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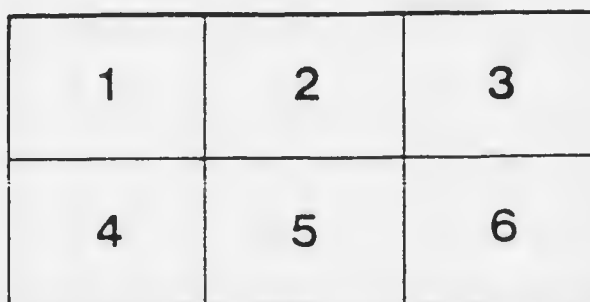
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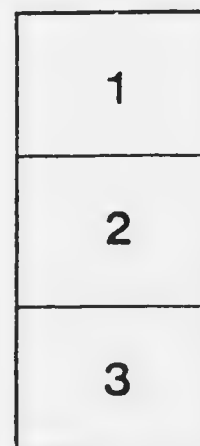
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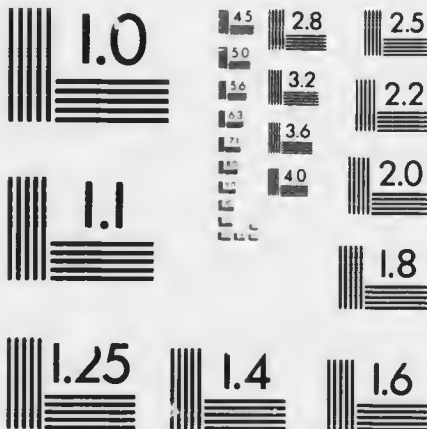
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OXFORD PAMPHLETS
1914

THE LEADING IDEAS
OF BRITISH POLICY

BY
GERARD COLLIER

Price Twopence net

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
HUMPHREY MILFORD
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW
NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE BOMBAY

OXFORD: HORACE HART
PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

THE LEADING IDEAS OF BRITISH POLICY

It is necessary for any one who would understand the leading ideas of British policy to run over in his mind the long roll of our mighty dead—from Alfred the Great downwards. Only then will he understand how deep-rooted and persistent is the imperial instinct of the English nation. It is older than the English Parliament, and about as old as the English language or any other of the oldest things that are essentially English. It is exemplified in our earliest annals by the Northumbrian and Mercian forerunners of Alfred, and by his descendants from Edward the Elder to Edgar the Peaceful. It was gratified by the wars and conquests of our foreign rulers from William the Conqueror to Richard Cœur de Lion. In Edward III we see the most conspicuous of these early imperialists. Edward III, besides continuing an old and a mistaken policy of continental aggrandizement, turned his thoughts to sea-power. He claimed, and for a time he secured, the 'dominion of the narrow seas', which since his time has been regarded as vital to the prosperity and safety of these islands; though more than a century elapsed from his death before England was sufficiently united and self-confident to follow out his naval policy with resolution and success. It was under the Tudors that she began consistently to behave as though 'her future lay upon the water'.

Throughout the last four hundred years, which is the

Modern Age, the position of England has been mysterious and complicated, and as England has become Britain this is true also of Britain and the British Empire—there is no doubt that this mystery is the secret of our strength, but, as the probing of a mystery only leads to the discovery of deeper truths, we do not hesitate to attempt the task.

With the break-up of mediaeval Christendom, England, like some other European countries, became intensely national in feeling, in ambitions, in religion. At the same time, and indeed as a part of the same process, the English imagination turned to the New World, which provided a boundless field for the enrichment and expansion of national life and for the propagation of national ideals. An empire of the New World was now the dream of Englishmen. Let us consider first what this dream of empire meant ; secondly, how Englishmen prepared themselves to win it ; thirdly, how, in the race for empire, England was favoured above other nations.

(1) The empire of the New World was, to begin with, a religious ideal ; the quest for it was a crusade. The English supposed themselves to be the chosen people, enjoying a monopoly of divine truth. A strange belief, it may seem, for rough sea-faring folk such as were the Elizabethan pioneers of the imperial idea. But we have the very perfect example of John Davis (who discovered Davis' Straits, and died in 1605) in those days, and of Captain Cook in a much later age, to show how religion may be and has been the mainspring of the conduct of great sailors, even though their religion goes along with characteristics that may seem irreconcilable with a religious faith. But it was not only the seaman who believed himself one of a chosen people. That conviction was shared by the merchant who went long

voyages for gain, and by the capitalist who financed the merchant.

