Chancellor with Shakespeare on his side: The Terry Colemen interview
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Nigel Lawson: "I'm not a great believer in progress" Picture by Frank Martin

Chancellor with Shakespeare on his side

The Terry Coleman interview

IT IS nothing remarkable that Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, should be happy to talk about tea-tasting and trade unions, because after all he has some experience of both. It is, however, remarkable that he should happily discuss original sin and the Toryism of Shakespeare. Conservative cabinet ministers are not on the whole given to discussions of abstract political philosophy. Mr Lawson is unusual.

We met at No 11, Downing Street, in a room overlooking the gardens, and when, at tea time, he offered coffee, I asked about his father, who is well known to have been a tea merchant in the City. Mr Lawson recalled a long room in Plantation House, with spittoons, and different teas in little piles. "My father tried to teach me to taste tea. I never acquired a palate for it. He could take a sip of any tea, blind, and tell you, exactly, almost which garden it came from. I couldn't."

His father's father was born in Latvia, and came to England at the end of the last century. He was an easy-going, not very successful fellow, a mason, and a great gambler. At this I asked Mr Lawson whether, after the idea of a career in tea had been abandoned and he went up to Oxford, he had not been a bit of a poker-player himself. "This poker thing," he said, "has been greatly exaggerated. One of my lesser interests."

Or bridge, then? Had he been in the Harold Lever class at bridge? "Oh good Lord, no. I always find that bridge leads to a lot of ill-temper."

After getting a first in PPE, he went off to do his national service in the navy, starting as an ordinary seaman. It took an awful lot to make him seasick, so he was often able to have an extra helping of food because some other poor devil was too sick to eat anything. He was commissioned as a sub-lieutenant and ended up with his own command, which is what he wanted. She was a motor torpedo boat.

Then followed journalism with the Financial Times, and then with the Sunday Telegraph where again he had his own command, of the City pages. In 1963 he was asked to go as speech writer to Macmillan, but before he could take up this job, Macmillan was succeeded by Home who took the young Lawson on in the same capacity, without even having seen him.

"Sight unseen," he said.

That showed great faith?

"It showed great courtesy." Mr Lawson was, and remains, an admirer of Lord Home as a politician and as a man.

Indeed, I said, he seemed to get on awfully well with prime ministers generally, with Macmillan, Home, Heath, and evidently Mrs Thatcher. He said he hadn't always got on with Heath, and had great rows, but nevertheless it was he who had drafted the manifesto for the election of October 1974.

Here I went back into the 1960s to ask the obligatory question about Mr Lawson's famous council mortgage of £20,000 on a house two doors away from Churchill's. This caused a great furore, and the amount would indeed be equal to about £120,000 in present day money, but I decline to believe that a mortgage, however got, is a sin, and was merely curious about the interest rate. It was 6¼ per cent, which is known, but had that been a *fixed* rate

No, he said: it had not been.

Pity. I believe that the more astute, and fortunate, a Chancellor of the Exchequer may be or may have been, the better. But, since you don't get an idea of the strength of a man's mind by watching him order fish and chips (and that turn of phrase is not mine but is lifted from one of Mr Lawson's books) I went on to ask about more fundamental things, like the concept of equality.

He had once quoted Oliver Wendell Holmes, of the US Supreme Court, as saying: "I have no respect for the passion for equality, which seems to me to be merely idealising envy . . ." Did that express Mr Lawson's own opinion?

> So Shakespeare was a good Tory? "Shakespeare was a Tory, without any doubt"

"Yes, pretty broadly it does. I'm in favour of equality of opportunity, but that's another thing. People are different, not equal. The appeal of egalitarianism is I think wholly destructive. It's an appeal to envy — one of the strongest emotions, one of the seven deadly sins too. . . It is I think something which is damaging in economic terms and in social terms too, because it can never be realised and so people feel permanently dissatisfied."

And if a man believed what was stated in the American Declaration of Independence, that all men were created equal, and saw himself to have failed, he might therefore blame this failure upon himself, which would be cruel? "He should no more think it's his own fault than somebody who's less good as an athlete should feel somehow he's inadequate. Though he can train and improve his performance."

Mr Lawson has occasionally quoted those lines from Troilus which say:

Take but degree away,
untune that string,
And hark what discord
follows.

Why did he like those lines?

"The fact of differences, and the need for some kind of hierarchy, both these facts, are expressed more powerfully there than anywhere else I know in literature."

So Shakespeare was a good Tory? "Shakespeare was a Tory, without any doubt."

Could he give another example. "I think that in Coriolanus the Tory virtues, the Roman virtues as mediated through Shakespeare, are . . . it's written from a Tory point of view."

So Mr Lawson felt that a social heirarchy was necessary and comfortable? "Yes, within an open society, where people can move up and down."

Wolsey, the son of a butcher, and that sort of thing? "Quite."

Would he say that people had recently, over the last 20 years, been disorientated by too many changes? "Right. The strength of the trade unions, I've often felt—it's all changed now but some years ago I felt that the strength of the trade union movement in the hearts and minds of people, working people, was the very thing that it was most criticised for, the fact that it didn't change. . . .When every other institution in the country was going through a period of most turbulent change and nobody knew where they were, people did know where they were in the trade unions movement, because it was very conservative, didn't change, and gave people a structure."

