

What was Winston Churchills political philosophy?

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What was Winston Churchill's Political Philosophy?

Descent and Ascent

Many, perhaps most political leaders, have entered politics by accident and espoused particular causes by opportunity. They have, no doubt, paid lip service to the principles of their party or connection; but a study of their lives and work suggests that they have had no coherent political philosophy of their own. A smaller number have, first, elaborated a doctrine and even a programme and, then, have entered the arena to put their ideas into practice. This could be said of Lenin and, indeed, of Hitler, and, in a more democratic context, of the great Demo-Christian Trinity—Adenauer, Schumann and de Gasperi.

Churchill does not belong to either category. His political philosophy was organic to the man, rooted in his origins, deeply influenced by his intellectual formation and shaped above all by his early experiences. It was never expressed as a consistent theory or system, but looking back at his life, his writings, and his speeches, there emerges a clear conception of the problems facing Britain at home and abroad and of the principles which should govern our efforts to resolve them. It is of course much easier to make a critique of a specific set of ideas expressed in abstract terms than it is to impose a pattern on books, articles, speeches and actions concerned with practical situations and spread over nearly seventy years.

Clearly, Churchill's origins were of determining significance. He sprang from a famous branch of the British aristocracy, whose members still believed themselves to be the natural governing class. But there was nothing conformist about the elitism of his own family. His father, Lord Randolph, had been the Alcibiades of nineteenth century British politics and a great demagogue and populist. His aunt, Lady Wimborne, had married into a great clan of capitalist ironmasters, the Guests. She gave sorely needed financial support to the young Churchill, and he spent much of his time in the Guests' circle. He thus had a foot in two significant British camps—the Aristocracy

and the Plutocracy. Then there was the influence of his American mother, the daughter of a buccaneering New York tycoon of robust opinions and no respecter of persons.

Churchill was no egalitarian but no snob either. His personal values and his tastes are perhaps best reflected in his choice of friends—Birkenhead, Lloyd George, Beaverbrook, Bracken, and in the last years, Onassis. These were men of strong character, independent even unorthodox views, and who had stormed the heights of success from humble origins. He spoke for Britain as no one in our history has done before, and though he was above all a patriot, Churchill was scarcely a typical Englishman. He shared few of the tastes and still fewer of the prejudices of his countrymen. His patriotism was imperial more than insular. He belonged to the cosmopolitan Europe, part aristocratic part plutocratic, of the early years of the century but with a broad streak of American flamboyance thrown in.

The man himself was formed by and in the Army. It was there that he first accepted instruction as distinct from enduring it. And it was against a background of Army life that he embarked on that course of self-education which would provide the intellectual foundations of his subsequent work. One result was that throughout his life, he thought and largely expressed himself in military terms—in terms of strategy and tactics, power and supply, leadership and morale. His reading in the long Indian afternoons, was mainly history and much of it military history. It was deep rather than wide. As he would write in the life of Lord Randolph, 'It is much better for the brain, and for the practical purposes of life, to know and understand one book than to have read a hundred.' His main studies, as is well known, were of Gibbon, Macaulay and the life of Napoleon. The influence of this reading on the shaping of his values has been widely recognised. But an even more powerful influence was the writing of his early books; *The Malakand Field Force*, *The River War*, and *Lord Randolph Churchill*. A man absorbs other people's values in a general way when he reads their works. But it is when he comes to put his own thoughts, emotions and experiences onto paper that he has to decide what to accept, what to reject and what to amend. It is only then that he begins to formulate and crystallise values of his own. For all his love of conversation, talking was for Churchill an amusement or at most a means of clearing his mind. All his serious work was done on paper in books, articles, speeches—he seldom improvised—and in the flood of minutes in which his policies and strategies took shape. Like the *Maxims of Napoleon* and the *Thoughts of Chairman Mao*, Churchill's personal and political philosophy are best distilled from the numerous though by no means comprehensive collections of thoughts and aphorisms extracted from his writings.

