



Old Hickory's Diary - 6

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The New Caring Conservatism

In a rerun of Matthew Parris's experiment of the 1980s, David "Two Brains" Willetts decided to take both his brains to live among the lowlife in Birmingham for a few nights in February 2002. He went along to the Christian missionary group, the *Birmingham City Mission*, which organises public speaking and runs a number of homes for the homeless near the city centre.

There he met some tales of woe from the few tramps that the Mission had managed to coax into its homes. One man told him that he had become homeless as a result of reporting benefit cheats. The cheats somehow found out about it and attacked him and his girlfriend last Xmas. As they have a two-year-old son, things were not so good. Willetts thought that this outcome was undeserved as they were only trying to do the right thing. The MP for Havant pushed on to the second building that the

Mission runs, just over the road. He there met other inmates and voluntary workers, some who thought he was only on the make. One of them said so. A member of the staff, Steven Jackson-Parr, thought that Willetts had not come properly dressed for his task. He ought to have worn a tee-shirt and trainers rather than his usual shoes and suit. The chief problem was drugs, Jackson-Parr said, and the Tories might do well if they were to sort that problem out.

The television news showed Willetts having tea, presumably in the new buildings that the Birmingham City Mission had built in the early 1990s in Granville Street. "Everybody has an extraordinary story to tell about how they have been down on their luck, often from drugs, alcoholism, armed robbery," Willetts said. "I have just had a meal with a guy who said he would be dead if it wasn't for the hostel. He was an alcoholic with a heart problem who was sleeping rough. But it is moving to see people who are being helped." This, Willetts haply hopes, will display his soft heart.

As a former student of John Gray, with whom he has written a book recently, he seems keen on reform in his party to show that they are all very caring. "I am doing this because I want to listen and to learn," he added. "However much you research a subject or debate it in the House of Commons, nothing beats real human experience. Here it is, real human experience in the raw."

Willetts later gave a speech to *Conservative Future* at the Tory central office. He is amongst those in the Conservatives who are set to try to

reclaim their old One Nation credentials in a move that is aimed at getting away from Thatcherism. He feels, or says he feels, sad that the deprived parts of the UK now feel forgotten by his party. For him, renewing the Conservative approach to poverty is crucial to the renewal of his party.

Willetts made a big fuss about spending the night in a Birmingham council house. Mr Willetts' speech follows another by Oliver Letwin, in which the shadow home secretary called for a more "neighbourly" society. But he has made way more impact of late than Willetts has, or will. Letwin has a way with the media and though he got fooled and robbed a month or so back when he let a stranger into his house to go to the toilet, and earlier was in hiding from the media following his tax cut speech before the election, he nevertheless has probably risen faster in the media esteem than any other politician since the election. His leader, Duncan-Smith displayed similar sentiments on needing a caring image in a later speech in March 2002 and it coincided with a rise in the polls for the Tories, reported on the media 25 March. For only the second time since 1997, New Labour seems to be on the wane, but maybe that is owing to their internal problems rather than this new ploy of the Tories.

Willetts said in his speech: "The renewal of our approach to poverty is not just essential for people living in our most hard-pressed areas. It is also crucial to the renewal of Conservatism itself." He now feels that there has to be more to the Tory party than the economics that Mrs Thatcher's party was good at. In the third week of March Mrs Thatcher was told by the doctors that she should no longer do public speaking and many in the media feel this can only aid the Tories. It will certainly aid those that long to see the back of her, and Willetts looks like one of them. He holds that

politics is more about obligations to our fellow citizens and it needs to be rooted in society. The media welcome all this as a move away from what they still repeat more than once a week as Margaret Thatcher's comment that "there is no such thing as society". They never fail to take this out of the context that it was made – that of denying that society itself could be responsible for immoral behaviour on the part of individuals. Willetts thinks that he can forge a policy on poverty that is less confusing than the one that New Labour has. He places it as the traditional concern that Conservatives have shown for the family. "It is difficult to envisage the renewal of our poorest communities without a strengthening of the family. We want to see stronger local communities and networks of neighbourliness. That is what society is all about." But when this new outlook was put on BBC's *Question Time* held at Wolverhampton on 28 March 2002 the audience was sceptical. However, they showed more hostility to New Labour than has been evident since 1997.

