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Conservatism

Power to the Individual

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To showcase the beginning of modern conservative thought and to demonstrate how the conservative philosophy plans on addressing the most difficult of policy areas of today.

Introduction

Conservatism is a term that has gained multiple connotations throughout modern society, with most of these connotations leading to a misunderstanding of the term. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, conservatism means “disposition in politics to preserve what is established.” Conservatism and conservatives themselves prefer not to change what is established by nature, but with this belief comes great scrutiny and insult. Most of this scrutiny, in my belief, comes from misunderstanding and prejudice, mainly from the progressives.

The purpose of this paper is to try to settle that miscommunication and misunderstanding that the other side seems to have about conservatism. The paper will be divided into two separate parts, the history (which in turn should lay out the foundation of thought) and how the described philosophy takes on some of today’s greatest policy challenges of immigration and healthcare, with the source of the majority of the information provided will come from The Heritage Foundation’s own research and analysis.

Definition

The word “conservative” is first known to be used in 1832, but the origin of this branch of political thought starts a few decades before. The word, as Russell Kirk explains, comes from Edmund Burke’s French disciples, “which, which Croker, Canning, and Peel [English political thinkers] adopted to the great party that no longer was the Tory or Whig party” (Kirk 7). Conservatism is not “a fixed and immutable body of dogmata” to which one definition can effectively and correctly describe it as a whole. Many men have tried to define this political philosophy, but no one seems to be able to come to a widely accepted definition. Abraham Lincoln took a shot at defining by saying, “What is conservatism? Is it not the adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried?”

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Ronald Reagan can also be quoted saying:

“If you analyze it I believe the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism. I think conservatism is really a misnomer just as liberalism is a misnomer for the liberals -- if we were back in the days of the Revolution, so-called conservatives today would be the Liberals and the liberals would be the Tories. The basis of conservatism is a desire for less government interference or less centralized authority or more individual freedom and this is a pretty general description also of what libertarianism is.”

Russell Kirk did his best to define conservatism and he lays out six “canons” of conservative thought. Conservatives believe in transcendent order, that a body of natural laws rule society and conscience with these laws coming from and through God. Hold affection for the thriving diversity and mystery of human existence and not an adherence to a narrowed uniformity, egalitarian, one-size-fits-all mentality that is found in most other philosophies as well as a conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes, a structured hierarchy, not necessarily a caste or feudal system. Kirk elaborates by stating that “if natural distinctions are not made the oligarchs fill the void” and that “ultimate equality [comes from] the judgment of God” with equality on earth is found in defined as “equality before the courts.”

Conservatives acknowledge that “freedom and property are closely linked” and the same time that they are separated is when liberties start to erode; further elaborating that “economic leveling is not economic progress.” We have faith in prescription, or conventional wisdom, and distrust “sophisters, calculators, and economists” who want to run and transform society based on abstract models that cannot take the human into consideration. Finally, we are not opposed to change, but we do not abide by the adage that all change is inherently a good thing. Kirk states

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that “hasty innovation may prove to be one’s end” and that “society must alter, for prudent change is the means of social preservation.” A radical transformation of society will only lead to a world with no traditions or prescription to fall back on. (Kirk, 8-9)

History

What we define as conservatism today has its roots back to 18th Century, in large part, thanks to Edmund Burke, the founder of conservatism. He had five principles that he held dear and they fall in line with Kirk’s “canons” described earlier. Burke preached that we should have a “reverence for the divine origin of social disposition” much to what Kirk describe as the natural order of things. Burke relied upon “tradition and prejudice for public and private guidance,” in other words, if it works there’s no need to change it.

Burke also believed that men are equal “in the sight of God,” but that’s the only place where they are truly equal. There’s a devotion to personal freedom and private property, much like Kirk. He distrusted huge transformation and “doctrine alteration” with the belief that large change at once goes against prudence and prudence, as he states, is a statesman’s greatest virtue. Lastly, he believes that “in good government, the object of voting is not to enable every man to express his ego, but to represent his interest, whether or not he casts his vote personally or directly” (Kirk 17).

