

## Enoch Powell and the Invention of Thatcherism

Shivaji Sondhi\*

*“Like The Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell” by Simon Heffer, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London (1998).*

Growing up in India in the 1970s and 80s, it was impossible to avoid learning of Enoch Powell. He was a cliché - the author of the “rivers of blood” speech and *ipso facto*, the father of skinhead violence against commonwealth immigrants in Britain; a latter day Dyer transposed to Birmingham from Jallianwalla Bagh. I remember being slightly perplexed on coming across brief erudite pieces by him in the course of discursive reading, probably reviews in the *Spectator*, but not pursuing the apparent contradiction further. (As for reading the *Spectator*, needless to say, this happened only on those rare occasions when my copy of the *Economic and Political Weekly* was late.)

It has come as a delight then, to come across Simon Heffer’s recent biography of the man who died last February 9th, and to discover that the cardboard Powell was fiction. In his place one finds a very complex figure who led perhaps the most remarkable career in British politics after Churchill and certainly, along with Margaret Thatcher, one of the two most consequential careers as well.

I should say at the outset that this somewhat demanding exercise (961 pages of main text, to be exact!) is a friendly biography, written by a Conservative commentator and friend of Powell’s, whose admiration for his subject is evident and who is clearly concerned with the latter’s place in British political history. Heffer was invited by Powell to this task and was granted privileged access to his personal papers and allowed to interview him at some length before his death. Consequently, while this is not an authorized or official biography, it is written from within Powell’s life and looking over his shoulder as it were. This has two great advantages: a coherence that comes from this single perspective and a consequent capacity to delve into detail that has the cumulative impact of giving the reader a sense of what it was like to “be there” during some of the great debates in Powell’s life. In many ways this works especially well for the subject at hand whose comprehension of the world was primarily intellectual and linguistic: ideas, speeches and writings dominated his life and they are easily invoked in the printed medium. No set of choices is cost-free however - looking at the world this way can create the illusion of a timeless stage and I came away wishing that Heffer had made more of an attempt to frame Powell’s activities against the broader canvas of changes in Britain and the world around her. But more on this a little later.

### Career

In interesting the reader in his subject, Heffer has a relatively easy task. John Enoch Powell was, quite simply, perhaps the most intellectually gifted major political figure in this century since Paul Painlevé who carried out seminal work in the theory of differential equations *and* served as French Prime Minister in World War I. Born in Birmingham in 1912 as the only child of school teacher parents, he had the undivided and devoted attention of his mother who stayed at home and took his education in hand. This surfeit of adult attention dovetailed with a pronounced intellectual precocity on the part of young Enoch (nicknamed “the Professor” already at age *three*) and marked him for life with a combination of a first class mind, exceptional autonomy and a prematurely serious temperament. A grammar school boy, he went to Cambridge to study Classics, stayed on as a fellow at Trinity, and was appointed Professor at the

---

\* The author is an Assistant Professor of Physics at Princeton University.

University of Sydney by age 25! Even at this age, Powell was not all head though and somewhat paradoxically, exhibited a pronounced romantic streak that would stay with him for life. He developed a deep admiration for the German romantics, wrote poetry in the manner of (another classicist) A. E. Housman and in the years immediately preceding the Second World War, could hardly wait for it to begin.

Begin it did, and Powell headed back to England and succeeded in enlisting as a private only to find himself rapidly promoted to the officerial ranks. Further promotion was equally rapid and exceptional service as an intelligence officer starting with North Africa saw him make Brigadier! Ironically, he never saw combat much to his expressed regret even late in life. Subsequent to his African tour he was posted to India and capped his wartime career by planning, along with fellow Brigadier Cariappa whom he befriended, for the defense of post-war British India. (For later reference it is worth noting that on at least one occasion he insisted on sharing Cariappa's quarters when racially segregated accommodation had been arranged.) India had a great impact on Powell and decided him on seeking a career in British politics as a first step in becoming her Viceroy! To this end, he abandoned the *second* career at which he had shown extraordinary ability, and returned to Britain to join the Conservative Party under Churchill, an unproblematic choice for a man who was, in his own description, born a Tory in the classic, Burkean, mold.

Ironically, almost immediately, India became independent. This should perhaps have alerted Powell to the difficulties of his new career and sent him off to one of many at which a uniform success would have complimented his talents, but there is no sign that he ever looked at it this way at that time. Instead he rose fairly rapidly through the Tory ranks, starting with research for the Parliamentary party, becoming MP for Wolverhampton in 1950, Parliamentary Secretary for Housing in 1955, and being appointed Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1957 when Macmillan replaced Eden in the aftermath of the Suez debacle. He was now in the inner circle of power and seemed set for a career at the highest levels of government. However, even during this process he had been held back somewhat by a limited gift for compromise, and matters came to a head during an internal cabinet debate on containing inflation in 1958 when he resigned along with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Economic Secretary when Macmillan failed to endorse their monetarist agenda. He returned as Minister of Health in 1960 only to leave government forever during another crisis of principle in 1963 when a back-room deal allowed Douglas-Home to succeed Macmillan in preference to R. H. Butler whom Powell has supported. In 1965 he ran for Tory leadership, finishing third in the race that Edward Heath won. He served for a couple of years as shadow Defense Secretary before being dismissed for his Birmingham speech. His remaining career would involve one more turn: he resigned from the Tory party in 1970 over his differences with Heath and spent a second stint in the Commons as the Unionist member for South Downs in Northern Ireland from 1974-87 before losing his last election.