War is a great university; and it was to be Churchill's only preparation

for politics. From conventional schooling until he entered Parliament, it was to be war all the way: War in Cuba, war on the North West Frontier of India, war in the Sudan, and war in South Africa. The facile compromises of peace, paper over differences, breed illusions and avoid decisions. Not so war. Honour counts for more than honesty, cunning and courage are the supreme virtues. All depends on leadership and decision. The waging of war calls for brutal realism, and a clear insight into the animal as well as the divine elements of the human condition. Churchill's reading of history, and his experience of war made him intellectually a profound pessimist, with a relish for the cynical phrase. But this essentially conservative pessimism was balanced by a liberal disposition and the temperament of a man of action. He admired magnanimity and generosity in others, and this made him magnanimous and generous himself. Like Plutarch's heroes, he was moved by a burning ambition to excel. Now to excel, you have to be an optimist. You have to believe that despite every frustration presented by human malice or folly, your efforts will achieve their aim. However determinist your reading of history, you have to believe in some measure of free will. With Churchill, the gulf between his intellectual pessimism and his natural optimism and generosity was bridged by an essentially rationalist approach. It puts him more in the stream of later eighteenth century thought rather than of the romantic and moralising thought of the age into which he was born.

Birkenhead, perhaps his closest friend, had decided at an early age, that metaphysical speculation led nowhere. Perhaps under his influence, Churchill made few forays into that field. He appreciated the political utility of religion to Government and its personal consolation to individuals, but he was, as he once described himself, 'a buttress of the Church from outside rather than a pillar from within'. For the rest, he would probably have subscribed to Napoleon's dictum: 'Above all, let my son read history, it is the only true philosophy.' But there was one abiding concern which troubled him most of his life. Where would science lead mankind? The world into which he was born was technologically still very much the world of the previous 3000 years. True, there was the railway, the telegraph and some machines. But the motor-car, the wireless, the telephone, the aeroplane, the submarine, the tank, the computer, the nuclear bomb and space exploration, were steps in the onward march of science taken only in his life-time. Science had conferred immense benefits on mankind. But might it lead to the physical destruction of the human race? Or would it bring about the enslavement of the individual in robot societies of the type of Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*? How were freedom and survival to be preserved? I do not think he found the answer. Certainly he would have told us if he had.

World-wide View

The England into which Churchill was born had not been invaded for eight centuries, and had not known a civil war for two. When he came of age, the country had enjoyed nearly a century of peace and most people expected this to continue indefinitely. In this climate of peace and progress, the British people and their leaders were essentially entodermic. Confident in Britain's wealth and power, they were primarily concerned with domestic problems and internal reforms. Few even among the soldiers had studied the realities of modern war. Most were remarkably remote from the tensions mounting in Europe and the world. Churchill was the exception here, even in the political world. Soldiering in India, Egypt and South Africa had taught him that the work of civilisation is constantly threatened from outside. It had taught him to admire the way Britain discharged her imperial mission overseas and this well before he knew much about his own country. He was, after all, familiar with Indians, Egyptians, Sudanese and Boers long before a Parliamentary election brought him into his first real contact with the British people, apart from the gardener at home and the soldier in the cantonment. Yet by the time he made this first contact, he already knew what so many leaders of British opinion ignored: how much the influence of Britain and the prosperity of its people depended on our access to the markets and raw materials of what was then called 'the outer Empire'. He had understood that Britain's survival depended on belonging to a wider system. Empire? The Atlantic? Europe? The emphasis would change with events, but the basic principle was constant. His experience gave him an essentially ectodermic view point in contrast to the entodermic approach of so many of his contemporaries. The essential business of statesmanship, as he saw it, was to stop the jungle with its wild beasts, encroaching on the cultivated land, and if possible to roll it back. Ordinary people could then get on with earning their livelihood in freedom behind a protective shield. Given freedom of enterprise and the inventions of modern science, he saw no limit to the prosperity they might achieve. Hence throughout his life, he gave first priority to defence and foreign policy. It would have been better if more of his contemporaries had done the same.