The old carthorse? He nodded; but then, as I understood him, went on to say that resistance to change could be taken too far, and that the strength of the Conservative party had been its ability to adapt without changing too greatly in essentials.

But, I objected, one of the changes of the last few years, this nonsense of changing county boundaries, of putting Bournemouth in Dorset when all the world knew it was in Hampshire, had surely been the work of his own party? "Oh, yes, I think that modishness (he cast around for this word, and then spoke it with distaste) is something that can be very powerful. When there was a mood at the time that everything had to be changed, the Conservative party, wrongly in my view, got seduced by that general vogue."

Then we came back to the unions. I reminded Mr Lawson of his contribution to a book called Confrontation, published in 1978, in which he had quoted Robert Lowe, Gladstone's first Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the need for legal restraint of the trade unions. Lowe's view was that if this restraint were achieved, a threat to prosperity and industry would have been arrested and that a "demoralisation which threatens to lower the character of the English operative to the level of the Thug of India" would have been stayed.

Did Mr Lowe's views reflect Mr Lawson's?

Mr Lawson said that they were Lowe's own colourful words. He had been a man of foresight, who had early seen the potential danger of the unions. The trade union problem was nothing new, and had come and gone.

Yes, but Mr Lawson had obviously been relating the argument to the present day? "Oh, very much so, very much so."

A thug was a highway robber? "Lowe's picturesque language."

Hadn't we had an example quite recently, with the Financial Times dispute? "Yes, I think there, that's right, it's a more sophisticated form of thuggery."

Throughout Mr Lawson's contribution to Confrontation one could sense his feeling that time was running out pretty fast. Why did he feel that?

"It's very difficult to say when a country has passed a point of no return. Although there clearly comes a point when such a high proportion of the population is dependent on the State that it's very difficult to reverse the trend. I did feel that if we hadn't introduced a fundamental change of direction as a result of the 1979 election, then it might well have been too late. I can't say dogmatically, but one sensed that we were getting close to a point where a change of direction simply wouldn't be politically possible . . . I mean, short of revolution, which is the last thing I would want to see."

I misquoted Nigel Birch as telling Macmillan, after the Profumo affair, that it would never be good confident morning again. Mr Lawson corrected me: "*Glad* confident morning."

Then, given the difference in circumstances, did Mr Lawson believe that it would, now, ever be glad confident morning again? "I don't know that it *ever* was glad confident morning."

Ah.

"I am not a great believer in progress, in the sense of an inevitable upward movement."

Progress was a nineteenth century idea?

"That's right. Man doesn't change. Or man's nature doesn't change. The same problems are there in different forms. . . . Clearly there are parts of the world where there has been a very marked descent into darkness. But I don't think that is inevitable either, any more than I believe progress is inevitable. I don't believe in the inevitability of history."

From history we went back to Mr Lawson's editorship of the Spectator, from 1966 to 1970. I said that one or two journalists who were not ill-disposed to him, though his editorship had been a shambles.

He replied that he didn't think that was so, but that his own view could hardly be an impartial one. And, he said, the paper had always been readable, and there, though I didn't say so, he seemed to me to make a complete reply. Shambles don't matter if the result is good.

> "Man doesn't change. Or man's nature doesn't change . . . I don't believe in the inevitability of history"

But, I suggested, the point was that if the Spectator had been a shambles, and he was now running a great department of State . . .

"You must judge the various things that I've done, that I've run at different times. This isn't the first department I've been in charge of. From running my little boat in the navy, to running the City side of the Sunday Telegraph, and the Spectator, you have to make your own judgment."

Well, what about sin? Hadn't he said that your socialist believed in the perfectibility of man but that your Conservative didn't, because he believed men were born frail, and subject to original sin?

Mr Lawson assented.

Now this I baulked at a bit. If he was telling me men were sometimes subject to sin, very well. But why *original* sin?

"Because they are born into the world with it. It is not something that is imposed upon them."

Surely he didn't believe that?

"Having had several children," said Mr Lawson, "I am well aware that is the case, from my own observation."

"Five children?" I asked.

"Six." (Some laughter).

What? Sin in little children? "It takes different forms. One develops in one's capacity for sin as one develops in one's capacity for other things as well. But the important thing is that it is there, innate, born. It is not something which is imposed."

Ah.

"The Rousseau-ite socialist believes that man is really the noble savage, and that it is only society which deforms him and makes him wicked, and that naturally he is born good . . . This is a view which I don't share."

So there he was insisting not just on sin, which I could well accept, but on original sin? He saw sin in little children? He asserted that? "I believe it."

I proceeded to negotiate with the Chancellor. Would he accept that a child was not born into the world sinful, but that it was, rather, born with such frailties as might lead it into occasions of sin? Would he settle for that?

"I'm not sure that in practice it makes very much difference."

Then, because it didn't make any difference he would accept it? "Yes."

It is of course a fundamental difference. But any Chancellor who can apparently abandon a belief in original sin while still, plainly, having modified his views not one bit, will be able to negotiate easily not only with trade unions but even with his own spending ministers.

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