Burke describes these beliefs in what is possibly his best and most known book, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. He writes that:

“Such a partnership [one between giving people their liberties and a proper division of powers within government through a Constitution] cannot be obtained... it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living...dead... and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal socie-

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ty, linking the lower with the higher nature. Prejudice is of ready application on the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave a man hesitating in the moment of decision. You would have had a protected... laborious and obedient people, taught to seek and to recognize the happiness which is to be found by virtue in all conditions; in which consists the true moral equality of mankind... in this relationship all men have equal rights ; but not to equal things.”

Burke also describes his vision of a perfect society, which also happens to be very similar to that which was found in 18th century England. He wanted for all classes to “intermingle” freely, eclipsed nobility, and an aristocracy open to all. He wanted for a class system to be all but abolished; perhaps he just envisioned a society where there aren’t clear-cut classes, but where anyone could work their way to the top. He also saw that wealth should be “installed as the supreme power” and that all men are equal under the law, including equal taxes. He believed that true equality only exists within God, but that as long as men are provided equality in the courts and with their taxes could become successful. He saw the importance of a free press and public debate to allow its citizens to express themselves and to keep those in power honest. He also preached that “justice and liberty stand and fall together” elaborating that “liberty under law, a definite liberty, the limits of which were determined under prescription.” (Kirk 20-21).

On religion and morals Burke did not subscribe to one specific religion, Alfred Cobban, a modern political theorist, describes his religious views that “his ideal is neither Protestant Erastianism nor Catholic Theocracy; it is much more like a kingdom of God on Earth.” Burke did not like religion because it was a “bulwark of order,” because its routine order was derives from a divine order and he remarks that “politics and morals are deduced from belief or skepticism.” In other words, people’s political beliefs come from their own life experience and with these personal beliefs come one’s view on equality. He states that “there is an order that keeps things fast

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in their place, it is made to us and we are made of it.” This might be the best general definition of what conservatism is.

Burke stresses that a universal equality among men exists, with this belief stemming from the Christian view on equality, which only exists in the “ultimate judgment of God,” and to believe that any other type of equality exists is “foolish.” This also leads to the strong between conservatism and Christianity. “Christianity envisages a framework for human society in which earthly miseries have recognized, permanent, and honorable place. They are trials sent by Heaven to test and train us; as such, it is impious to repine against them” these are words by Leonard Woolf, an English political think in the 19th century, commenting on religion and its importance. Kirk elaborates on this point by saying that “religious faith makes existence tolerable” and that “ambition without pious restraint must end in failure” (Kirk 35).

“Though state and church ought *never* (emphasis mine) to be separate entities, true religion is not merely an expression of national spirit.” This quote from Kirk may be confusing to some at first glance, but if you break it down you realize that this is exactly what the founders wanted. They believed that religion was important and that society, as we know it, would not function so they decided against a state religion and allowed the people to observe whichever religion they wanted, as long as they were deemed a good citizen and that religious law (e.g. – laws found in the Old Testament of the Christian bible or Sharia law in the Qur’an).

Laws, however, come from a superior entity and men have no right to “change them as they may like.” That is to say, political communities do not have the power to amend these laws as they may see proper. Burke opines on the matter when he says that “religion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, liberties, rights of men, are the *pretexts* for revolution by sentimental hu-

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manitarians and mischievous agitators who think at established institutions must be the source of our afflictions. But the human heart, in reality, is the fountain of evil.”

Burke is of the belief that people are inherently bad, but that society has given them a reason not to be, but if allowed, that savagery will come out because “under the skin of modern man stirs the savage, the brute, the demon.” The cure to this has been the principle of Providence, and that it had “taught humanity, thorough thousands of years’ experience and mediation, a collective wisdom [prejudice]: a tradition, tempered with expedience” expanding that the individual “is foolish, but the species is wise.” This is not to say that men should allow divine intervention to run menial or daily tasks, but that:

“a man should be governed ... by a decent respect for the customs of mankind; and he should apply that custom or principle to his particular circumstances by cautious (emphasis mine) expediency. Human beings participate in the accumulated experience of their innumerable ancestors; very little is actually forgotten.”