### **Politics: Monetarism**

Against the backdrop of this career, Heffer details some of the private Powell and his apparently happy and unremarkable family life as a devoted husband and father of two daughters, but mostly we get a detailed exposition of his politics. I think it is fair to summarize Powell's politics as being concerned above all with two themes: the logic of market economics (especially monetarism) and the problem of post-imperial British national identity. The first theme was surely remarkable for a man trained as a Classicist - but starting with his introduction to Malthus's celebrated essay at Trinity, we see Powell rapidly acquire a superb understanding of the logic of market economics. To this day, even in the ultra-market friendly United States, this is rare among politicians much to the dismay of professional economists (such as Paul Krugman who has attempted to make this case to a larger audience in his writings).

Certainly in India there has been an almost uniform lack of talent in this direction among the political class for a long time.

At any rate, Powell soon found himself at odds with the post-war consensus on “ratchet socialism” in Britain in which the Conservatives did not dare challenge the fundamental, statist drift in economic policy due to Labor governments, and in the position of providing frequent tutorials to his colleagues on elementary economic principles that they wished to defy. Most significantly, he found himself introducing monetarist ideas into an increasingly serious debate into the causes of recurrent inflation. The inflation debates make fascinating reading: in the Age of Greenspan (and other central bankers) it is hard to remember that today's conventional wisdom was a dim vision as late as the early eighties. We see matters come to a head within the Tory party during Heath's leadership with Powell emerging as the Prime Minister's chief critic on a set of economic policies that became increasingly hard to justify. Within the country as a whole, matters came to a head during Mrs Thatcher's first term but by then Powell had left the Tories and hence had to content himself with interventions in the Commons as it debated Tory policies that he had done so much to formulate.

### **British National Identity**

Powell's other concern, the problem of post-Imperial British identity, elicited from him multiple responses. In strategic matters he offered a tough-minded response that his colleagues in politics shrank from. Heffer describes his conviction, even prior to Suez, that after the loss of India, Britain could no longer sustain a global role and hence should return to its historic stance of an Island power off the European coast. As corollaries, he concluded that Britain had no need of a “special relationship” with the United States, a country he blamed for undermining the Empire, and that nuclear weapons were unnecessary for the defense of Britain. Clearly, he had zero impact on British policy on this front! To offset the loss of the global role, he recommended a return to the pre-Imperial distinctly British identity and a renewed embrace of nationhood and national institutions: monarchy, the church of England and parliament. Unsurprisingly, he found himself in dissent as Britain, under Heath, moved towards joining the European Union and finally left the Tories as a consequence.

The last and most controversial component of Powell's prescriptions for a renewed British identity was his stance on immigration from the Commonwealth countries which led to his emergence as a truly major public figure with a loyal following of this own, while forever leaving him vulnerable to the charge of racism. The setting for this emergence was, of course, the infamous Birmingham speech and the prophecy therein from which this biography takes its title: “Like the Roman”, Powell said, he saw “the River Tiber foaming with much blood” unless the post-war rush of immigrants from the former Empire into Britain was halted and even reversed. But more than that, he painted a picture of the English besieged by immigrants that, predictably, caused his colleagues to run for cover.

I must confess that on reading Powell's words in that speech, I am, ultimately, at a loss to account for its tone. Heffer makes an eminently persuasive case that Powell was not a racist in any crude sense, and that would be inconsistent with the breadth of his learning and interests (for instance, he taught himself Urdu and was awakened to a love of architecture on viewing Humayun's Tomb in Delhi). It is also clear that he was addressing an issue of some importance for the future of Britain. I, for one, am readily persuaded that a nation may wish to avoid large changes in its composition over a brief period of time to allow its existing social consensus to adapt; the “rivers of blood” that flowed in the Indian northeast in the eighties might have been avoided by a less *laissez faire* attitude towards immigration into the region in a couple of decades previously. I can even understand a fear of resulting cultural dissonance on that part of Powell who had built his edifice on the basis of English nationhood, and his annoyance that Britain's

failure to accept its post-Imperial status as one nation among many had caused legal confusion about as elementary a question as who was a British citizen.

But surely there were countervailing thoughts that could have impressed themselves on him. The romantic in Powell could have mused on the tangled destiny of the Empire and Britain: the latter had indelibly marked the former in complex pleasant and unpleasant ways and now the former were returning the favor. The economic liberal in him might have wondered if labor mobility was not a means of promoting prosperity world-wide and whether he might not expect the immigrants to respond to economic incentives to hard work, thrift and upward mobility much as he might expect of the English themselves. Above all a man of his character, and Heffer offers ample evidence of this in the private Powell, should have wrestled with the question of how his words would resound in the narrow confines of immigrant communities. All of this is to say that Powell's own subsequent explanations and Heffer's implicit defense of him, do not account for the harsh and *uncomplicated* tone of a speech on what was surely a complicated question from a man who was, intellectually, capable of acknowledging the complexity.