The ectodermic or military approach to problems inevitably raises the question: Who is the enemy? 'The story of the human race', he wrote in *The World Crisis*, 'is War. Except for brief and precarious interludes, there has never been peace in the world.' In war, you know your enemy, but as victory approaches, so the prospect of the next struggle throws its shadow before it. During the Cairo Conference of 1943, Churchill said to a colleague: 'Cromwell was a great man, but made one great mistake. Obsessed with the power

of Spain, he failed to observe the rise of France.—Will they say that of me? Two years before the end of the war, he was already brooding on the growth of Soviet power. As each struggle in which Churchill took part, drew to an end, it was always his way to show magnanimity to the vanquished and look round for the next danger. As soon as the Germans were defeated in 1918, we find him calling for urgent action to suppress the Soviet regime in Russia and proposing to enlist Germany in this cause. As Russia under Stalin withdraws into her own shell in the nineteen thirties, we find him focussing on the Nazi danger and calling for an understanding with the Soviets. As Hitler's defeat becomes certain, so he turns his batteries once again on the danger of Soviet expansion. He is then the first statesman of the front rank, after the Second World War, to call for Germany's return to the European family of nations; first in the speech at Zurich in 1946 that launched the European movement and again in 1949 at the first meeting of the Council of Europe. That was the day when he glared round an Assembly largely composed of delegates who had fought in the resistance to the Nazis, and said to them: 'I see no Germans here, you cannot make Europe without Germany.' He won no cheers for these words. But they knew he was right and twelve months later, the first German delegation was received at Strasbourg. Yet again when Stalin died, Churchill is the first head of government to call, in May 1953, for a summit meeting between the Western powers and the Soviet Union to explore the possibilities of a reconciliation. His call was rejected at the time by the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of France and indeed the Leader of the Labour Opposition in his own country. Did we make a mistake of historic proportions in not opening our doors at once to Mr. Malenkov, while the wave of re-action against Stalinism was still in full flood? Churchill would always think so.

This disposition to conciliate yesterday's enemy and to identify tomorrow's is of course a logical though unfortunately not an instinctive application of the traditional British concept of the balance of power. But Churchill gave it a new form in his vision of a united Europe. He feared the Soviet Union. Despite or perhaps because of his American affiliations, he knew that American power could not always be counted on. He knew too the underlying hostility to the old European Empires which informed so many powerful sectors of American opinion. Only in the framework of a United Europe could countries like Britain and France hope to hold their own in a world where the standards of power were set by Moscow and Washington. Instinctively, he was a European patriot and deplored the decline of Europe's position in the world. But in calling for a United Europe at Zurich in 1946 he also spoke in the interest of Britain and the British Commonwealth and Empire. As he saw it, and I heard him expound the idea at a private meeting

a few weeks after the Zurich speech, it was only if the industrial countries of Western Europe came together that they could hope to provide a large enough market and a sufficient source of investment to maintain and renew their historical associations with those overseas countries which had been linked to Britain, France, Holland, Belgium and for a time Germany and Italy in the colonial era. Otherwise, those associations would be eroded by the super powers, Europe would be the loser and Britain above all. But, of course, his immediate inspiration at the time of the Zurich speech was the steady advance of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe combined with the withdrawal of American forces from Western Europe back to America. In this sense, his Zurich speech was a natural corollary to his Fulton speech.

Concern for Europe

It has often been charged that there was an ambiguity in his approach to Europe. Some have said that he wanted Britain in Europe; others that he merely wanted Britain to be loosely associated with a united continent. I have little doubt myself from a study of his speeches and from what I heard him say that he believed Britain should take her full place in a European system, though I think he saw this system, as did de Gaulle, as a Europe of States rather than a federation. How then are we to explain his inactivity over Europe when he came back to power in 1951? Several factors conditioned his policy here. The United States under President Truman had already moved to set up the Atlantic alliance. The safety of Western Europe was thus assured as it had not been in 1946 or even at the Hague Conference in 1948. European Union remained important for its own sake but it no longer had the same urgency. The Commonwealth was still very much a going concern and to persuade its leaders that Europe was in their interest as well as Britain's would take time. Economically moreover, Britain was still very weak and dependent on the United States; and Eisenhower begged us in 1951 not to try and join the European Defence Community lest, in the process, we delay the rearmament of Federal Germany. Ironically enough, our decision not to join led the French Assembly to reject the Defence Community and delayed Germany's entry into NATO by nearly four years! Then there was the human factor. Churchill was already an old man. The perspective before him was shortening; he knew his European ideas were unpopular in many quarters in Britain, even in his own party. His time was limited. He concentrated therefore on those issues where he might still secure decisions and get things done. There were many of them. The restoration of our position in the Persian Gulf put in question by the loss of Abadan; the future of our