Burke writes a good bit on principles and what their definition. A principle “is right reason expressed in permanent form” and “abstraction is its corruption.” This is something that I agree with wholeheartedly, at least with my interpretation of it. Personal principles are not something that should ever be compromised, because if one can turn their backs on their own principles, then they can betray anything or anyone. Principles are just that, the principle building blocks of beliefs and without those there is nothing but a man that can be swayed in any direction that may sound attractive. “One arrives at principle” writes Kirk, “through comprehension of nature and history, looked upon as manifestations of divine purpose; one acquires prudence by patient observation and cautious investigation.”

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With principles come rights, specifically the definition of rights and if there exists such a thing as “natural rights.” Kirk writes that “radicalism at the end of the eighteenth century expressed its case in terms of ‘natural rights’... the notion of inalienable natural rights... [was] embraced by the mass of men in a vague and belligerent form.” Needless to say, Edmund Burke was not among these men, in fact he “denied” the notion of natural rights and that these men were confusing “rights with desires” (Kirk 47). Rights, to Burke and coincidentally Kirk, have two essential conditions that it must meet for it to be a “right.” The conditions are that an individual must be able to claim and exercise the right itself and the duty that corresponds with that right. For example, Kirk uses the hypothetical rights to marry someone and the right to rest:

“If a man has a right to marry, some woman must have the duty (emphasis mine) of marrying him; if a man has the right to rest, some other person must have the duty of supporting him”

This is a very crucial distinction between conservatives and progressives, between Burke’s school of thought and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s. Rousseau was the one advocating that natural rights do in fact exist and that they should be granted to all through some form of document, like a Constitution. In 1948 the United Nations created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) in which it gives a detailed outline of what these rights are. Poor Burke must have turned over in his grave when this occurred as it grants everyone in the world these basic “equal and inalienable rights... [to] all members of the human family” (Preamble – UNDHR). Kirk blasts the UNDHR when he writes that:

“If rights are confused thus with desires, the mass of men must feel always that some vast, intangible conspiracy thwarts their attainment of what they are told is their inalienable birthright” (Kirk 48).

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The UNDHR goes against the belief that all laws come from a superior order and that mankind has no power over these laws or its amending. Kirk describes that “[m]an’s rights exist only when a man obeys God’s law, for right is the child of law.” He further adds that “all this is... different from the “natural rights” of [John] Locke ...and Burke’s concept of natural right... is descended from sources quite separate from Rousseau’s. Burke’s idea of natural rights stems from Cicero, the ancient Roman philosopher, and his concept of *jus naturale*, and heavily influenced by Christian dogma and English common-law doctrine. Burke’s most important contribution to political thought was his thought on equal justice. Burke states that “equal justice is indeed a natural right; but equal dividend is no right at all” (Kirk 55). Kirk adds that:

“Burke contrasts with the... delusory “rights of men” so lusted after across the [English] Channel – “rights” which really are a negation of justice, because if (impossible contingency) actually attained in the absolute sense...they would at once infringe one upon another and precipitate men into moral and civil chaos. “Absolute liberty... [and] equality” are similar projects, far from being natural rights, are conspicuously unnatural conditions.”

At the same time that Burke was in England creating what is known today as conservatism, John Adams was also making his own contributions to conservatism in the newly founded United States of America. Adams is dubbed by Kirk as being the “founder of *true* (emphasis mine) conservatism in America” (Kirk 71). Adams believed in two “simple political principles:” a distrust of popular and local impulses and he believed that salvation from “the consequence of leveling ideas lay in establishing invincible national authority.” Adams was also a big opponent to Rousseau’s idea the mankind can be perfected, and Kirk quotes him as saying that “freedom can be achieved and retained only by sober men who take humanity as it is not how it should be.”

