

Extract from a letter to Ronald 30 dated 30 April 2013

And so let me move on to the battleground of politics. I think the differences in reaction to Margaret Thatcher's death indicate how well-chosen any conflict metaphor is. We live in a nation-state that has become even more significantly divided since 1979 than it was before. You and I quite nicely mirror that divide. As a Conservative thinker, it seems you broadly favour the policies of the present Government: lower taxation, cutting back the public sector, opening up opportunities to maximise profit through private enterprise thereby, so the argument goes, reducing our debt, increasing the nation's wealth and thus benefiting as many people as possible in society. For my part, although averse to labels and identification with any particular party, I am broadly in agreement with those who are opposed to such policies.

Contemporary Conservative leaders such as Cameron and Osborne seem to me to share with Thatcher a callousness that blinds them to the hurt and harm they are inflicting on their fellow citizens. But the notion of fellow citizenship is lacking in their ideology, unlike a number of their European counterparts. Coal mining and iron and steel communities in Germany and northern Europe were not demonised by their governments and led into bitter conflicts; their ruling parties engaged in a long-term strategy to manage the decline of these traditional industries. The grocer's daughter in practice cared more for the people like her, who shared the nostalgic vision of an imperial Great Britain in which enterprise would always be rewarded and the freer such enterprise was allowed to be the better for all in the land. She embraced the neo-classical economic thinking of the likes of Hayek, just as her successors and imitators do today. Unfortunately, this mode of economics is in my view and many others quite simply wrong. At best, it is a fascinating academic cul-de-sac; at its worst, an immoral smokescreen for self-interest and greed.

For Thatcher, Cameron and Osborne, the people who are protesting and complaining are not our people; they can be dismissed as muddle-headed or worse. Denial is the hallmark of such politics; ('Denial' is also the focus of my next literary undertaking). Change and reform are defined by such radical Conservatives as the prerequisites for progress. Tough decisions have to be made. We are the people you can trust to see you through these difficult times. But what is the trademark of these difficult times? In short, it is greater inequality, more poverty and more personal suffering. You wrote that you found Toynbee's article 'fascinating' but made little comment on her ideas and supporting data. Tribal enemy of Conservatives she may be, but the facts she records of deepening inequality, widening poverty and personal suffering as a consequence of government decisions seem irrefutable. You acknowledge that change needs to be managed so that the most vulnerable are not harmed. Your party in government is, it seems to me, failing to satisfy your own ethics.

The familiar myths are repeated over and over again. This is no accident. Scapegoating has always been a nasty political tool. 'The benefits system is in urgent need of change'. Is it? We have one of the least generous and most castigated systems in Western Europe; it is the mark of a civilised society that it cares for all, especially the most vulnerable. You can't care for all through charity; you show the care through redistribution of wealth in society in such a way that all can acknowledge its fairness and justice. We have so much to be proud of in our welfare system as a whole; it is a topsy-

turvy world where its weaknesses are blown out of all proportion and used as a political tool to discredit the notion of welfare and blacken the humanity of those receiving benefit.

The mind-set that believes in minimum government and an unregulated market is going to be hostile to the idea of a welfare state. But such an ideology is deeply flawed. All markets are social constructs; the best ones, the most efficient, are those that know the value of intervention, the just balance between the public and the private, and the imperative of maintaining spending power. Some two and a half years ago after the 2010 election, we presented you with 'A Little Red Book'. The arguments presented therein foresaw the failure of Osborne's economics. Those arguments seem to have been vindicated. This is a government that appears set on presenting itself as a case study in the application of misguided and outdated economics.

It is unlikely that we will ever see eye to eye on these matters but it is important to me that I respond to the political comments in your letter. These are issues of profound importance for the kind of society we will leave for future generations. They cannot be reduced simply to polite differences of political opinion. They are central to the question whether we are moving closer to or further from the notion of government by, of and for the people. Neither of us has any reason for apologising for articulating what we believe to be right, given the stakes.