The mediæval Church had set her face against the belief that the pursuit of wealth was a lawful occupation. Her theologians held that money-getting was a proof of avarice, and that avarice was a sin. The papal court at Rome, the higher clergy elsewhere, might be ostentatious and luxurious. But still the Church set her face against the ideal of developing Nature's resources for the use of men. The Puritan with all his faults was the reverse of this: he practised a rigid simplicity in his private life, but devoted his energies to business which meant the piling up of wealth and the development of the world: he thus went far towards the solution of the economic problem—a moderate and stationary standard of expenditure for those who have the immediate control of wealth combined with a real increase of the total which all must share. Indeed it seemed that traditional religion stood with a drawn sword guarding the entrance to an Eden in which was to be found not only scientific truth but also the material bounty of God. England believed that it was her function to lead the way in forcing an entrance for mankind into this paradise.

Like the Protestants of England, the orthodox Spaniards had a dream and a vision of the same kind. The Spanish Empire was based upon religious ideals. But the English ideals though crude were less crude than those of Spain. We understood, what the Spaniard did not, that the gold of the waving corn is more precious than yellow metal, and that the spirit works in its own way demanding an atmosphere of freedom.

(2) Before the South African War we were apt to pride ourselves on muddling through. That pride received a fall, and now most Britons are congratulating

themselves that at the beginning of last August we had an Expeditionary Force which could be mobilized in a few hours, and a fleet ready for action. The successful conduct of the government of an empire demands the same high qualities as any other work of note ; and we have not in fact been such muddlers as other peoples, and we ourselves, sometimes imagine. We have often seemed to be in a state of intellectual muddlement because we were trying to take all the facts into consideration, and were thinking over the permanent principles of our policy. In this sense, but in this sense only, we have always been a muddled people whenever we were engaged in empire-building.

When a man takes a few selected facts of any situation into account and rules out all the others, if those selected facts happen to dominate he will be easily and quickly successful, but otherwise he will be lost ; likewise the actions of a nation which has set its heart on achieving a certain object for a few years will be easy to follow and to appreciate, while the actions of those trained through hundreds of years will be unselfconscious and perhaps mysterious ; but if the training has been good they will be very effective.

Under Elizabeth we set ourselves with a tremendous energy to lay the foundations of the empire of the New World ; we laid them deep and systematically ; Elizabeth encouraged our sea rovers as far as she dared, she also encouraged the men of the Low Countries as her auxiliaries in the war against Spain. Burleigh, quite systematically, built up industries from the point of view of sea-power ; the fisheries were to be encouraged as a school for seamen ; we were to make our own powder and our own cannon, we were to have a plentiful supply of naval stores—and as a result, in 1588, our fleet was

more numerous than the Spanish Armada, our ships could sail faster and nearer the wind, and our guns shot more quickly and harder. But more important than this our religion was a religion of freedom and order, for although the main strength of English religion was moving towards Puritanism and the Puritans were not tolerant, still there was a strong religious element which though traditional was not Roman, an element which made possible the existence of such a family as the Ferrers, and such an establishment as the religious community of Little Gidding, and which represented gentleness and charity; moreover, Puritanism itself did achieve toleration with the appearance of the Society of Friends. There was therefore a spirit in England which offered a welcome to religious refugees of the reforming societies throughout Europe, and, besides that, the non-religious people in England, led by the Queen, were zealously anxious for religious peace as long as it could be reconciled with some measure of order.

Thus both the religious and non-religious elements of England combined to draw over to us the pick of the middle and industrial classes of Europe, and this most important result may be regarded as part of the fixed and conscious policy of the nation.

