On Brexit, Remember that Politics Is Not a Dinner Party

by Theodore Dalrymple

As far as anyone is able to tell, the British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, has only one clear policy: to remain Prime Minister.

To be sure, every politician aims to stay in office as long as possible. Politics is an exacting and demanding trade, now more than ever, whose main reward is the exercise of power, and it is not realistic to expect those who have sacrificed their lives to attaining it to give it up without a struggle. Nevertheless, one would still hope that those who attained it had some idea what to do with it. A politician with only ideas is dangerous, no doubt, but one entirely without them is contemptible.

Mrs. May pins her hope of remaining in office on not offending anyone too deeply, neither to the right nor to the left of

her. At a dinner party, this might be a good principle, but politics is not a dinner party. Those who try to offend no one also please no one, and in times of crisis give the impression not of compromise and flexibility but of lack of principle and pusillanimity. Faced by the challenge of Brexit, Mrs. May, who seems like a stranger to strategy and tactics, has opted for an evasive immobility, perhaps in the hope that something (such, for example, as post-electoral chaos in Italy) will turn up and prevent her from having to make any painful decisions.

Her own party is deeply divided on the question of Brexit, and the situation is eerily reminiscent of that which followed Joseph Chamberlain's sudden conversion from Free Trade to protectionism in 1903. Though the times then were generally prosperous (judged by their own and not by subsequent standards), Chamberlain argued that unfair foreign competition was harming, and even destroying, British agriculture and industry. The solution that he proposed was protectionism within the then extensive British Empire.

The Conservative Party, led (or at least, headed) by the highly intellectual Arthur Balfour, was deeply divided on the question. It appeared not to be able to make up its mind; as one brilliant young Conservative Member of Parliament, Harry Cust put it, 'I have nailed my colours to the fence.' Balfour, the Prime Minister, refused to express himself clearly on the subject, for fear of alienating one or other of the factions of his own party, and thereby bringing the government down. Intellectually brilliant as he was, he proved incapable of exercising any leadership.

In the election that followed Chamberlain's conversion to protectionism, the Conservatives were swept from power. Neither free-traders nor protectionists trusted them, and the opposition Liberal Party, which at least was clear on this question, soon became a government of reforming zeal. For many years, the Conservatives were a party whom its enemies need

not fear and its friends did not trust.

No historical analogy is exact, of course: that is why history provides parallels but not exact repetitions (life would be much easier if it did, for then hindsight would be a much better guide to future action than it is). While the opposition Liberal Party was very clear on Free Trade – it was in favour of it – the current opposition Labour Party is itself as unclear on the question of Brexit as are the Conservatives. This does not matter, however, from the electoral point of view: a vacillating government is not the same as a vacillating opposition, for it is the government, not the opposition, that is held responsible for, and is supposedly in charge of, national policy. Indeed, a certain lack of clarity in the opposition is a distinct advantage to it, for it can then attack the government for whatever it does. It is rather more difficult for an opposition to attack a government for a policy that it has itself clearly advocated.

The cross-currents of the Brexit debate are much more complex than were those of the Free Trade debate in Arthur Balfour's day. There are free traders who dislike the European Union because it is a customs union, and therefore intrinsically protectionist in intent (for what would be the point of a customs union if no one were outside it?); there are those who dislike the free movement of labour within the customs union, either because it serves to lower the wages of unskilled labour, leading to indigenous unemployment, or because it has culturally dislocating effects; there are those who like the European Union because it undermines national sovereignty and those who dislike for exactly the same reason; there are those who like the European Union because it promises to eliminate the vicissitudes of national politics and those who dislike it because it was at its inception an attempt to bypass politics altogether, passing power to a council of men of economic wisdom and political insight supposedly superior to that of

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