position in Egypt—he was strongly opposed to any withdrawal from the Canal Zone; the development of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent; and, after Stalin's death, the whole question of a reconciliation with the Soviets. Had he been younger, he might have taken yet another European initiative. Had he governed longer, the Suez crisis of 1956 might have provided the opportunity as another great European, Guy Mollet, believed it would. I do not think his failure to do so between 1951 and 1955 represented any change of view or even ambiguity in his original concept. As an Opposition Leader, he had looked into the future and pointed the way. As Prime Minister, he had to operate from day to day with such cards as were in his hands.

Thoughts on Government

May I turn to his attitude to domestic affairs? He had inherited from his father and learned from fifteen years association with the Liberal Party, a deep attachment to the ideals of freedom and justice. For the rest, he was not greatly troubled by ideology. Although a great 'House of Commons man', he had no illusions about democracy. In the early thirties, he wrote that democracies do not confer power upon their ablest men, 'or those who know most about their immediate affairs, or even those who have a coherent doctrine.' Democracies tend to take the line of least resistance and to approve and appoint those who promise the people easy things in 'pleasant-sounding platitudes'. In his heart, he believed that government was a business for the few. Parliament he regarded as a healthy check on the executive and as a place where men could make their mark and undergo their political apprenticeship. He was certainly no theoretical democrat in the sense of believing that government should express the will of the people. His concept here was more negative but unshakeable—it was that the people should have the right and opportunity to dismiss a government by the process of a General Election. They should have a power of veto rather than of initiative.

His attitude to social questions was shaped by his experience as an officer and deepened by his sojourn in the Liberal camp. He had the officer's concern for his men. To ensure their welfare was right for its own sake and vital to the morale and efficiency of the unit. Beyond this, he retained to the end of his life the radical ideas learned, above all, from Lloyd George. It was the duty of society to provide for the old, the children, the sick and the unfortunate. As he was fond of saying; 'there should be a floor below which no man can fall by misfortune or even by misconduct. But there should be no ceiling to the heights to which a man can attain.' Social reform in fact, was

to be a by-product of the creation of wealth. This made him an inveterate opponent both of the fashionable egalitarianism of the postwar period and even more of socialism. Here he went deeper than many exponents of *Realpolitik* who so often calculate the power relationship between states accurately enough without examining the internal dynamic behind the power. Unlike most observers Churchill discerned a close connection between the internal policies of Soviet Russian and Nazi Germany and the dangers which they represented to peace. It was not their ideologies that concerned him so much as the apparatus which they created in the shape of parties, armies and secret police which could only excuse their crimes or justify their privileges by increasing tension at home and abroad. By a process of analogy, he claimed in the General Election of 1945 that a Socialist victory in Britain would lead to the establishment of a police state. His warnings were derided at the time, even by many of his supporters. Honesty obliges me to say that very similar warnings have become the stock in trade of our main Opposition parties today. Churchill's detestation of socialism inclined him to confrontation with the Labour movement both in the industrial unrest before the First World War and in the General Strike of 1926. But as the danger from abroad increased in the nineteen thirties, a fresh consideration influenced his approach to these matters. The important thing was to unite the country against the Nazi danger. Hence in the nineteen thirties, we find him making common cause with Socialists and Liberals, and prepared to accept major social and economic concessions in the interest of creating a common front against the threat of Nazi aggression. By the same token, after 1951, he was careful to instruct Monckton, his Minister of Labour, to make whatever concessions were necessary to secure peace on the home front. The threat from Soviet Imperialism called above all for national unity in Britain.

