

DON MILLIGAN'S
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“I’ve never kissed a Tory!!!”



I AM NOT SURE if I’ve ever kissed a Tory. I’ve kissed a policeman – true, that was before I knew the lad was a copper – but if I remember rightly, learning that he was a constable did not make me leap out of bed in a flurry of political distress. So, it’s perfectly possible that I’ve kissed a number of Tories in my time.

Consequently, I’ve become increasingly bemused by the fashionable ‘kissing’ slogan common amongst the metro-middle class of our major cities. I’m not entirely sure what has led to the popularity of this notion, but I think it must be something to do the cherished virtues and self-regard of those who mouth it. I suspect that this conceit is informed by the *idée fixe* that Tories are uniquely, brutal, uncaring, and given over to all-round wickedness.

It’s a moot point, of course, whether or not one can enjoy kissing the wicked . . . I suspect that I could, but despite being a member of the metro-middle class

who voted remain, I fall short in so many other respects of those who prohibit kissing Tories.

When considering whether wickedness is particularly concentrated within the ranks of the Conservative Party, I think something of a political audit is required – even if it is only a rather rough attempt at one. This is because it was not the Tories that gave Britain its nuclear weapons; it was not the Tories who fought the war in Malaya in the nineteen forties, interning some ten per cent of the population in barbed wire camps cunningly called “New Villages”.

Nor was it the Tories who called in police and soldiers to scab and beat up striking dockers in 1949, or who sent conscripted national servicemen to Korea a year later. It was not the Tories who allowed general practice doctors to function as private business partnerships under the auspices of the NHS, nor was it the Tories who introduced prescription charges seventy years ago. It wasn't the Tories who refused to suppress the white settler rebellion in Rhodesia.

Labour governments have had little difficulty in passing and enforcing restrictions on immigration, interning those who fell foul of the system in prisons that are nowadays called “removal centres”. Labour also rushed through the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968, in three days of Parliamentary panic, ably assisted by Enoch Powell, a host of moderate Tories, and Tony Benn.

We could go on counterposing progressive measures against reactionary ones since 1830 or thereabouts and we'd find that the Tory Party has often participated in the passage of a great many progressive reforms, from the extensions of the franchise to working men from 1867 onwards, and to all women by 1928. True, the party has always been home to a large cohort of double-dyed reactionaries, but it has also had its progressive elements led by people as diverse as Robert Peel, Benjamin Disraeli, Harold Macmillan, and David Cameron.

Mentions of Enoch Powell, Norman Tebbit, and Margaret Thatcher, will always arouse the whiff of

sulphur – particularly Thatcher who regardless of the merits of her reforms, will never be forgiven for making few, if any, practical arrangements to deal with the appalling consequences of her renovation of British capitalism. More recently, David Cameron, and the Tories in general, have teetered on the rim of the fiery lake over the policy of austerity pursued with disastrous consequences for those at the bottom of the heap.

Their strategic weakening of the entire social infrastructure used by the low paid, and the poor, over the last nine years has been little short of catastrophic. Undoubtedly, this has given force to the moral assertion that the Tories are definitely unkissable. What, exactly Labour governments would have done in the aftermath of Blair and Brown's spending spree, and the great recession, is unclear – but the Tories have been in charge since 2010, and have relentlessly narrowed the options of the NHS, local government, and all other agencies attempting to prevent people with few resources, and little money, from being driven to the wall.

Now, we must ask: is this because they are wicked, unkissable, and want to grind the faces of the poor into the dust? Or is there some other explanation? Many people on the left would answer, "No". They appear to be convinced, like the extremely well-heeled metro-middle class, Ash Sarkar, on Question Time, that 'we' are being attacked and 'we' are being impoverished by Tories motivated entirely by their refusal to share, by their greedy desire to keep all the good things to themselves. "Tories pursue their own narrow material interests against the rest of us, because that's what Tories do."

This implies an unexplained identity of interests between the professional people who run trade unions, think tanks, public services, consultancies of various kinds, staff the universities, media and cultural industries, on the one side, and the poor and hard-pressed on the other. It appears to be believed across a large swathe of the liberal left that the metro-middle

class in all our major cities are motivated purely by their desire to help the poor and represent the less fortunate. Unlike Tories, who are motivated above all by self-interest, the liberal left intelligentsia engage in political discourse for purely altruistic reasons. People like Ash Sarkar, Owen Jones, and Andrew Murray, have no interests other than the common good.