Spin Doctors and the Jo Moore Affair

Ever since 11 September, the Jo Moore case has been in the news. The big offence that she committed was to try to cover up some poor transport news by using the big event to detract attention. Jo thought that 11 September was "a good day to bury bad news". She sent the idea round in a memo on an email within minutes of hearing the news from New York on 11 September. But the civil service colleague at the time thought it downright immoral and though everyone in the media agreed with him, he still got the sack for his reaction; Martin Sixsmith replaced him. For some reason in September 2001, all on the media and in parliament held this ploy to be utterly immoral.

Jo Moore herself made an almost tearful apology and she was supposed to have been forgiven by Stephen Byers, the head of her department. But on and on the story went. Was it that the ploy was very immoral as all oddly seemed to agree? Or was it that Jo, who is reasonably attractive with a slim figure, just makes excellent copy for the daily papers? In any case, the media were not to have another long running saga with Jo (in the style of Princess Diana). The endless headlines destroyed her job as a low profile “spin doctor”. This pin up was almost intrinsically ephemeral.

On Monday 4 March the media had the story that it was Blair rather than Byers that thought this one “mistake” by Jo Moore should not have cost her job. However, it did cost the forerunner of Martin Sixsmith his job as he let all know in the Sunday Times of 3 March. As so often in those affairs that are mainly made up of cant, the denial of a relatively mild ploy led to Byers lying to the House of Commons and also to the media on *Dimbleby* 3 March. Now the media have got it into their heads that Byers is a liar, and they will consequently be pressurising him from now on. On *Dispatch Box*, BBC2, 8 March, the three resident journalists for the second week agreed that the press in general are not likely to let up till Byers falls.

On Friday 1 March, the story broke that the recently sacked Jo Moore had been a bully. She was clearly not very sturdy in the job. Jonathan Baume, general secretary of the Association of First Division Civil Servants (FDA) has said she was a textbook case of a bully. He gave a report to the Commons Public Administration Committee’s inquiry into the relationship between civil servants and special advisers. He said: “My perception is that Jo Moore was forceful and aggressive to the point that she bullied and victimised civil servants both

in the press and related policy areas. Her behaviour was described to me as an almost textbook case of bullying. She appeared to have no grasp of the concept of the political impartiality of the Civil Service, or if she did, she ignored it. It was completely unacceptable.” But none dared to complain as she was too close to Byers. Instead they sought to escape, by moving to another department or another job. He added: “I think it is reasonable to point out that what we are seeing at DTI is not happening across the rest of service.”

A speech was given on special advisers by the retiring head of the Civil Service on 25 March. Conservative leader, Duncan-Smith, attacked Mr Blair on Wednesday in the House of Commons for “rolling out the red carpet” for Mr Byers just minutes after he expressed “regret” for giving an apparently misleading answer on his role in the affair. Mr Blair retorted that Byers had made an “absolutely full statement” over the affair. He had, in fact, made an over-full statement, as he had said both that he did have a hand in the dismissal of Sixsmith and that he didn’t. One statement was to the House on 5 March and the other to *Dimbleby* on ITV on which he was the guest on 3 March 2002. Blair challenged Duncan-Smith over what he said were the real issues of getting the rail system running after a botched Tory privatisation. Byers won credit on the Labour backbenches for almost re-nationalising the Railtrack part of the train system by placing it into administration.

Maybe Sixsmith was out to get even with Jo for the dismissal of his forerunner. He seems to have caused all the latest ballyhoo by sending out an email saying that no announcements should be made on the day of Princess Margaret’s funeral. Sixsmith denies leaking the email or briefing against Jo Moore, but he seems to have done so nevertheless.

It was enough to put Jo back on the hook and this time she did not get off – but Sixsmith also fell. Has the hunting bill been revived to help Byers to make a getaway from the Jo Moore scandal? Blair has been said to use the issue to get support from the backbenchers before. It has caused the greatest discontent on the backbenches since 1997.