(3) Our advantages over other nations have on the whole been sufficiently described in Seeley's *Expansion of England*; it is only necessary here to emphasize the great importance of the fact that we were an insular nation, and so able to keep ourselves comparatively free from the entanglements of continental policy. This, as Seeley has pointed out, enabled us to concentrate our energies much more completely than the Spaniards or the Dutch or the French could do, on the acquisition of the empire of the New World; but furthermore, this

concentration on the New World and aloofness from the Old World affected the spirit of our nation and the quality of the work we did. In the Modern Age we have never wished or attempted to conquer Europe, we have not wished to be supreme on the Continent, we have taken part in continental strife only to the extent that ourselves and our supremacy in the New World was at stake.

Oliver Cromwell might have been beguiled into taking up the sword of Gustavus Adolphus and leading the Protestant armies of Europe, rightly or wrongly he resisted the temptation, and instead we fell to quarrelling with the Dutch—our religious allies—over the prize of maritime supremacy; on the surface this looks like the policy of the backslider, but it is possible that fundamentally we were never more true to our mission. So, as a matter of fact, we addressed ourselves to a possible problem instead of an impossible one. It was necessary that the world should be opened up to the vital civilization of Europe, means of communication had to be established over all the seas radiating out from and returning to Europe; the streams of commerce with their collecting and distributing centres had to be organized, and derelict continents peopled with emigrants from the progressive nations—the primal command must be obeyed, 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth', and the human family thus extended must be kept in touch the one part with the other, or brought into touch where it had been for ages separated, so that in material, intellectual, and spiritual things there should be interchange and co-operation.

As the leading nations had not learnt to co-operate in equality and peace, it seemed necessary that the work should proceed under the supremacy of one, and it was

this supremacy which we determined to win. The impossible problem which we avoided was the attainment of supremacy of one nation over all the others in Europe: this object did not correspond with the accomplishment of any useful piece of work, neither does it so correspond now. Europe never has been under the dominion of one nation for a thousand years; it last happened in the days of Charlemagne—what we call the Dark Ages. (It is, however, true that the acknowledged supremacy of one nation over all the world to-day should make possible the abolition of armaments, and no doubt if we are so foolish as not to arrive at that result some better way, we shall deserve the supremacy of one.) So the real gist of our advantage was that the continental nations were wasting much of their strength in useless and demoralizing rivalry, while we were bending our main energies to a great and really necessary piece of work.

The secret of our success and our glory was that we were doing real work towards shaping the material earth itself and the organization of man upon it, so that this planet might become a perfected whole, achieving its mission; in fact, we stood for work rather than life, for the future rather than the present, for achievement rather than enjoyment.

Our constitutional and social history during the period brings out this ideal; we organized ourselves for an object, not for the sake of the organization, nor, indeed, for the sake of the people.

The Tudor form of government being a popular and enlightened despotism, would seem to have been the best for the purpose of attaining the sovereignty of the New World, and no doubt it fulfilled admirably its function of organizing the beginnings of the enterprise; but success

was eventually achieved with a form of organization more subtle, much more mysterious, and better adapted for attaining quick but lasting results over an area co-extensive with the globe. The English Parliament has been called the mother of parliaments, and so she is. In the later Middle Ages we established a most advanced system of constitutional government which, from the practical point of view, broke down in the fifteenth century to recover itself in the seventeenth, but the success of this constitutional government during the eighteenth century was of a peculiar kind. Our government during the eighteenth century was in truth an aristocracy, if by that is understood the rule of the best, and if by best we mean the most efficient in view of the national policy. From the point of view of a formal constitution, it became, as the years went by, more and more anomalous and more corrupt. The actual government was in the hands of the House of Commons, the members of which were theoretically elected by the constituencies, that is to say, the shires and towns of the country, but as a matter of fact, they were mainly appointed by the House of Lords, whose members were the great landowners, the leaders of the landed aristocracy. The essence of the situation was a world to be conquered (the New World, not the Old World), and all the strong men in England, whether their traditions were religious or commercial or military, inspired or inflamed to effect the conquest. Although the direct political power was in the hands of the landed aristocracy, no caste feeling was allowed seriously to hamper the national ideal, for after the attainment of the religious toleration of all Protestants in 1689 there was no serious cleavage in the solid phalanx of our military, commercial, and Puritan efficiency. Indeed, as the

foreigner observed, we were a nation of shopkeepers, that is to say, the commercial element in the phalanx was becoming predominant. Families soon forget their origin; no doubt there were many families in the eighteenth century who assumed a blue-blooded purity of caste, but, as Lecky has pointed out, they often enough owed the establishment of their prosperity to a merchant or a banker.

