

How Thatcher & Benn stake out the liberal ground!

POLITICAL philosophies are not always advocated by the parties that bear their names. This is illustrated by two books*, widely different in viewpoint and style, one from an academic of the right and the other from a politician of the left.

In *The Meaning of Conservatism* Dr. Roger Scruton asserts that conservative dogma cannot be clearly formulated and he seeks to interpret conservative feelings and instincts rather than following lines of argument. The inevitable result is a certain amount of obscurity.

Looking first at what conservatism is not, there are some surprises. According to Dr. Scruton, conservatism is *not* about democracy and *not* about individual freedom: these are the doctrines of liberalism, which is to be despised. The author certainly does not espouse marxism but he does find it a more profound account of the human condition than liberalism, which he considers to be shallow and abstract and the enemy of conservatism.

Conservatism is not about the individual in isolation but about the institutional life of society and the place of the individual within it. It is about the family, about law, about the monarchy, above all about the authority of the state, the legitimacy of its power, and the allegiance that citizens owe to it. It is about not just the relationship but the *identity* of people with the society to which they belong. It is also about values and tradition, about being part of something greater than oneself whose life reaches back into the past and goes on into the future.

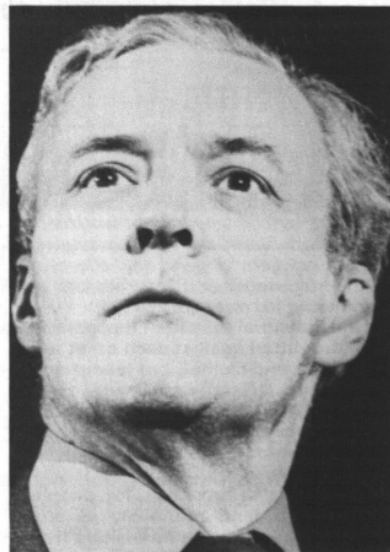
The conservative sees this life, like friendship and the family, as an end in itself, requiring no contractual justification and no external goal such as freedom, equality, or justice. In this he differs from the liberal and the socialist, for both of whom the state and other social institutions are means to achieving their ideals. The conservative resists the extension of the power of the state mainly because its authority is thereby weakened, but like the socialist he is opposed to the liberal concept that government should be minimised.

Conservatism is concerned with public rather than private life. For this reason, the defence of property, often thought of as the core of conservatism, is not so, though it is important in the context of home and family and Dr. Scruton sees no inconsistency in supporting a non-progressive income tax while expressing anger about taxes on inheritance. He admits no natural right to property or indeed any natural rights at all (these are another liberal delusion) but is not offended by privilege and hierarchy. As for conservatism and capitalism, this is at best an accidental alliance and at worst an unholy one. Dr. Scruton does not object to the free market in goods and services but questions the wisdom of industrialization which has emphasized consumption rather than possession and alienated man from his work and therefore from the social order.

ALL THIS is fascinating not only in itself but in its application to contemporary British politics. A government is in office whose economic strategy is to revive a free market economy and reduce the role and



● Margaret Thatcher



● Tony Benn

REVIEW BY A. J. CARTER

expenditure of the state. It is a Conservative government, usually regarded as a right-wing Conservative government, but there is a little doubt that by Dr. Scruton's criteria it is not primarily a conservative government at all but on the contrary a liberal one.

At the other extreme, *Arguments For Socialism* presents the ideas of Mr. Tony Benn, who says much that is worth saying (there is an eloquent statement on the costs of unemployment) but who is preoccupied with class conflict and too full of misdirected

emotional fervour. What he preaches is 'democratic socialism' as an alternative to both capitalism and communism.

Capitalism, although initially an emancipation from feudalism, has become monopolistic and a threat to the well-being of ordinary people. Mr. Benn believes that one of the principal duties of government is to help ordinary working people, through expanding the influence of their trade unions, to curb capitalist concentrations of power, and government intervention in industry, and a high level of public spending are ways of doing so. It does not worry him that the power of the state can be as dangerous as any other centre of power, or that trade unions are by no means necessarily representative of ordinary working people half of whom do not belong to them. Such policies are the antithesis of those of Mrs. Thatcher, but in principle they would not be uncongenial to Dr. Scruton: between socialism and conservatism there is much in common.

However, Mr. Benn is not just a socialist but a 'democratic socialist'. He rejects not only the discipline of the free market but also the fashionable notion that economic problems can be solved by agreement between the leaders of government, industry, and trade unions. An increasingly significant aspect of Mr. Benn's thinking is summarised by one reviewer as his 'faith in the capacity of ordinary people to govern themselves,' through political democracy, industrial democracy, and the democratic control of the environment (an urgent need in a nuclear age), all of which entail the release of more information by government and the acceptance of more responsibility by those to whom decision-making would be devolved. This approach would be anathema to Dr. Scruton, for whom democracy is a 'contagion', but welcome perhaps to Mr. David Steel, for in this respect Mr. Benn is a liberal. 'Democratic socialism' consists of two distinct and possibly contradictory strands of thought which Mr. Benn is driven to combine only because of his intense distrust of the establishment.

When there are such unexpected liberals as Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Benn, it is not too astonishing that the Liberal Party's chief recipe for economic health is a policy more socialist than either of the other major parties can stomach and that is the statutory control of prices and incomes. It seems that, with the party political structure as it is, a liberal should vote Conservative and a left-wing socialist should vote Liberal. The conservative could vote moderate Labour but if, like Dr. Scruton, he dislikes industrialism he might prefer the Ecology Party.

The generals they say, prepare for the battles of the next war as if they were those of the last. The great struggle between capitalism and socialism may be drawing to a close and a realignment beginning. If the next war is between the individualists and the collectivists, we may wonder in which of the two camps Dr. Scruton and Mr. Benn will find themselves.

**The Meaning of Conservatism*, Roger Scruton (Reader in philosophy at the University of London), Pelican Books, £1.95.

Arguments For Socialism, the words of Tony Benn, edited by Chris Mullin, Penguin Books, £1.50.