

# Ethical Record

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## EDITORIAL – BURNING IVORY IS WRONG

Throughout history, even highly sophisticated people have held the curious belief that qualities of goodness or power, when attributes of an admired god or animal, can be transferred to oneself by consumption of the god or possession of the animal part. Although the Eucharist ceremony doesn't usually cause harm, mutilating animals certainly does – and it can cause the extinction of the species.

It was therefore cheering to read of United for Wildlife's plans to curb the terrible trading of elephant tusks and rhino horns, wanted for their alleged properties – until I read that Kenya intended to burn their 120-ton stockpile of valuable ivory seized from the poaching gangs.



Nothing will please these gangs more than this proposed wanton destruction of this precious material, increasing its scarcity value and the incentive for further poaching. Kenya should instead store the ivory and sell it (and rhino horn) in small quantities to craftsmen, scientists and even gullible others (without a guarantee of magical efficacy) in order to finance the high cost of the animals' protection.

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### Obituary – Donald Howard

We regret to report the death of long-time CHES member Donald Howard of Barnes at the age of 87. His sister Edna, aged 92, tells me that he was a carpenter by trade, building film sets and exhibition stands. Donald's passion was for Shakespeare. He always attended lectures that dealt in any way with literary topics and was very knowledgeable about films. **NB.**

#### THE HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

Conway Hall Humanist Library and Archives is home to a unique collection of published and archival sources on humanism and its related subjects. We are open for members, researchers and the general public on Tuesdays to Thursdays from 1000 - 1700. Our collections include printed materials such as books, pamphlets and journals as well as archival material of unpublished institutional and personal records and papers, such as manuscripts, letters and photographs. For your time and convenience it is advisable to contact the library before your visit so we can ensure the material you seek is available.

Tel: 020 7061 6747. Email: [sophie@ethicalsoc.org.uk](mailto:sophie@ethicalsoc.org.uk)

#### CONWAY HALL ETHICAL SOCIETY

Reg. Charity No. 1156033

Founded in 1793, the Society is a progressive movement whose Charitable Objects are: **the advancement of study, research and education in humanist ethical principles.**

We therefore invite to membership those who, rejecting the supernatural, are in sympathy with the above objects. In furtherance of these, the Society maintains the Humanist Library and Archives. The Society's journal, *Ethical Record*, is issued monthly. At Conway Hall the educational programme includes Thinking on Sunday, discussions, evening courses and Sunday concerts of chamber music. Memorial meetings may be arranged.

**The annual subscription is £35 (£25 if a full-time student, unwaged or over 65)**

# DEMOCRACY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

**Derek Bates**

*Lecture to the Ethical Society, 7 March 2016*

Once every five years, our political system enforces an election which costs in excess of £120million. The Obama election in USA cost \$7bn, enough to pay for 60,000 nurses. An election only allows us to put a cross on a piece of paper to select candidates who adhere to Party policies in which we have had no input nor any recourse if it transpires that our MP is incompetent. This we are constantly told is ‘Democracy’.

## **The Existing Political Regime**

The nation is disillusioned with our outmoded political machine, governed as it is by Party dogma. Politicians fail to act decisively because they are afraid that they may not be re-elected. Even though with declining resources and world population predicted to increase by 50% our current consumption is unsustainable, Party politics and political in-fighting has inculcated apathy and boredom in the electorate because we are forced accept the decisions of our representatives yet if we could take part in the decisions which influence our future welfare we would be very interested.

Parliament, initiated in the 13th Century when the population was ill-educated, is now a self-perpetuating anachronism. MP Zac Goldsmith has said that it is dysfunctional with MPs little more than lobby fodder, voting for laws they do not understand. Will Hutton states, “politicians find it hard to think beyond the next election; they owe favours to close supporters that have to be settled; they overpromise; they are prone to vanity and hubris.” Al Gore in his book *The Future* says politicians are feeble, dysfunctional and servile to corporate interests.

Ministers with no experience are expected when appointed to be immediate experts in Education, Industry, Environment etc. Often after a short period in office they may be moved to become expert in Transport, Health or the nation’s Finance. In February 2011, the Regulatory Policy Committee found that 44% of proposals for reform in 2010 were poorly conceived and had no analysis of costs or benefits. As one ex Cabinet Minister said, the largest thing he had run before being appointed was his constituency office. After his appointment, he had a staff of thousands and a budget running into £billions. Baroness Shepherd was given an irrelevant 20 minute talk by John Redwood to prepare her for becoming a Minister. In 2010, the Institute for Government issued an unsurprising report which said that Ministers should undergo training, but no action has been taken.