Thus the British system in the eighteenth century worked, partly indeed, on account of long and great traditions and a certain national genius for government—the cause or effect of those traditions, but more especially because the adventurous element was given a new world to explore, the military element a new world to conquer, the commercial and industrial element an unlimited market, and the religious element visions of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the whole nation a new world to construct; the system did not work on its own merits as a system.

The best simple illustration of what we have been saying is the important and well-known share that the Scots have taken in the development and administration of the British Empire; they have entered into it so wholeheartedly and identified themselves with it so thoroughly because it has given unlimited scope to their magnificent national vitality; as to the Highlanders, it is a household word how the elder Pitt recognized their genius for warfare—fighting they must have and fighting they were given. What our Indian administration owes to Scotland is equally well known, her part in Indian evangelization is perhaps less familiar, though not less glorious. Canada and Australasia give their testimony to the enterprise of the Scots in all departments of life, and the scope that was offered to them.

Another illustration of how much the system depended on its object is given by the immediate collapse which occurred as soon as the object was attained ; but we shall have to return to this later.

We have seen how England provided scope for the enterprise of her sons, and, as always is the case when there is something real to be done, there existed in Britain to a very considerable extent the Napoleonic ideal of the career open to talent ; but what about the unenterprising, the people who would have preferred to go on living in the old way, or indeed the inefficient—that is to say, inefficient from the point of view of the national ideal ? There were mainly two classes to be considered, the peasantry on the land and the craftsmen in the towns ; if the bulk of the land had continued to be held by an irremovable peasantry, wishing to continue a more or less immemorial system of subsistence-farming, and impervious to the idea of the sovereignty of the New World, the realization of that idea would have been hampered at every step ; the solution of the problem was a simple one—to get practically all the land into the possession of large proprietors who were imbued with the ideal of expansion, and for them to form an alliance with some of the more progressive of the peasantry as tenant farmers, then with inexorable power the landlords and farmers could and did dictate a progressive policy for the land. Thus the land, its occupiers and cultivators, was made into an organism highly sensitive to the national ideal. This process was not indeed complete until the early years of the nineteenth century, but had then been going on for a hundred years and more.

The development in commerce and industry was similar ; the mediæval system by which industry was

monopolized by highly organized guilds, who were mainly occupied in each town in supplying the needs of that town, and who held control of entry into the craft could, and probably would, have hampered economic progress even more effectively than a persistent body of peasant proprietors. Commerce indeed was naturally controlled by the wealthy few, who no doubt were convinced that it was their duty to devote the resources at their disposal to the development of the world, and, as we have noticed, the opposition of the Church had for long been removed; but commerce is based on industry, for it consists in the exchange of the products of industry. There were two ways in which industry could be brought under the control of those in touch with the national ideal: (1) as soon as the artificer produces for a distant market he is in the hands of the merchants who conduct the exchange, this brings industry immediately and directly under the control of commerce; (2) the so-called capitalist system by which the instruments of production—that is to say the tools, machines, material, and organization necessary for the conduct of industry—come into the possession of a few rich men, be they merchants or be they captains of industry.

By these methods, happening of themselves or consciously pursued, industry and the industrial population also became part of that organism or body, of which the directing head consisted of those inspired by the national ideal. In no other country of the world at that time was the system of national organization at all comparable in sensitiveness, in no other country could the resources of the nation be applied so quickly and so completely to the attainment of an object.

It is of course notorious that there was a dark side to this economic policy—indeed by the time that the

national ideal was achieved that dark side was seen to be intensely black and lowering. Britain was ceasing to be only these small islands, and was becoming the British Empire; this involved economic revolution, and we have noticed how the sensitiveness and adaptability were attained which rendered this revolution possible; this sensitiveness was sufficient to make the revolution possible, but it was not nearly sufficient to remove all friction. The weak, the ignorant, and the backward always suffer when there is an economic upheaval, unless the process is conducted with transcendent skill and elaborate method; no such skill or method was at our disposal, but we established a vast system of public and private charity to save the myriads who fell out of the ranks from actual starvation and despair.

