

# Working Class Conservatives

FRANK DUPUIS

*"Conservatives, by joining with socialists to impose the planned economy, have sapped respect for those essential rights on which good democracy depends."*

**A**NGELS IN MARBLE, by Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver\*, presents the results of a social survey into why British working-class electors continue to vote for the Conservative Party. The authors are professors of sociology at the London School of Economics and Columbia University, New York, respectively.

The book begins with a well-written historical introduction, commencing at the period of the Second Reform Act, 1868, when the franchise was first extended to urban householders, thus making the working class the main element in the electorate. This Act was carried in unusual circumstances. The Liberal government had proposed a similar measure, but, owing to the defection of a section of its supporters, was defeated on a vote of confidence, and without an election the Conservatives under Disraeli came into office. Then, to general surprise, Disraeli carried a measure granting in some respects a wider franchise than the Liberals had proposed.

Disraeli was regarded as a traitor by most Conservatives, but he was one of the most astute politicians on record. He declared that "when the hubbub had subsided," the Conservatives as the patriotic party would be supported by the working classes as by others and would emerge unimpaired. He has certainly been proved right; in the period since 1885, "the Conservatives have had a record of electoral success almost unrivalled among political parties," state the authors of this book. They give some interesting extracts from election addresses to illustrate how skilfully the appeal of "social imperialism" and the imputation of unpatriotic motives to their opponents have been exploited. But one feels it is unfair to subject only one party to such scrutiny. Today, if an opponent of the Wilson administration says the export drive is humbug or exposes false confidence in the £ he suffers the same imputations.

Deeper factors, however, should be considered. The Conservative Party has always been based on the landed interest and has always inclined to paternalism operated by welfare measures and protection. Thus, provided the land question can be obscured, the same attitude of mind that leads to socialism can support conservatism, and the Conservative Party can make striking changes on the surface while remaining essentially the same. The real resistance to Conservative power is the spirit of personal independence as expressed in freedom of trade and genuine land reform, and in combating this spirit the Conservative Party has had remarkable strokes of luck, such as the split in the Liberal party on Irish Home Rule, the

outbreak of war in 1914, which arrested land reform, and the economic panic of 1931 which enabled an alliance of Conservatives under a socialist prime minister to revert to protection under its present title of the planned economy.

The authors regard the Liberal Party only as an element in the political Left—as if Gladstone and Tariq Ali had much in common—but the reasons for Liberal decline have some bearing on Conservative success. They notice, which so many others overlook, that of the twenty-two governments since the Third Reform Act, 1885, only five enjoyed the support of a majority of total votes cast; but they do not point out the cause of this misrepresentation and its advantage to the Conservative Party. The general single-member constituency system then introduced limited the electors' choice to party organisations, which require large financial resources, so the balance of political power, despite extension of the franchise, remains on the side of wealth. Trade union contributions have since enabled the Labour Party to compete, but in the interval many who might have voted Liberal have voted Conservative, from negative rather than positive motives. The continuing strength, under universal franchise, of a party alleged to be opposed to the working classes, cannot be explained entirely by free choice of the electors.

The Liberal Party did not decline when the working classes first had the vote. Remembering the solid benefits of free trade, the electorate in 1868 returned a Liberal government which enjoyed the longest period of real power until 1905, when free trade was again thoroughly debated, together with the land question. But around 1871 the military success of Bismarck's imperialist socialism enhanced Disraeli's line of propaganda just when the Liberals, having completed the liberation of trade, seemed to have little more to offer. Gladstone, aware of this, hoped to abolish income tax by methods rather too complex for electors to grasp, although at the election of 1874 his party failed by only some fifty seats. Had he advocated land-value taxation as an alternative to the unpopular income tax, subsequent events might not have been so advantageous to the Conservative Party. He would probably have failed at the time, but the real basis of his opponents' power would have been made clearer to the working classes.