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Not only was Adams one of the Founding Fathers of America, he was one of the founders of the Federalist Party, the first conservative faction in an independent America. This is the same party that drafted the Constitution. The greatest single political document ever drafted in the history of mankind, as well as its defense with “The Federalist Papers.” It is important to differentiate the difference between the American and French revolutions, and the ideals they were fought for. The American Revolution was a fight based on English ideals of equality, which had already had a sense for liberty from government with the drafting of the *Magna Carta* in 1215. While the French had not tasted much liberty with their monarchs and they fought for Rousseau’s ideas of “absolute liberty.” Alexander Hamilton, another Founding Father, had this to say about the revolution in France:

“The politician who loves liberty, sees them with regret as a gulf that may swallow up the liberty to which he is devoted. He knows the morality overthrown (and morality must fall with religion), the terrors of despotism can alone curb the impetuous passions of men, and confine him within the bounds of social duty.”

And to further exemplify the folly that is “absolute liberty” Adams remarks that “Men are weak and foolish, especially when deprived of proper leadership... It is the weakness rather than the wickedness which renders men unfit to be trusted with unlimited power” (Kirk 89-90).

On the subject of rights and equality, Adams had three premises in which equality exists: a moral equality (from God), juridical equality, and that “equality from nature is moral and political only.” He also believed that inequality is a part of life, as made by the creator, he points out the difference in intellectual and physical abilities, and he expands on this when he states that:

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“but top teach that all men are born with equal power and faculties, to equal influence in society, to equal property and advantages through life, is as gross a fraud, as glaring an imposition on credulity of the people, as ever was practiced... . for truth and virtue’s sake, let American philosophers and politicians despise it” (Kirk 94).

Adams, prescribing to Burke’s belief that there is a natural order in society, believes in the system of aristocracy, yet another word that has developed a negative connotation. He developed a unique definition to the term, which even converted Thomas Jefferson when he finally defined it well after their political lives were over. Adams defines an aristocrat as “any person that can command two votes, his own and another man’s” believing that this was “a rudiment of government by those who are best qualified to govern.” This can be seen in the representative style of government that was laid out by the Constitution with the House of Representatives. He however does not see aristocracy as a simple creation of society, but a hybrid between manmade and natural, he states:

“Pick up the first hundred men you meet, and make a republic. Every man will have an equal vote; but when deliberations and discussions are opened, it will be found that twenty-five, by their talents, virtues being equal, will be able to carry fifty votes. Every one of these twenty-five is an aristocrat in my sense of the word; whether he obtains one vote in addition to his own, by his birth, fortune, figure, science, learning, craft, cunning, or even by his character for good fellowship, and a *bon vivant*” (Kirk 95).

He furthers his definition by saying that “the most common form of aristocracy is produced by differences in nature which positive legislation cannot alter substantially... because an aristocrat is someone who commands two or more votes, thus democracy, in its present form, is an aristocracy.” Even the form of an aristocracy that is passed down from generation to generation

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cannot be affected by positive legislation because the family name carries weight with voters, as seen with the Kennedy family here in America, but also when the current incumbent sponsors his heir apparent.. He adds that “aristocracy is not destroyed by alienation of land or confiscation of wealth” because “power follows property, aristocracy may be transferred, but it is not abolished.”

He even presents the paradox that “even laws that establish equality reinforce aristocracy.” He comes to this conclusion by rationalizing that “the more you educate, without a balance in government, the more aristocratical will the people and the government be. For thus the state creates an elite who command the votes of their less informed fellows.” He ends his defense for aristocracy by saying the aristocracy cannot be abolished. “Not even”, he writes, “have the Jacobins in France [abolished it], no matter how much they like to say they have.” This is such because they have “not made every man and woman equally wise, elegant, and beautiful.” Ending that, “you can only take away the titles [in an] aristocracy”, but their power remains the same.

Policy Recommendations

Now that the basic principles and thought patterns of conservative thoughts have been described by its history, we move on onto making words into action and how they answer the call on one of today’s most pressing issues: immigration.

