

The Same May Happen

by Theodore Dalrymple

It is difficult to say what politicians in modern democracies stand for—other than themselves, that is. At best they seem to be the representatives, or perhaps the lightning-conductors, of the various strains of resentment by which advanced societies are now riven. In power, they always disappoint their supporters and give ammunition to their enemies. Proponents of balanced budgets, once in office, take deficits to new heights (or depths); would-be healers of racial divide exacerbate ethnic tensions. Never has political rhetoric seemed so facile or out of touch with the sheer intractability of reality.

When Theresa May became—faute de mieux as it were, all other candidates for the position having dropped out like rotten apples from a tree—Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and leader of its Conservative Party, the press made much of the differences between her and her predecessor. David Cameron was the spoiled scion of privilege, she the ordinary girl made good by hard work, merit, and some luck. Mr. Cameron's was the reign of Old Etonians, Mrs. May's would be that of the state-educated striver.

In fact, the differences are probably slight.

The Conservative Party in Britain has long ceased to be conservative in any meaningful way, just as the Labor Party has long ceased to be socialist. In theory the former has been marginally less statist than the latter, but in practice not very much so. Since the Conservatives returned to power in 2010, the British budget deficit as a percentage of GDP has been consistently higher, sometimes much higher, than that of the avowedly more statist French, and the national debt has increased as a proportion of GDP by a sixth. Of course, this

might stem in large part from the economic situation they inherited in 2010, but this in itself should put us on guard against expecting very much change of direction under a new leader.

Mrs. May, like all mainstream politicians in Europe today, is a social democrat, a social engineer, and a statist. She is more open about this than her predecessors. In so far as they made any efforts to control the budget deficit, they did so for financial rather than for any philosophical reasons. They believed a budget deficit of 10 per cent was not economically sustainable; they kept the increase of public expenditure more or less in line with inflation. (These days merely failing to increase it is usually regarded as a reduction, which of course it might be on a per capita basis.) Discussion of this policy at the time was largely about its economic wisdom, or whether it would have been wiser to increase overall demand by expanding public expenditure. That the state should take charge of the provision of health care, education, pensions, social insurance, transport and infrastructure, as well as providing a large part of the population with food, clothing, and housing, was not questioned.

Nor is it likely to be by the new Prime Minister. In her public pronouncements, at least, she has sounded almost indistinguishable from Labor's Tony Blair before he became Prime Minister. Mr. Blair promised to attend to the interests of the people rather than the those of the elite; Mrs. May has promised to do the same. Mr. Blair promised to reduce inequality. (Just how sincerely held was his egalitarianism has been demonstrated by his conduct after he left office.) Mrs. May promises the same. Mr. Blair promised that the state would not be so much bloated as efficient and responsive to the needs of the population, particularly the disadvantaged; Mrs. May has made the same or similar noises. Mr. Blair wanted to give every child not only opportunity but equal opportunity; Mrs. May wants the same. The state would

guarantee opportunity for all.

To oppose any of these goals, or even merely be skeptical of them, would be political suicide.

Let us grant Mrs. May sincerity, which as yet there is no reason to doubt. The usual genuflections in the direction of personal effort and responsibility notwithstanding, she is still a knobs-and-lever politician: She will twist what she thinks are the right knobs and pull the right levers, and supposedly the result will be a more equal but also a more entrepreneurial society.

It is certainly true that there are large disparities in the condition of the British population in health, level of education, experience of crime, and economic prospects. Disadvantage is passed down from generation to generation, and whole areas of the country that once relied on industry requiring large quantities of unskilled labor, resemble old war zones that have yet to recover.

But the knobs Prime Minister May intends to turn and the levers she intends to pull are themselves rotten and have helped to bring about the very situation that needs correction. What most struck me in my observation of the National Health Service bureaucracy, for example, is its unreformability. Attempts at reform usually ended, at best, with no change; at worst, they exacerbated the very problems they were supposed to solve. The attempt to give every citizen an electronic health record that was in principle available to every doctor and every hospital in the country cost upwards of \$20 billion, and ended in total failure, unless the creation of information technology millionaires along the way were to be counted a success. And what is true of the health service is true of every other governmental department.

In other words, the central government proposes, but it is the bureaucracy below it that disposes. The knobs and levers that

are turned and pulled are connected to no proper machinery behind them, or are connected only in a perverse fashion. This is in part because of the machinery's sheer size, but also because it has interests of its own to pursue, among which efficiency is not usually one. The larger the number of tasks undertaken by the central government, therefore, the greater the disparity between its aspirations and its achievements.

Looking at the new Prime Minister's website, one admires the energy but not the realism. By all accounts she is an efficient and straightforward person, of whom no personal defect is known—as good as possible a captain of a ship with a broken compass and heading in the wrong direction.

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