Here, at the risk of complexity, it is necessary to review the period of preparation (roughly speaking, from the accession of Elizabeth to the fall of Charles I); in the sixteenth century there was very generally over Europe an economic upheaval, consequent on the break-up of the Middle Ages and the discovery of the New World; to meet the stress there was very generally a poor-law system established. In England, as in other countries, the Government exerted itself to stem the economic tide, to maintain a vigorous and contented peasantry on the soil, and to save the corporate life and traditions of the craftsmen from the economic flood. Thus far indeed the national policy of work rather than life, the idea of hammering the world into shape at all costs, including the sacrifice of one's own comfort if need be, and one's own health, had perhaps been envisaged but had not been embarked upon. But with the fall of Charles I this conservative and domestic policy collapsed, the

power was speedily concentrated in the hands of the efficient of all classes, and the homes of the weak were sacrificed on the altar of the magnificent ideal of the strong.

Thus when we emerged in 1815 completely victorious and completely successful (except for the loss of the United States), having achieved the empire of the New World, we had incurred a debt, in the intense misery and degradation of our people, which was not experienced by our defeated rivals.

After 1815 the policy to be pursued was obviously to strengthen the Empire and to look after our people, and this in the main has been our accepted policy; but, as we have already suggested, with the attainment of the traditional objective a certain amount of disintegration set in.

We had finished the task which we had set ourselves, we had won the empire of the New World. What next? asked our strong men. The answer was—Cosmopolitanism; the Old World also must be brought into the scheme. We were a nation of shopkeepers, we had beaten Napoleon with our industry and our credit; our commercial and industrial classes now set to work to extort political supremacy at home from the landowners, and to work out cosmopolitanism in the commercial sphere. There was first a Glasgow School and then a Manchester School, shipping and cotton, Adam Smith and Richard Cobden. The intellectual system produced is generally known as Free Trade. We had won the New World on the principle of exclusion, no other nation was allowed to take part except in subordination to us. Adam Smith taught that the wealth of the nations was the wealth of a nation, that the good of one was the good of all, that natural liberty involved a universal freedom for manufacture and for trade; the whole system was

shot through and through with idealism, with the knowledge that the economic well-being of man is part of the natural order of the will of God. As the Puritans had overthrown the restraints of the mediæval Church, so the free-trader was to overcome the restraints of a self-centred nationalism. Spiritually and intellectually, as well as economically, the shopkeeper was the strongest man in Britain, and the shopkeeper's philosophy conquered.

There were two grave defects in the system ; for one of them the shopkeeper was directly responsible, for the other he was not. In the first place the system contained a hideous logical error, which can be stated shortly as follows : the free-traders accepted self-interest as the motive in a system whose main doctrine was equality of opportunity, when of course these two principles are incompatible, the wolf and the lamb ; self-interest as generally understood must destroy equality of opportunity. As a matter of fact, this defect has vitiated our economic system through and through ; in the United States its ravages have been even more fatal. Secondly, the system was one-sided ; besides commerce and industry, it was necessary that cosmopolitanism should take religion and nationality into account. To this, however, the shopkeeper might fairly retort that it was not his business, he had done his part ; let the Church take religion and the landowners nationality.

Upon the whole, it is true that the Church and the landowners have been very dilatory in doing their share of the work, and even negatively their criticism of the shopkeeper was for long ineffective ; as a result of the French Revolution they both had become reactionary and obscurantist, and having lost faith in the things of

the mind they allowed the shopkeeper to establish a monopoly in truth.