What of his views on economic policy? This is a subject on which his Memoirs and other writings are strangely silent, strangely because economic issues played a central part in two important phases of his life. In 1904, he left the Conservative Party to join the Liberals, ostensibly to defend Free Trade. At first sight, it was a surprising decision. His father had sympathised with the Fair Trade movement which inclined towards retaliatory protection and he himself professed a sincere admiration for Joseph Chamberlain, the champion of Tariff Reform and Imperial Preference. Personal ambition and the strong influences of Lady Wimborne and of Lord Rosebery may well have had as much to do with his conversion as economic conviction. Nevertheless, once in the Liberal camp, he accepted and absorbed the orthodox views of the Liberal economists of the day and would never seriously question them. Then in 1924, he was invited to become Chancellor of the Exchequer, partly as a signal to the City and to the United States that the Con-

servative Party would not return to protectionist policies in that Parliament. This was his title deed to office and he held to it resolutely despite strong pressures from the Conservative Party. Martin Gilbert's next volume may throw some more light on this phase in his long career. But it would seem that on most issues he accepted the advice of the Bank of England and the Treasury without much reservation. Later, as Prime Minister in the war, he showed little disposition, despite considerable opposition in his own Cabinet, to resist the economic and financial blueprints advanced by the United States and intended to commit the nations to multilateral free trade and convertible currencies at fixed exchange rates. It seems likely that in his heart, he would have endorsed de Gaulle's dictum 'l'attendance suit'. As to the methods of bringing this about, he was content to leave this to the experts. Having acquired a reputation for unorthodoxy in many fields, he was determined to be 'sound' on money and trade. Shortly after leaving the Exchequer however, he put forward an interesting proposal which is again the subject of discussion in Britain today. In a Romanes lecture given at Oxford in 1930, he called for a Chamber of Industry, in which the different economic interests—industry, trade unions, finance and the professions—should be represented and where economic policy and economic legislation should be publicly debated. He argued that the great producing interests were also consumers of many of each others' products. If they were obliged to justify their claims and defend their practices in the presence of their equals, this would lead them to a better understanding of each other and so would make for greater social unity.

Summing up

Let me attempt to summarise what I have said so far. Churchill was the child of an age when aristocracy and plutocracy constituted the governing class of Europe when America was a rising but still secondary influence, and when Communism was only an idea. He was formed in the school of war, both in the study and in the waging of it, and was thus exceptionally prepared, compared to his contemporaries in Britain, to confront the terrible years that lay ahead for all of Europe. He came to English politics from a decade of experience of the outer Empire. This had taught him what the Empire meant for the power of his country and the prosperity of its people. It had also convinced him that the task of statesmanship was to keep back the barbarians and provide a sure protective shield behind which ordinary men and women could get on with their lives and, with the help of science, increase their substance. The problem was to identify the enemy of today and tomorrow and

to be strong enough in arms, in treasure and in unity to prevent aggression or at least achieve victory. Yesterday's enemy should be conciliated and made a friend. As Plato had written: 'Love as if you should hereafter hate, and hate as if you should hereafter love.' Government was the business of an elite, not of class or caste, but of merit. Parliament, in Britain at least, provided the training ground. But the people must always have the right, at General Elections, to dismiss the Government. This was the vital safeguard against tyranny. In economic and social affairs, it was the course of wisdom to give enterprise as much freedom as possible. The task of Government was to maintain a sound currency and ensure that there should be a floor below which no man could fall but no ceiling to the heights he might attain. Nevertheless, social unity was essential to meeting the external threat and a price might have to be paid for it.

A Churchillian View in 1976

Churchill's active life ceased in 1955, and in the decade that followed, he said and wrote very little, even on the great issues of the day. Since his death, another decade has gone by. What would be his view of Britain and Europe's affairs today? The answer can, of course, only be speculation. But for those of us who claim that there is a valid Churchillian political philosophy, it is a duty to say how we think it should be applied.

