

‘Progressive’ Policies Eventually Become Mainstream

[This article by David Aaronovitch was published in *The Times* on 15 October 2020 and was originally entitled ‘Reactionary Right Keeps Getting It Wrong’.]

Back in the spring, after nearly losing his life to coronavirus, the prime minister abruptly declared himself a convert to anti-obesity measures. Having argued long and hard against the state getting involved in such campaigns, he now suddenly understood their value. Why? Because his own obesity had been a factor complicating his illness.

This volte-face will not have enhanced health experts’ opinion of politicians (or newspaper columnists for that matter). The facts were clear enough before Johnson shook one Covid-infected hand too many. The arguments didn’t change because he was overweight or got ill. But the PM never got round to explaining how he’d managed to overlook them for so long.

Then came this. “I remember how some people used to sneer at wind power 20 years ago and say that it wouldn’t pull the skin off a rice pudding,” Mr Johnson told his disembodied audience at last week’s Conservative Party conference. But those people had been proved wrong. Wind power was the way of the future! Step back briefly to 2013, when the then mayor of London typed these words for a newspaper column: “No one seriously believes that wind turbines are the answer to our power shortages . . . they wouldn’t pull the skin off a rice pudding.” His solution? “We must stop pussyfooting around and get fracking.”

So it wasn’t “some people” who’d been proved wrong, but him. And not 20 years ago, but seven. Seven years to get from “wind power is rubbish” to “we will be the Saudi Arabia of wind”, without even acknowledging the backflip — 180 degrees of self-separation.

Mocking wind power was part of the culture wars in the 2010s. It was a way for Conservatives to distinguish themselves from their green-tinged and much-loathed Lib Dem coalition partners, and also to put two fingers up to the environmental lobby. David Cameron spoke for many Tories in 2013 when he said of his own government's policies, "we have got to get rid of all this green crap". Fracking — the very name is somehow manly — and not renewables was the way forward. And, by and large, the people who denigrated wind power were the ones who cast doubt on the diagnosis of manmade global warming.

It has been like this my whole life. A month before I was born the Bletchley Park codebreaker Alan Turing killed himself; homosexual acts were illegal and gay men went to prison. When I was a year old Ruth Ellis was hanged in a prison two miles from where we lived. Until I was 11 it was perfectly legal to operate a workplace "colour bar" against black people. Pupils at my school were caned. Until I was 21 it was legal to discriminate against women in the workplace. Trains were full of cigarette smoke right up to the 1980s.

In every case the same thing happened. Reformers — liberals, nanny staters, environmentalists, human rights campaigners — would point to a problem and campaign for change. And conservatives (Tory or otherwise) would oppose. Smoking was a matter of freedom of choice but homosexuality wasn't and schools needed protecting from proselytisers turning their pupils gay. The white Rhodesians were our "kith and kin" and apartheid in South Africa was better than the alternatives.

Eventually, after many battles and bruises, the reformers and campaigners would win and the thing they had argued for would gradually (or sometimes quickly) become the law of the land. Within half a generation, people would even forget there had been a fight in the first place. And the right would go quiet on what they

had once argued against vehemently and move on to the next argument. Rinse and repeat.

I should perhaps just rejoice. It takes time, yet we always get there in the end. But in the past five years, the right has been striking back, without being called to account for its U-turns. Take Johnson's recently preferred candidate to become chairman of the BBC, Charles Moore. Moore is a wonderful writer and a very nice man. But for me he represents that loose affiliation of highly literate men on the right whose speciality has become mocking and opposing change. Men who I believe have held us back.

I got a glimpse into the psychology of some of these men at an awards dinner 30 years ago. I found myself on a table with a *Daily Mail* journalist and a Thatcherite cabinet minister, who were talking about the criminal proclivities of various races. Jews equalled fraud and blacks equalled knives, apparently. Around that time Moore wrote a *Spectator* column that some regard as a more elegant version of a similar thesis.

All perfectly charming people but their grandfathers were among those who opposed the creation of the NHS. Their fathers lamented the loss of the Miss World pageant and *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum* from their televisions and blamed it on bra-burners, do-gooders and political correctness gone mad. Their uncles argued that gays in the military would undermine morale and that women in the military was simply a joke. Moore praised Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical for taking a hard line against contraception and then effectively damned the Church of England for ordaining women because it damaged relations with Rome. HIV/Aids was a purely homosexual problem and it was a liberal plot or liberal hysteria to suggest otherwise; a forerunner of liberal plots such as climate change, the EU and the destruction of British culture.

Before you think I'm letting liberals off lightly, they can certainly get things horribly wrong and be impossibly self-righteous. For a brief period in the late 1970s, some on the left fell for the lies of the Paedophile Information Exchange

and called for the legalisation of paedophilia as a way of enhancing children's rights. But it was other progressives who saw off these arguments, not the right.

What's hard to stomach is the way the right banks all the social advances it had formerly opposed and still gets to condemn the liberals who supported them — and then opposes them the same way when the next reform comes along. Does the former Brexit secretary David Davis recall that, as shadow home secretary in 2003, he called for the death penalty to be reintroduced? Even Ann Widdecombe, a supporter, accepted at the time that it was never going to happen. The dogs barked and the caravan moved on.

Into my head floats an image of 2030, and a podium swathed in red, white and blue and a speech in which the new Conservative leader, Priti Patel, reveals her plan (a lifetime ambition, no less) to revolutionise the European Union — by rejoining it.