Diversity, Conservative Style



by Theodore Dalrymple

One reason—perhaps the *only* reason—for optimism occasioned by the recent struggle for leadership of the Conservative Party in Britain is the remarkable ethnic diversity of the candidates and at the same time the almost non-existent part it played in the choice between them. Even more encouraging was that none of the candidates him- or herself emphasised or even mentioned his ethnic background as something to be taken into account in the voting. All the candidates spoke purely as citizens of the country, to be adjudged as politically and economically competent or incompetent as the case might be, but *not* according to their origins or personal experiences. Their appeal was to their electorate as a whole, not to some Balkanised part, or parts, of it.

The field was very diverse from the ethnic point of view (sometimes the term *ethnic diversity* seems like a pleonasm,

for what other kind of diversity, sexual tastes aside, could there be, at least according to the apparatchiks and nomenklatura of the diversity and inclusion profession?). There were, among the contenders, a Kurdish refugee from Iraq who arrived in the country speaking no English, the son of a Pakistani immigrant bus driver, the daughters of immigrants from Mauritius and Nigeria, and the son of Indian immigrants from East Africa. Prominent in the government, though not contenders for the leadership, were the daughter of Indian immigrants from East Africa, and the son of immigrants from Ghana.

It is possible that some of these political figures owed part of their initial success to a conscious effort by the Conservative Party to diversify itself ethnically, in accord with the spirit of the times. But this hardly accounts for their attraction to the party in the first place, or their ascent within it, all the more surprising because the Conservative Party was traditionally the party most opposed, at least in theory, to both mass immigration and to the dilution of British identity by such theories as multiculturalism.

The first important lesson from this surprising ethnic diversity is that ethnic minorities cannot be assumed (as once they were assumed) to be inherently, or *ex officio*, of the left. In retrospect, to assume this was to assume what the left claimed to be opposed to, namely the determining nature of race in political affairs. It was to assume that the category "ethnic minority" captured the intellectual, cultural, and political essence of hundreds of thousands or millions of people. That they might differ among themselves, according to personality, interests, beliefs, in short according to all those things that divide everyone else, never occurred to those who claimed to be their defenders or saviours.

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The Conservative Party traditionally stood for limited government, personal responsibility, hard work, individual effort, low taxes, and private ownership. In practice, of course, it has at most been only marginally different from its opponents in these matters: indeed, the present Conservative government has raised taxes to their highest levels since the 1950s, when there was still debt from the Second World War to pay for. But in politics, symbolic meanings matter, and notwithstanding the personal fortunes often made by its politicians, the Labour Party still stands, at least in the mind of men, for public ownership, social welfare, high taxation, and property rights limited by public purposes.

Many immigrants prefer the first vision to the second, for it is to escape limited personal possibilities (or actual persecution) that they immigrate. Others may, by contrast, be attracted by the chance of something for nothing, which a welfare state represents for them. At any rate, given the importance of symbolism in political choices, immigrants (who unsurprisingly are not just one lumpen group) vote differently and, if they go in for politics at all, are likely to take different sides.

The second lesson of the ascent of ethnic minorities within the Conservative Party is that it has been almost noiseless. There has been comparatively little ideological song and dance about it, and it has therefore assumed a more spontaneous character than such diversity has done with its opponents (where it is in any case much less pronounced). A party of individualism can hardly pride itself on choosing its leaders by virtue of their membership of ethnic or other groups, though it is in the nature of all large-scale societies that

not all groups, however categorised, will be equally represented throughout it. Informality and spontaneous evolution are better spurs to advancement than formal procedures which conduce only to bitterness, resentment, and permanent feelings of injustice. To emphasis what people *can* do is more constructive than to emphasise what they *can't*—which is not quite the same as denying that obstacles exist. It is rather to turn obstacles into a personal challenge rather than either insuperable barriers or alternatively into an inexhaustible resource for political entrepreneurism.

None of this is to endorse any of the candidates for the leadership (more of whom have now been eliminated), all of whom in present circumstances are likely to have proved to have feet of clay—and not only feet made of that material. The contest, however, has revealed an astonishing shift in British society in the last few decades.

Criticism of Rishi Sunak (as I write one of the two contenders left in the contest) has been completely free of racism, though not therefore completely free of prejudice. He has been criticised because he is extremely rich, though hatred of the rich was responsible for at least as many deaths in the last century as racial hatred. He has been criticised for his expensive private education, though his parents made considerable sacrifices to procure it for him and he was, after all, only a boy at the time, with no choice in the matter. He has been criticised for his expensive suits, as if a very rich man had a duty to appear scruffy in public, scruffiness being a sign, presumably, of democratic sentiment—not very flattering, when you come to think of it, to the multitudes. That he has presided over an incipient economic catastrophe is a very minor matter by comparison with these profound criticisms.

One endorsement of Rishi Sunak, however, has, paradoxically, been profoundly racist. A prominent donor to the Conservative

party, a businessman called Lord Ranger, an Indian immigrant raised to the House of Lords, has suggested that if Rishi Sunak is not chosen over his remaining rival, Lynn Truss, Britain will risk being seen as racist. This is surely extraordinary and illustrative of how difficult it is to go beyond the ideology of anti-racism, for it suggests that where there are two contenders for a post, one of them being of ethnic minority, the latter must always be given it to avoid the accusation of racism. Not only is this racist in itself, there could be no better way to promote and institutionalise racism.

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