Where Britain is concerned, he would no doubt have argued that the abandonment of Empire and the adoption of Socialism had led to an inevitable and sharp decline and justified his gloomiest predictions. Certainly the loss of Empire has deprived us of a preferential access to markets and raw materials on which we had relied for several generations. Arguably—and I would accept the argument—British Socialism has led us to spend upon ourselves more than we have earned and can justify. But then I think, the man of action in him would have reasserted himself. He would have counted the assets still to hand; the high quality of our technology, the reserves of oil and coal, the financial expertise of the City, the network of connections overseas—with the United States, with the Commonwealth and with the Middle East. He would call for new leadership to unite the nation since as the Turks rightly say: 'the fish stinks from the head.' He might even have argued the case for a Government of national unity. At heart he was always a coalitionist, despite his strong and sometimes extreme views on particular issues.

His first aim would have been to re-establish a sound currency and then leave industry the maximum freedom to head for recovery. Faced with our

intractable problems in industrial relations, he might well have revived his concept of a Chamber of Industry and so called on the Trade Unions to accept constitutional responsibilities to match the powers they already enjoy.

Abroad, with the Commonwealth system largely dismantled, he would have concentrated his energies on developing Europe. I doubt if he would have bothered much about its exact constitution. As a man of Government—a statesman in the full sense of the word—he would have tailored the machine to his own needs rather than to any theoretical concept. The economic side he might have left to others, but he would certainly have worked hard to produce a European foreign policy and to back it up with a European defence policy. This must have included an independent European nuclear deterrent, though it would require Churchillian ingenuity to devise it. Then he would surely raise the question—‘who is the enemy?’ Here, there can be little doubt of his answer. The massive rearmament of the Soviet forces, conventional and nuclear, the offensive deployment of their forces in Europe, the appearance of a vast Soviet Navy on and under the waters of the seven seas, the establishment of Soviet bases in South Arabia, in East Africa and now in West Africa give the clue, clearly enough.

Throughout his life, Churchill had been an advocate of the indirect approach in strategy. In the First World War, he wanted to stand on the defensive on the Western Front and take the offensive to knock Turkey out of the war. Here was the mainspring of the Dardanelles campaign. In the Second World War, he showed great prudence about opening the Second Front in France and gave priority instead to attacking ‘the soft under-belly’ of the Axis powers in Italy and Greece. If he could have had his way, he would have pursued the offensive up the Adriatic to the Ljubljana gap and on to Vienna, with incalculable consequences military and political.

With his own personal experience of war in South Africa, we can well imagine that the whole central and southern African situation would today engross his mind. He would see in the Soviet conquest of Angola his own ‘soft under-belly’ strategy being turned against the West. He would be quick to see through the confusion which obscures the Southern African situation to Europe and America today. He would appreciate that the threat of Soviet Imperialism to our markets and raw materials in the area was the primary and mortal threat. Without those raw materials, our industries would be disrupted, prices would rise, unemployment would increase and social tensions could reach critical proportions and threaten the free way of life of Britain and the whole western industrial world. He would recognise the racial confrontation as real but secondary. Doubtless he would urge a more generous approach to their racial problems on South Africa and Rhodesia. But he would scarcely approve Dr. Kissinger’s Lusaka speech. The attempt

to coerce small but friendly Rhodesia to surrender so that we might avoid another Angola confrontation with the Soviets would remind him all too clearly of the Munich Agreement of 1938, and the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis. He would be the first to appreciate that Britain alone could scarcely decide the Southern African issue. But like his great ancestor Marlborough, he would be the architect of a new coalition. He would seek to mobilise the European Community to defend its own vital interests in the African context. He would also do his utmost to draw in the support of the United States as of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. He would study carefully the possibility of enlisting the support of China. Central and Southern Africa are so vital to the survival of the industrial west and particularly of Europe and Britain that he might well seek to make Southern Africa the anvil on which Europe's foreign policy was fashioned and a much broader alliance between Europe, America, Japan and even China hammered out.

Tenth Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture, given in the University of Basle, 7 May 1976.