As Heffer describes at length, Birmingham created for Powell a mass following among ordinary Britons, many working class, who saw in Powell's actions the mark of a traditional English patriot, and in connecting in this fashion outside the traditional Tory fold, he invented the second pillar of Thatcherism; his prior introduction of monetarism and a robust free enterprise viewpoint into Tory politics being the first. So the long term political impact of the event was enormous even as it ruled Powell out as a direct beneficiary of it in terms of an opportunity to govern himself. Perhaps Powell, the politician, had an inkling of this when he stood up in Birmingham that evening and decided to go for the jugular, moral qualms and all?

## Legacy

In attempting to evaluate Powell's legacy in British public life, Heffer has little trouble with his transformative impact on Tory and ultimately all British economic thinking. Tony Blair's grant of independence to the Bank of England is persuasively a lineal descendant of Powell's long campaign to educate his peers on the monetarist account of inflation. His campaign to limit Britain's political integration into the European Union is by no means moribund as of writing and Blair's attempts to devolve power within Britain might interact with it in unpredictable ways. But it seems, at least from a distance, that it is precisely his fears on immigration that seem to have been overblown. At least the South Asians in Britain seem to have followed a trajectory more akin to immigrant communities in the United States, of achieving a great deal of mobility and seeking a considerable measure of assimilation in the generation that has grown in Britain. It will likely come to pass that many of them will turn Tory in an attempt to find a home for their own work ethic and sense of achievement much as immigrant groups in the United States have found common ground with the Republicans as they have prospered. It would have added substance to Heffer's assessment of Powell on this count, if he had attempted to ask if such a process is indeed underway. Instead, the book ends as if the stage was set as it was in 1968 and that is the most serious flaw in this otherwise admirable effort.

While it would be natural for Indian readers to dwell as this review has in the last few paragraphs, on account of our instinctive sympathies with the Indian diaspora, on Powell's views on immigration into Britain, this would be to miss the woods for the trees. Powell was a conservative and conservatives are, by definition, conservative regarding the traditions and institutions of the societies to which *they* belong. (I should say that I am using "conservative" here in the Anglo-Saxon political/philosophical sense of Burke and his followers who see in tradition a compendium of collective wisdom not to be lightly tampered with, *not* in the sense commonly employed in India

which is really the same as “orthodox” with respect to a traditional set of rules. This sense also carries in modern times a greater sympathy for the market economics.) Instead it is much more rewarding to follow Heffer into a tour of British conservatism from within during a period when it remade itself as a vital intellectual force in national politics in response to the perceived crisis of economic stagnation and national self-confidence.

I believe this inside look has much to make many of us envious. Perhaps the most notable feature of the Indian political scene since independence has been the incredible dominance of the leftist spectrum ranging from the Nehruvians to the antediluvian lunatics that grace the Communist parties. That Pandit Nehru was able to launch the country along an economic and institutional trajectory that was suspect to the more perceptive already in 1950 (Rajaji and B. R. Shenoy for instance) is perhaps understandable given the tenor of the times, but that two decades later his daughter was able to ignore the accumulated evidence of systematic failure and turn the wheel further to the left can only be credited to the absence of a credible conservative opposition that was at once intellectually forceful and politically astute. The Swatantra certainly had in its ranks formidable intellects of the caliber of the late Minoo Masani but they had no Enoch Powell or Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan to navigate the party around the charge of elitism that sank it in 1971. The price paid for this lack was another two decades of terminal silliness and rampant hypocrisy in the political system with another generation’s worth of economic growth lost before the crisis of 1992 forced some reform under Narasimha Rao.

Regrettably matters are quite bleak even today. The BJP which has emerged as the dominant force on the right has shown far greater political skills but in an eerie reversal of the Swatantra, it has no real program of conservative reform. While a deeper analysis of this failure would take us too far afield it is worth noting an obvious explanation that fairly leaps from the pages of Heffer’s book: the lack of a political culture that can engage in a sustained debate over public choices. Margaret Thatcher did not come to office bereft of ideas, she built on a Tory debate that stretched back two decades and involved institution building in the form of the Institute for Economic Affairs and other think tanks, public argument and a vigorous intra-party debate culminating in Powell’s crusade against Heath. Real reform of an entrenched system is hard work and, unfortunately, intellectual ability is *not* an unnecessary luxury in this task.

In closing I should focus once more on the fascinating figure of Enoch Powell himself. In a moving epilogue Heffer pays tribute to Powell’s uncompromising sense of intellectual and personal integrity, anachronistic already in modern British politics what to speak of the bleak landscape of our own, and of the remarkable influence that he exercised despite his limited stints in government. On both counts I found much reassurance that a principled politics is not impossible in modern times and expect that other readers of this book will find the same.