The backbenchers did originally back Byers for confiscating Railtrack without compensation, but the media reported that there would be compensation after all on 27 March 2002. That did not please the backbenchers though Gordon Brown was more concerned with the relationship with the City. That too does not please Old Labour. They are also not pleased with Blair's partnership with Bush for a possible invasion of Iraq. On the 21 March, Alun Michels MP was pushing the latest anti-hunting bill through the House of Commons in an attempt to revive his shattered career in the wake of his fiasco in Wales. He warned the House of Lords in his Commons speech that the bill could be pushed through by the Commons if need be. Tony Banks MP is all too keen to take on the Lords now he knows that he can win. Yet the talk over the week up to the 22 March 2002 has been of compromise. MPs seem to want to avoid the drawn out conflict with the House of Lords. This would take time from the avowed aim of the government which is to sort out the social services like education and the National Health Service that the opposition also seem to hold as the top priorities in UK politics today.

The government appears ready to accept a compromise deal where hunting is allowed to continue under licence and in places where it is held to be effective, as in the Lake District. But the Lords are far from backing down and they have been using the media in the last few weeks and looking very confident. There have been reports that the police hardly

thought it a top priority to enforce the law should it be passed. It would not be too clear whether it was a foxhunt or just exercising the dogs with artificial bate. In any case there may be up to a million people connected to hunting, as enthusiastic as football fans, and the police simply do not have the manpower to handle such events. But this has been countered by those who favour the ban as they hold that the police already have been involved with the hunts and only need to do extend their existing surveillance. The *League Against Cruel Sports* will be only too keen to encourage the police to do their duty.

The Socialist Party of Great Britain's Review of Bjorn Lomborg's Book

The reviewer signs off as 'DG' and the review is entitled "Sceptical about Doomsday?" He asks whether capitalism can adapt and whether it even needs to adapt. In the 1960s the SPGB no more sided with the Greens than did Marx with Malthus in the nineteenth century. But in the 1970s they tended to think that if 'it' is against capitalism then that is good enough. It is rather like the fallacy that "my enemies enemy is my friend" but whether a common opponent is an ally depends on the particular components of each one's creed.

The reviewer realises that the facts are not all that easy to see on the environment. However, the Greens, like the SPGB, have a quasi-religious outlook that disapproves of human beings as they are. It hopes that they might be better in the future. It jumps from saying that we can all have more to saying that we will all be more careful in the new society. The former idea hardly fits in with the Green outlook. The anti-economist, Lester Brown, is cited from his book *Eco-Economy* thus: "our economy is slowly destroying its support systems,

consuming its endowment of natural capital. Demands of the expanding economy, as now structured, are surpassing the sustainable yield of eco-systems.” This is typical Green bosh and it has been accompanied by bold predictions since 1965, all of which, like the charge of the Light Brigade, rode into certain doom.

The Green track record is a list of predictions that have all been refuted in the event. We are told that Bjorn Lomborg is a former Greenpeace campaigner. Julian. Simon’s books which he said he found in second-hand bookshops converted him to an anti-Green position. The result is his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001). The reviewer wonders how such different result as those of Brown and Lomborg could be reached. His answer is that they differ on the facts and what should be done about the facts in any case. Lomborg questions the idea that 40 000 species are becoming extinct each year and that pesticides are a great danger. The actual reason is that the truth is not manifest and most of us are ignorant. It is easy for a tyro to discover things unknown by an expert of many tears standing as the latter remains largely ignorant despite knowing quite a bit.

We are told that Lomborg has been accused of being selective by the Greens – the same accusation he has made against them. He is said to overlook the point the Greens make about species of fish being on the decline by reporting a bigger global catch. He does much the same on deforestation. They are concerned that some trees have only recently been re-grown while Lomborg thinks that matters little to bio-diversity. The reviewer feels that Lomborg is selective. It is held that he does not take the call of wolf today seriously owing to there being no wolf in the past, but that is thought by the reviewer to be

unwarranted. Logically it is, but it is not a bad supposition and it is one that most long time observers of the Greens will tend to assume. We should still check but we will certainly cease to panic.

Pollution has diminished in the past fifty years but the reviewer wants to say there is still lots to moan about there. He feels it is profit that is to blame but that is not a topic he has thought critically about. All this has occurred during a doubling of world population over the last 30 years and with a resulting expansion of economic activity. It seems that both Lomborg and Brown overestimate solar and wind power. There is, of course, lots of potential in capturing more energy from the sun. It is said that all the fossil fuels only represent about ten days of sunlight landing on the earth. However, there is no immediate shortage of oil, and with increasing usage the stockpiles in terms of years have gone up from 20 years in the 1930s to 47 years by the 1990s. We are no more likely to run out of oil than the Stone Age ran out of stones.

