedly impractical policies like socialism. This does not mean that Honderich is wrong to equate the character of Conservatism with the influence of authoritarianism. Hence its appeal to the people has been on the basis of support for the role of a strong state that is indifferent to the importance of civil liberties. Furthermore, the Conservatives have utilised the importance of traditional institutions like the monarchy in order to uphold their appeal. In other words Conservatives combine an ideology of traditionalism with the skilful ability to utilise the democratic process, and so in that manner have generally been able to be more successful than their opponents in electoral terms. Thus the following understanding of Conservative attitude to democracy underestimates its ability to be able to utilise the process of liberal democracy to its advantage. He comments that their conception of political freedoms means: “These are freedoms that are no more democratic than need be, are not such as to interfere with property conceived in a certain way, leave some place for a true natural aristocracy, and are consonant with a certain authoritarianism. Hierarchic or oligarchic democracy, in short.”(41) This view does outline some of the traits of the Conservative ideology and practice, but it underestimates its skilful ability to be able to be successful in the very process of winning elections. The Conservatives are skilful manipulators of popular views, and so as a result can obtain the majority support at elections. Hence they have no reason to be opposed to the role of liberal democracy because this very process has proved to be successful for them.

However, there is one condition on this situation. They support liberal democracy as long as it upholds the importance of private property, as Honderich explains: “Given various connections between property and business on the one hand and politics on the other, a society whether property and business are to the fore is more likely to be one that has only the more limited political and civil freedoms. If property owners and businessmen have greater economic power than they might, we are all the more likely to have only the kind of political and civil liberty that suits them.”(42) This point was expressed in the Thatcher years when the role of elections combined with the role of the strong state was utilised in order to oppose any dissent with the divisive policies that were uphold in order to create a situation that benefitted the forces of capital to the detriment of labour. Only popular nationalism ensured that such a possibility was able to be realised. It could not say that government in this period was based on the principle of genuine consent, and instead it had authoritarian aspects in order to ensure that the interests of capital were being realised. This situation meant that this period led to many forms of mass dissent, but this did not deter the government from carrying out what were obviously unpopular policies. The approach of compromise and negotiation was replaced by the attitude of intransigence and determination to realise government policy despite the development of opposition. In this situation the conception of national unity was replaced by a polarisation that meant an effective end to consensus politics. The role of crude class struggle replaced any attempt to bring about an agreed process of negotiations concerning differences. Thus Thatcher effectively rejected the standpoint of traditional conservatism and created a new form in which it was the direct instrument of the ruling class. Since that time the various Tory administrations have attempted to re-establish the more conciliatory type of traditional conservatism. This process has been vital if they are to continue to win elections. Hence it has been necessary that Conservatives show concern about the National Health Service, and are also motivated by generating the end of mass unemployment. However, such aims are not against the interests of capital, which continues to be their primary interest.

The uncertainties of BREXIT have undermined the ability of the Conservatives to be able to uphold their traditional policies. Instead the claims of nation seem to be opposed to the interests of capital. Thus an important dilemma has arisen that they have not yet been able to resolve. It seems that in this situation promoting the interests of capital, which would favour a soft BREXIT, could result in electoral decline. The complexity of circumstances seems to be undermining the coherence and consistency of Tory policy. The only manner in which the Conservatives can hope to continue in power in this situation is to try to promote the increasingly problematical view that they are still the natural party of government. But this approach is constantly being undermined by the differences in the Cabinet and the fact that the EU is imposing harsh demands on the UK as a basis for its withdrawal from this institution. In other words the present problem for Conservatism is that it is being undermined as the natural party of government in terms of problems about upholding the interests of capital. Thus it can only govern in this sense by pointing out that the alternative party of capital – the Liberal Democrats - are not a credible party and have no chance of electoral success. In these circumstances the forces of business have no other option than to continue to support the Conservatives. This is mainly because they mistrust the aims of a possible Corbyn administration. However the major contradiction of the present Conservative administration has not been resolved. Indeed it has increasingly been unable to satisfy the demands of popular nationalism because of the continuation of austerity and the situation of a low wage economy. At some point popular nationalism could actually become transformed into support for more left wing demands about the economy. Corbyn could acquire increasing support. Hence it is vital for the Conservatives that they are able to agree a credible process of BREXIT which would maintain employment and promote prosperity. But how is this aim to be reconciled to the fact that the UK would no longer be part of the single market. How could an effectively isolationist UK be able to promote the possibility of economic prosperity? In other words it seems that adverse circumstances have generated the possibility for an historic crisis for Conservatism. Whether the Labour party is able to take advantage of this situation depends on it undermining the influence of popular nationalism and instead upholding the aims of internationalism, equality and socialism.

FOOTNOTES

(1)Roger Scruton: The Meaning of Conservatism (Third Edition) Palgrave, Basingstoke 2001

(2) ibid p8-9

(3) ibid p15-16

(4) ibid p18-19

(5) ibid p24

(6) ibid p24

(7) ibid p27

(8) ibid p106-107

(9) ibid p106

(10) ibid p172

(11) ibid p176

(12)John Kekes: A Case for Conservatism, Cornell University Press 1998

(13) ibid p10

(14) ibid p22

(15) ibid pp27

(16) ibid p38

(17) ibid p41

(18) ibid p46

(19) ibid p47

(20Ibid p87-88

(21) ibid p89-90

(22) ibid p186

(23) ibid p189

(24) ibid p188

(25) ibid p203-205

(26) ibid p206

(27) ibid p213

(28) ibid p218

(29) ibid p218-219

(30)Roger Scruton Arguments for Conservatism, Bloomsbury London 2006 p18

(31) ibid p1

(32) ibid p30

(33)Ted Honderich: Conservatism Pluto Press, London 2005

(34) ibid p20

(35) ibid pp36

(36) ibid p56

(37) ibid p94

(38) ibid p115

(39) ibid p119

(40) ibid p121

(41) ibid p185

(42) ibid p186