However, working along their own lines, they have done something, and let us begin with the Church. The Oxford Movement re-emphasized for us the catholic idea, and their work has now attained remarkable success; not only among Anglicans but in the other communities—especially the Presbyterians and not excluding the Quakers—the question now is not only what of the individual and his salvation, but what of the Church, and what is the Church. The catholic ideal is a relationship in which every man and every community is free and good and capable of realizing its mission—in fact, an existence open to all in the power and in the presence of God. This ideal in the sphere of organized religion is the counterpart of free trade in the subordinate sphere of economics. Unfortunately, the Oxford Movement was not altogether fortunate in making its object clear; to the Evangelical it seemed to mean sovereignty of the Bishop of Rome over all that Britons held most dear; to the ordinary man it meant processions, vestments, lights, and incense; however, that period is passing, and we can feel growing up around us an evangelical catholicism.

As to the landowner: he was beaten by the shopkeeper in 1832, for the Reform Act amounted to the enfranchisement of the middle classes; he was beaten again in 1849, for the success of Cobden and Bright and their Anti-Corn Law agitation meant the dominance of free-trade economics over the mind and the policy of the nation. Beaten from his position, and unwilling and incapable to meet his opponent in the intellectual field, the landowner, under the leadership of Disraeli, fell back on the traditional imperialism of Elizabeth, which had

been supposed to be superseded since 1815. But in advocating 'forms of permanence and power' Disraeli was only emphasizing the need in the political sphere for some scheme of relationships without which the individual man is unable to operate.

The teaching of Disraeli was followed up by that of Joseph Chamberlain, the gist of whose policy it was, that the British Empire would be hampered in its development, if not actually strangled, unless it were provided with an organization, that is to say, a scheme of relationships appropriate to its life. No doubt his early experience of the government of a great and growing city opened his mind to the human need for forms of permanence and power.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, beside the ordinary man there existed two fairly well defined schools of thought; there was the Little Englander, who believed in the general principles of the Empire but had no confidence in the actual organization which had been built up—he considered the more abstract thought of his ancestors to be admirable, but the work of their hands deplorable. On the other hand, there was the Imperialist (whom the Little Englander called Jingo), who did not interest himself much in general ideas, but knew that his ancestors had won the empire of the New World, and intended that he should keep it; moreover, he believed that the British had a special genius for the task denied to other races. The South African War changed all that; the Little Englander could not get over the impressive evidence which was provided that the Dominions themselves believed passionately in the Empire. The Imperialists were disillusioned to see that it taxed the resources of the whole Empire to overcome the resistance of a few thousand brave and obstinate farmers of a race similar indeed to our own.

Thus we all now really believe in the Empire, the work of the souls, the brains, and the hands of our ancestors, and we none of us really believe in exclusiveness; a liberal imperialism has emerged which enabled us to make the magnificent experiment of granting self-government to South Africa.

Traditional British policy is the making of the world, at whatever present sacrifice, into a more and more perfect home for the united human family, and the British Empire is the preliminary sketch for the future federation of the world. It may be objected that both these things are as true or more true of the United States, but this only strengthens the argument, for they came from us.

We have elaborated very carefully (but, as was shown above, very imperfectly) the economic scheme appropriate for a united world, we have experimented in the political scheme and done something in religion; but in all three of these departments, though we have experimented much, we have thought little. Except for Socialism, there has been little original and vital political thinking in Britain since Adam Smith and Burke, and an utter dearth since Cobden; we have, with the one exception, simply been stretching old ideas to meet new demands, or indeed, sometimes simply for something to do. We have allowed practice to outrun theory, which is obscurantism and the negation of even the possibility of progress—our feet are taking us whither our minds know not.

To us has been entrusted leadership in politics and economics, and recently our failure has been great (though our achievement has still been great); if we had provided the world with a true politics adequate to the

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conditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is inconceivable that the Germans, who are an educated people, with their minds open to ideas, could have fallen so far as they have done under the sway of a system of thought untenable in logic, hideous in sentiment, and glaringly incompatible with the religion that we all profess.

The reason for our intellectual failure has lain in just that analysing method which, when restricted to its proper place, is so often an essential of success ; analysis no doubt should generally come first, but synthesis must always follow it. We have analysed life into religion, politics, and economics, and have somehow persuaded ourselves that to bring them together is to sin against the light. The Socialists alone have attempted a synthesis, and with all their defects they are not barren of thought.

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