

# THE SHIFTING CENTRE: A REACTION TO THE TELEVISION SERIES “DAHRENDORF ON BRITAIN”



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During the last week, the first of the year 1983, a television series called “Dahrendorf On Britain” was shown. Ralf Dahrendorf is the Director of the London School of Economics and a former Eurocrat. Although German he is now a full member of Britain’s club of the Great and the Good, from whom Royal Commission members are chosen, and he has been on several of these. The pre-publicity for his show included a lovingly detailed close-up of his *Who’s Who* entry, suggesting what a formidable fellow he is. My father, who also used to do well in *Who’s Who* and with whom I was watching this, asked me what I thought of Dahrendorf, and I upset him by snapping out that I considered the man about as influential as a cork bobbing about on the Atlantic Ocean. My father replied that maybe this was because I didn’t like what he said, not because nobody listened to it.

Rather to my surprise I have been proved totally right. Last night’s episode was a startling finale to this truly bizarre series.

It was a Party Political Broadcast on behalf of the Conservative Party.

What made this spectacle so astonishing was that it had been preceded by a succession of bore-ins on behalf of the Tendency of the Extreme Centre, occasionally on behalf of the Social Democratic Party itself, and at its worst on behalf of that Party’s leader the Right Honourable Roy Jenkins M.P. I didn’t see all these other bore-ins, so I bought the book of the series (Ralf Dahrendorf, *On Britain*, BBC Publications, 1982), and this is even more bor-

ing. It contains all the televised cliches and more, but none of the pictures or recordings of others boring besides Dahrendorf.

## NATIONAL REGENERATION BY CONSULATIVE GATHERING

People I’ve met who have switched on Dahrendorf at random have mostly said that the man was saying absolutely nothing; simply spouting an uninterrupted gush of centrist vacuities. (One day a member of the Great and the Good is going to reply: “There are no easy answers” only to realise a fraction of a second too late that the question was: “Tell me Lord Boredom, what does two plus two equal?”) Nevertheless, emerging like a multi-story car park from out of the fog, a distinct theory could be observed, by those who persevered. Namely: a country does well when those who rule it all agree to do well. The country’s rulers (the people in *Who’s Who* such



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as, to name but one, Ralf Dahrendorf) sit down in ever widening rings of committees, consultative gatherings, regular meetings convened by the Prime Minister, and so on and so forth. What, you ask, do they do? The following Dahrendorf sentence catches the drift well: "There is a need to reach at least procedural conclusions on guidelines for action." Not: action. Procedural conclusions on guidelines for action. Later (this one is my absolute favorite) Dahrendorf says: "If there is a common understanding of issues, even a common definition of major problems, a framework of action is created which itself forms ..." What, for a bonus of ten points, does it form? Offer it. Answer: "a guideline". A *guideline!!!* The Japanese are just going to be queueing up in their millions to buy our bloody guidelines!

Being a committee man Dahrendorf also gives due weight in his ramblings to entirely different theories, which, he hints, could be just as true as his preferred theory, and perhaps (who can be sure?) even more true. He is a sociologist by background, and is thus incapable of being certain about why things happen in society, indeed unable to grasp that anyone ever could be certain about such things.

Speaking of "bloody" guidelines Dahrendorf is, naturally, opposed to "adversary" politics. This he regards as totally different from the civilised search for consensus, and he is thus saddened by the way Britain has oscillated back and forth between these two unrelated styles of government. But they are the same style. X announces a national consensus which all are urged to accept. Y tells X where he can stick his consensus and X replies to Y in much the same tone. Consensus politics *is* adversary politics. Contrariwise that arch-exponent of adversary politics Margaret Thatcher will, if she wins the next election, have established something suspiciously like a consensus, even if it is only a consensus that it is unwise to cross this demented virago. Which of course was her idea in the first place. She will not help us, e.g. by employing us. So, there's nothing for it, we must help ourselves, and employ ourselves. It was just this newly emerging consensus that Dahrendorf ended up by describing.

The SDP isn't nearly such a good bet now as it was when Dahrendorf began work on his series. If, as now seems possible, this woman is going to be enthroned for the next fifteen years, and if one wants continuing employment knitting together the consensus, then perhaps one should somewhat change the colour of one's wool.

## PRODUCERS VERSUS PREDATORS

The truth is that countries stagnate when the people in them agree to stagnate, and do not stagnate when the people in them do not agree stagnate.

Producers of goods produce goods, and consensus politicians attempt, with varying success, to put a stop to this process. Producing requires no consensus, so producers act quickly. Consensus takes time, so the politicians are to begin with left far behind, but eventually they get their act together and bring the producers to heel. Anything which discredits politicians (like defeat in a major war)

without installing new, powerful and undiscredited politicians (as in Eastern Europe) is good for production. The acquisition of another half dozen states of the union, or joining a customs union like the Common Market consisting of a bunch of damned foreigners, is good for production, because suddenly there is this vast army of blacklegs which the producers immediately exploit but which it takes the politicians a generation to subjugate.

For detailed exposition of the above, see Mancur Olsen's *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (Yale University Press, 1982). Olsen is an economist. He finds things out. He says why his theory is true and other apparently equally good theories untrue. He only writes a book when he has definite answers to report, and after you have read his book, some of these answers are easy.

## SELF HELP

Dahrendorf's final episode, at which the book scarcely hints, was the result of a systematic search for success stories in the disintegrating wasteland of Thatcherite Britain. Cleverly omitting all reference to Thatcher, Dahrendorf described (1) a small computerised steel mill in Ebbw Vale, (2) a vocational training centre cum product R and D operation, somewhere or other, run by a disillusioned school teacher, who was using "unemployable" black youngsters to do the soldering for some promising sounding electrical gadget designers, (3) a part-time all female computer software consultancy firm in Horsham, Surrey, and (4) a self-help amuse-yourself community group in Glasgow. All are apparently doing nicely. The first and third are making money, and the other two appear to be staggering along without major outlays by anybody, if only because no outlays are available.

Dahrendorf was describing a world in which all the expanding spider's webs of common understandings, shared guidelines, consultative thises and local authority thats (in other words, the world of Ralf Dahrendorf) had simply collapsed into oblivion. The people were on their own. If they couldn't save themselves from catastrophe, then catastrophe was going to engulf them. But, and this was the good news, the same state apparatus that was so powerless to help them was for the same reasons much less well placed to stop them doing things, such as building a laundrette in the hitherto "zoned" Glasgow housing estate. What could the council do to prevent such insubordination? Withdraw its support? It provided none. Cut off "community development aid"? It was cutting it to ribbons anyway. It was all the people in the council could do to pay each other their salaries.

Is it too fanciful to hope that people who are now one hundred per cent responsible for their own lives may come to resent paying fifty per cent taxation in exchange for absolutely nothing, and may one day even decide to stop doing this?

If such a consensus ever does emerge then Ralf Dahrendorf can be relied upon to say something encouraging about ... let's see now ... this seemingly retrograde but in fact very positive contribution towards defining Britain's role for the future.