

## Comment

### *Vision and Reality*

Professor Roger Scruton is a good philosopher and a good expositor of the European as well as of the Anglo-American philosophical traditions as *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* shows, in its newly revised edition. Wearing one of his other hats (he is a novelist as well), he writes as a political commentator on behalf of the Tory Party. In the light of a recent speech by Lady Thatcher, we find him writing as follows: 'the British people are hoping for a vision: whether reasonably or not, they expect politicians to provide them with a clear picture of where they are going and of why they are going there' (*The Times* 13 January 1996, page 20). For this reason, so he goes on, 'the managerial approach to politics makes no contact with their anxieties'.

Perhaps it is amazing that anyone should feel such confidence in diagnosing the hopes and fears of 'the British people'. No doubt he is trying to be politically correct; what he really means is 'the *English* people', and no doubt only some of *them*. But, overhearing what people say in pubs and buses, listening to the anxieties of university students and their parents, talking to some one who has just had long awaited surgery rescheduled once again, at a couple of days notice, because the bad weather brought in more urgent cases— nothing of that counts as better than anecdotal evidence, of course, but it is perhaps as instructive as what Professor Scruton reads in the London newspapers on his visits back home from his chair in an American university. One thing that might make contact with the anxieties of a fair number of the people, one might reasonably think, would be less vision and more evidence of concern to manage affairs in a common sense way. One thing that the British people might be thought to have learned to fear, since 1979, is politicians with a vision— 'conviction politics' and 'strong government'.

The vision that the Conservative Party has to offer the electorate, Scruton says, has two basic components. In the first place, 'Conservatives believe that the functions of society should not be controlled by the State, but should be left to individual initiative'. This means that they want a 'privatised society' as well as a 'privatised economy'— 'one in which schools, clubs, hospitals, and leisure activities are all independent of the State'. Well and good— but the facts of the matter surely are that, since 1979, the State has enormously extended its control over more and more of the institutions which embodied that independence of the State. The United Kingdom is a vastly more centralised state than any other in the European Union. The introduction of market-defined audit and performance monitoring in universities, for example, while no doubt intended to improve productivity and efficiency in ivory towers, is obviously reducing academic freedom, as vice-chancellors and principals

despairingly note in their end-of-year speeches. The privatisation of the railway system, while designed to increase choice for the customer (you can get from Edinburgh Waverley to Glasgow Central on InterCity East Coast in 65 minutes or to Glasgow Queen Street on Scotrail in 50 minutes), has brought with it an enormous increase in bureaucracy, necessary to deal with new regulations and complicated relationships among the various owners. The paradox of 'marketisation', which may begin as 'rolling back socialism', is that it greatly strengthens the power of central government. The subjugation of local government to Westminster, to the Treasury and indeed to the Prime Minister's office, offers one more of many examples of the way in which the Tory vision of freeing society from State control has had entirely the opposite effect in reality. No profession or organization, even in the 'private sector', can say that it is less regulated than was the case in 1979.

The second principle is that Conservatives are 'traditionalists'. By this Professor Scruton means that they see the nation, 'not as a contract among some arbitrary group of people, but as a partnership, in Burke's words, between the living, the unborn and the dead'. What that alumnus of Trinity College, Dublin, with his lifelong memories of the iniquitous restrictions on Irish trade and industry, the jobbery and corruption of the British government, the absenteeism of the landlords, and so on, in the Ireland of his youth, would make of the Tory Party in office since 1979 would take some discussion. 'A nation', Scruton goes on, 'is an historical community, bound together by kinship and self-imposed rule'. Well and good—though again not beyond discussion; but is it not obvious that 'family values', such as good parenting, neighbourliness, community service, home ownership, and much else besides, precisely the customs and institutions which embed a society in something much deeper than 'a contract among some arbitrary group', are all threatened dramatically by the casualisation of labour, the uncertainty and insecurity that have been deliberately introduced into everybody's life by the ideology of marketisation? Conservatives are not 'individualists', Scruton tells us— who 'see society as nothing more than a mass of self-centred atoms'. In terms of Burkean social philosophy no doubt they are not; but the policies pursued over the last fifteen years have done their best, fortunately only with partial success, to turn a society which had reached an enviable degree of peaceful stability and tolerance of dissent into something approaching Professor Scruton's nightmare of 'a mass of self-centred atoms'.

But then what Tony Blair's Labour Party offers, according to Scruton, is that 'the British people' should become 'part of a great protectionist empire, able to cast aside our national loyalties and boundaries and impose on us a new population of immigrants, catered for by a multinational socialist bureaucracy'. Perhaps anyone who believes *that* would do better to write another novel rather than more fiction about the vision that the British people want.

F.K.