The truth, of course, is otherwise, the left intelligentsia has much to gain from nationalisation, enhanced public spending, and engrossed public employment. They have much to gain from a greater role for the state in managing public services made available to the poor, and in curating cultural, housing, economic, and social spaces, designed for the low paid, and those with few resources. This is because middle class lefties know that it is, as likely as not, that people just like them, gifted with emotional intelligence, and a subtle appreciation of things in general, will know exactly how to manage the grant applications, disburse the budgets, and administer state, health, and local services, in a way beneficial to all. Left-wing professionals like to believe that they have no interests of their own, other than the welfare of the poor, and the good of society in general.

In this, they are strangely like the Tories whom they hate, and would never kiss. This is because the distinguishing feature of the Conservative or Tory political outlook is that the welfare of the population at large, from the top to the bottom, is dependent upon the proper functioning of commercial life, or capitalism – call it what you will. Tories do not believe that the poor can prosper if the economy crashes. Consequently, the prosperity of industry and enterprise is the necessary condition for the prosperity for all. This is a deeper, more structural idea than notions of ‘trickle down’, in which it is thought by some, that wealth will eventually reach the lowest rungs of society. On the contrary, the Tory belief, that we all have a vested interest in the welfare of business, is rooted in the observation that when things go wrong it is always the most vulnerable who suffer.

For sure they know that when they attempt to reduce public spending and pay down as much of the national debt as possible, they will be cutting the services upon which the least advantaged and most embattled in our society are most reliant. Tories are well aware that the most vulnerable will be hit hardest by their policies, which is why they do everything they can to get as many people as possible into jobs and hooked on 'self-reliance'; everyone must fend for themselves. Attractive Tory hype of can-do optimism 'self-determination' and flexibility, leads them, perhaps, inevitably, into the awful lie that low paid work – having a job, any job – is the route out of poverty.

This is where the Tories come unstuck. Their reliance upon markets for determining wage levels, setting rents, providing housing, pensions, and personal care, manifestly fails to serve at least a third of our population – it fails twenty-two million people.

However, the Tories are driven back upon the nostrums that hold their worldview together because they can see no plausible alternative to a society built around private property and commercial activity. The role of the state as far as they are concerned is to create the most optimal conditions for capitalism to work as well as it can. They simply do not believe that increasing nationalisation, and state control of the economy, can deliver overall benefits to the population at large.

We must admit, that given our concrete historical experience the Tories have a strong case. State run economies have not been able to demonstrate conspicuous success, or even alleviate widespread poverty and backwardness. Indeed, nationalised economies in China and Vietnam have only prospered by introducing extensive elements of commercial competition and capitalist enterprise into their systems.

John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn might run capitalism in a more fruitful and fairer way than the Tories. This is after all what they're promising to do – despite a great deal of socialist hoo-hah surrounding

banning fee-paying schools, handing shares to workers, free prescriptions, or endorsing tenants' right to buy-out their landlords – this 'revolutionary' duo are promising to do nothing other than run capitalism better than the Tories. They propose to do this by greatly enhanced public spending, more state assistance for industry and infrastructure, and improved social and welfare services. It's a moot point whether they could pull this off, but this is their offer.

The Tories, on the other hand, remain solidly committed to pursuing society's welfare through the pursuit of a prosperous commercial life, and striving for the wellbeing of capitalism.

Consequently, it is abundantly clear that neither the Corbynistas nor the Tories are particularly kissable. Neither the left intelligentsia's noisy occupation of the moral high ground, nor the Tories' pursuit of the national business case, is convincing. They're, like the leavers and the remainers, we're all having to side with, *for or against*. It really is a case of Tweedledum and Tweedledee in pursuit of the welfare of society through the assertion that what's good for me, is good for you.

The insufferable smugness and virtue of those on the left committed to the well-being of the less fortunate, ranged against the studied realism and world-weariness of the right, will get us precisely nowhere. The only way out of this cynical knockabout is a frank recognition that the Tories are not wicked, Labour is not virtuous, and the LibDems are not the best thing since sliced bread. We need a wide-ranging political discussion in which the impact of new technologies and globalisation upon capitalism and our democratic arrangements, are centre-stage. This would be a political discussion that is framed by the assumption that neither state-socialism nor free market capitalism, addresses the climate crisis, or can deliver stable and prosperous development. The concatenation of crises we are facing demand nothing less than the thoroughgoing interrogation of all shibboleths, and all of our ingrained assumptions.