The reviewer moans about vested interests and the fact that most research is in established areas of fossil fuels and nuclear power. But why not research where it is likely to pay off? The reviewer thinks that this is a reason for saying that any future expansion of renewables will not be a success for capitalism! Well, as no post-capitalist society is due, capitalism will develop the renewables if they are to be developed at all.

Some might think that this doomsday syndrome dates from just the 1960s since when the BBC has been putting out about ten programmes a week featuring it. But in fact the Tories were against the “industrial revolution” [as Toynbee called it in the 1880s] from the beginning. So we do not just have 35 years of shouting wolf but about 200

years of it. We still need to check but we can be relaxed about that duty.

The reviewer thinks that fossil fuels are the main cause of global warming but the Greens are a bit fast to come to this

conclusion when their main culprit, carbon dioxide, is still a trace gas being only from 0.02 to 0.04 of the atmosphere. Water vapour is clearly a bigger factor as Philip Stott so often says to the Greens on the media. Climate change is the norm. Natural history shows plenty of it prior to life itself and, if anything, life has made its own nest of the atmosphere as the Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock suggests. There is no objective pollution. One species' meat is indeed another species' food, even within the microbial domain. Microbes are so polymorphous that perversion is alien to them, and that is about the only thing that is beyond them. With the rise of Genetic Engineering, we are fostering their adaptive ability to use genetic information rather like we use literal information in language and thought. Microbes usually do not need to wait fifteen minutes for another generation to adapt as they can do so by connecting. We can use them to defend us against attacks from their own domain and to clear up pollution problems like oil spills.

The reviewer adds the Brown book to the supposed review of the Lomborg book as he favours this anti-economist. After all, Marxism functions mainly as a form of anti-economics itself. It is not an extra option to the Tory or Whig choice but firmly a Tory option and socialism always was the old Tory ideas with a new name. Brown is for ecology over economics and this misanthropy is typical of the Green outlook. They prefer less humanity and more non-human nature. The reviewer rightly sees that capitalism puts profits above ecology but seems not to see that this

puts humans first. Instead, he thinks that profit is somehow not production for use, as it directly uses an economic criterion as to what is going to be useful in the form of money. He is on Brown's side but he is so confused, as is Brown also, that he has no idea of where that puts him. He entertains the delusion that he is anthropophilic. But he explicitly joins the "kind vision" of Brown in his quest to curb humanity greatly. Most of the suggestions Brown has are hopeless but tend to follow the emotional plague rule that objective reality does not matter so long as the advocate means well. The Marxists think themselves materialists but their whole case amounts to little more than the old adage that "it is the thought that counts".

A case in point is the daft idea that public transport is a good idea when a more wasteful idea is not easy to find. It means big vehicles running with few people on them all too often and they also usually run less economically. Thus, even if these vehicles were all full up they would hardly match the average car carrying one person. Maybe taxis are the solution for public transport but how many Greens have any idea of that fact? How many thoughtless politicians do?

The reviewer calls Lomborg simplistic for thinking that the progress made hitherto is an indication that it will continue, but that hypothesis might be right. Anyway, it is ahead of the Green propositions based on bigotry and ignorance that the reviewer is inclined to favour, owing mainly to his own ill-thought-out Marxist dogma. That is certainly simplistic and haply way more clearly so. The reviewer notes that both Lomborg and Brown think that the state should use subsidies but in reality there is no reason to think the Green recommendation have any merit and their track record up till now suggests it best to be critical towards their folly. Lomborg ignores nuclear wastes says the

reviewer but Beckmann did not so perhaps he should read *The Health Hazards of NOT Going Nuclear* (1976). The reviewer rejoices in not being convinced by Lomborg that Brown is wrong but he clearly has not done much thinking on the topic and if he decides to debate it out then he may well learn something yet. An extension of private property will ensure that the problems the Greens go on about will be costed, thus making the polluters pay their way and bringing economy into line with ecology in a completely free market. The idea that the price system fosters inconsideration and irresponsibility is exactly wrong. It is the major institution of civilisation in every sense of that word.

Old Hickory

"We never run clean out of anything; the price of a commodity just rises as it is more difficult to obtain, until it no longer pays to produce or use it"

PETR BECKMANN