The bulk of *Angels in Marble* is concerned with tabulating the replies to the authors' sampling of working-class Conservative opinion. The replies are interesting but cannot be conclusively summarised. The authors seem to have inferred that as people vote from motives of personal interest and the Labour Party professes to re-

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present the working classes, there is something irrational in a member of this class not voting Labour. But some said they voted Conservative because they promised more personal freedom. Others said that Conservative leaders,



being better educated, could "manage the economy" more skilfully. If one accepts the planned economy this is not irrational. Conservatives vie with Labour leaders in well-farism, and the record of recent Labour governments suggests that Conservatives could not manage the economy worse than Labour politicians. This enquiry might have been more revealing if the question had been put: "Why do you *not* vote Labour?" It might have been more revealing still if some wealthy persons, including land speculators, had been asked: "Why do you find it to your interest to support Labour?"

In its object and method this book is typical of the dominant influences in contemporary thought. The authors do not set themselves to investigate any aspect of truth likely to promote improvement in politics and society, but only to present the result of a survey of opinion undertaken in the same spirit as a market survey for a new detergent. It will be useful for political strategists but not to public-spirited citizens. The effect is likely to be the promotion of the general impression that public affairs are matters of expediency only and best left to the experts and that there is something inferior and unscientific in feeling deeply moved at injustice and impelled to take one's side in the eternal struggle between good and evil in the world.

The subject might have suggested the question of how to reconcile indiscriminate franchise with political wisdom. The authors quote several writers in the 1860s who considered this, but they do not enlarge upon it, and they omit J. S. Mill's *Representative Government*, 1860, a notable contribution to the subject. Mill contended that unless there were a general understanding of some personal rights that no government must infringe, democracy might be more of a danger than a benefit; that although electors could not themselves have knowledge of all the details of government, they were capable of responding to the appeal of honest and able men who could do so; but for this purpose it was essential that electors should be free to vote for personal, not party, representatives, so that minority opinions could have an equitable voice in deciding policy. Thus, with genuine free and independent discussion in Parliament, there would be opportunity

for truth to prevail over error and so check the prevalence of mass ignorance and its exploiters.

Mill's warning has been ignored. Conservatives at the time hoped to check bad democracy by insisting on a property qualification for electors; this has been swept away and in the process it has helped to bring property into disrepute. Conservative leaders have since, by political manoeuvre, succeeded in maintaining their power, but only at the expense of all that is valuable in the Conservative principle. By joining with socialists to impose the planned economy they have sapped respect for those essential rights on which good democracy depends. The Conservative principle of resisting mistaken and injurious changes is a most valuable element in politics, but those independent spirited Conservatives who assert it are repudiated by their compromising leaders.

The authors of this book received financial and other assistance from various public and semi-public bodies such as the London School of Economics, the University of Michigan, and the Centre for Social Organisation Studies at the University of Chicago. One feels that the public interest might have been better served if the same resources, together with the undoubted ability of the authors, had been put into an effort to awaken the public to their essential rights and thus diffuse the light of knowledge necessary for correct opinion in social and political matters.

## EUSTACE DAVIES

**E**USTACE ARTHUR DAVIES of Cardiff died at a mature age on the 9th July, 1968.

It was given to him to see the introduction of the Henry George movement in this country, but although he was a young man when George came here, he did not actually meet him. He was to become a dedicated follower, however, and was one of the founders of the Welsh League for the Taxation of Land Values.

He bore the burdens of the day in a very real sense. He was the League's Honorary Secretary and all the propaganda work and organisation fell upon him. The law office he occupied was often given over to the work of the League.

These efforts resulted, amongst other things, in the calling of a meeting of the municipal corporations by the Cardiff City Council to consider the rating of land values.

The Finance Act of 1931 seemed at last to spell the beginning of the reform, but the repeal of it on the change of Government which followed before the measure was put into effect, left him disheartened.

He nevertheless persisted, frequently almost as a one man effort but, the passage of time took his strength, and when he lost his wife, who was ever with him in his efforts, he was obliged to yield to his years.

Our sympathy goes to his brother, Mr. John Davies, and his sisters, Mrs. S. O. Harris and Mrs. S. Griffiths, and particularly to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Edith Edwards, who devoted herself to him in his failing years. E.S.B.