First off we will attempt to fix the broken immigration system that is the one that is found here in the United States. I will divide the issue into three critical aspects: border security, illegal immigration, and legal immigration/naturalization.

With all of these states around the country seemingly taking immigration into their own hands, it has once again opened the door for all the rhetoric from both sides on the topic. It is time for Washington to finally do something about the problem at hand. To do so, Edwin Meese

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and Matthew Spalding of The Heritage Foundation have laid out the principles and solutions that the Foundation stands on with immigration. First and for most, they believe that “America’s immigration system must be a national strength not a strategic vulnerability. Every nation has the right... to secure its borders and ports of entry and thereby control the goods and persons coming into its territory.”

We cannot lose sight of national security when reforming our immigration system, and to do that we must: provide for comprehensive security, target federal support at the border, and implement US-VISIT.” They recommend that the United States have “a complete security system” implements throughout the country, not just at the point of entry as to strengthen “all of the activities, assets, and programs necessary to secure America’s borders.” As we know, funding is everything, and that applies to effective border security. Heritage recommends that Congress allocates about \$400 million per year over the next three years “out of the projected spending on homeland security grants.” As well as not allowing these grants to become pork-barrel programs and “insist that the federal support for border security policing be strategically employed” as to provide a short-term solution for border security while a long-term solution is implemented. Finally, they recommend Congress to implement the US-VISIT program, which is a “system for recording entry and exit into and out of the United States.”

Next, on illegal immigration heritage believes that “the rule of law requires the fair, firm, and consistent enforcement of the law and immigration is no exception.” To say it simple terms, “Congress and the President must take credible steps to reduce illegal immigration in both annual and absolute terms, and that requires enforcement.” To do this it is recommended to increase workplace compliance, strengthen employment verification, and to target criminal enforcement.

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To increase workplace compliance, one must do something that will provide an incentive if not followed, such as steep financial penalties especially to those who employ the most undocumented workers, and a reform of the tax code that does not allow businesses to deduct taxes from wages paid to unlawful labor, but to being careful not to “create a new federal bureaucratic program.” Currently, employers verify the worker’s legal status by submitting a social security number for payroll tax, only that millions of the Social Security number that are submitted do not match the Social Security Administration master record. Reform must include a way for these discrepancies to be found and the worker and the Department of Homeland Security be notified to crack down on unlawful labor. Lastly, police should target the illegal immigrants that have committed crimes in the United States or “have fled after having been ordered to be deported” as well as establishing clear penalties for violation of the deportation order.

The last prong of the immigration debate, legal immigration/naturalization, is one that does not get the headlines, but is the most important. Heritage states that “each nation has the responsibility- and obligation- to determine its own conditions for immigration, naturalization, and citizenship.” It is recommended that immigration reform must encourage immigrant education, clarify birthright citizenship, improve immigration services, and protect the integrity of the legal immigration process.” The term “immigrant education” refers to the promotion to immigrants on civics and history to “foster political integration and strengthen common principles.”

Birthright citizenship has become a sticky topic, but that is only because it has been grossly misinterpreted to mean that the only qualification to citizenship is being born in America, where the 14th Amendment clearly states that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States.” The part that says “and subject to the jurisdiction thereof” seems to always be forgotten. This requires a complete jurisdic-

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tion that “brings with it an exclusive allegiance” to the United States. Congress must include a clarification to this amendment in any reform, especially if a temporary workers program is implemented.

Finally, any immigration reform must allow for the improvement to immigration services and agencies as well as protect the integrity of the legal immigration process. Reform must “insure that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service has the capacity to handle current and future immigration to the United States... with a better model to pay for services and funding to transform USCIS to work as part of an interagency effort to control legal immigration.”

Conclusion

As this paper has sufficiently described, conservatism has a history as old as this great nation and it has fueled the principles it was founded on and those that are still being observed today. We saw that Edmund Burke and John Adams started it off in the 18th century and their beliefs and ideals are still with us today. Most importantly, it has been shown that conservatism is not only a bunch of ideals that cannot be implemented; conservatism is applies practical approach to politics grounded in with basic principles.

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