Roger Bootle emphasised the naivety of politicians. He points out that Keynes highlighted the need in a depression to reduce taxes and increase spending but Prime Minister Cameron in his speech urged people to pay down their debts, thereby reducing purchases and spiralling the economy downwards. Bootle thought this was complete economic illiteracy. We would never allow a lawyer to perform surgery on us yet a lawyer as Minister of Health is allowed to decide on the resources that surgeons need. In spite of the frequent changes Ministers of Education have made over the past decades we still send out students ill equipped for the modern world.

## **Change through Alternative Democracy**

We have been so conditioned by the status quo that there has been little debate on alternatives. In my novel *Shadows in the Wall* I propose that we work towards a system where we replace the current machinery of Government. How can this be achieved and what would we replace Parliament with? We obviously need Government but we cannot afford the waste engendered by MPs and Ministers who have been selected by Party Committees because they are articulate, have good television presentation and accept Party policies.

The vast majority of us have mobile phones, email and web access. For many years it has become evident that this technology is capable of initiating enormous cultural change. This is very evident in Africa and India where this e-technology (e-tech) can advise farmers when to plant, fertilise and irrigate crops, can provide a route to education in remote villages, allow transfer of money in for instance Kenya and affects many other transformational innovations. Yet even now it has not been accepted that the small machine in our pockets has the potential to dispense with the need for elections by allowing us to vote easily and rapidly at miniscule cost on issues that concern us. Software exists which can analyse our voting intentions in an instant.

## **The Role of the Convocators**

There are fewer than thirty Party Members who currently attend Cabinet meetings. Their responsibilities would be taken over by individuals with professional backgrounds in medicine, education, business, transport etc. Ministers and ex-ministers from all Parties could also offer themselves; this would overcome the current weakness where those who had been in Government but after an election are in opposition and are thus emasculated. These people will be known as 'Convocators' because their role will be to 'bring together' disparate viewpoints. The systems would be known as 'Convocation'. The Convocators would have positions as Ministers with the same responsibilities. As at present, they would act as a Cabinet under the authority of a Prime Minister.

Professionals who put themselves forward for the positions of Convocators would be given a platform by the media for speeches and interviews on radio, television and newspapers and the web. They would then be chosen by the public by e-tech voting. It is recognised that not everyone would want to be involved in voting for these candidates but everyone would have the opportunity. This group of qualified Convocators would derive at least three different policies.

There would be a media and web based debate on these policies. The policy selected by an e-tech majority would run for three years with opportunities to amend policies as world events change. This Alternative Democracy would render the role of Parliament redundant. MPs would be released from the need to attend the House. They could then base themselves in their constituencies, advisors to the electorate as they are now but with more time to concentrate on real issues and be more cognisant of the nation's needs and able to offer advice to the Convocators whose role would be to prepare policies for the nation to vote on.

There are many talented and experienced members of the House of Lords. These Members can act without concern for re-election and would be able to analyse issues without the restrictions of Party dogma which characterises the Commons. It would be reduced in size and would act as a Think Tank to the Convocators, debating aspects such as future energy needs and energy saving, poverty, social welfare and education. Lobbyists would meet with Members of the Lords but would not have meetings with the Convocators. Their responsibilities would be to act as policy makers. Discussions on issues which impact on the populace would be reviewed in speeches and debates so that the nation would be informed on the issues.

### **Example of an E-tech Vote**

An example of a situation which would be put to the people for an e-tech vote would be:

**'If Syria were invaded, the cost would be, say £10billion; this would need to be borrowed and the interest on this loan would add to the tax burden. Alternatively, if we did not invade, the money saved could be used to fund say 500,000 nurses, teachers or care workers.'**

To a large extent, wars and invasions are engendered because Ministers want to appear to be decisive and to 'act in the nation's best interests' even though there is no mechanism for gauging the nation's views. Under existing Government, we are never given facts such as this because it wants to be able to decide on action without consulting the people. It is doubtful if UK would have invaded Iran or Afghanistan if the electorate had been allowed to voice their views. It is estimated that the £30bn cost of these invasions would have paid for 1,464,000 more NHS nurses, 408,000 NHS consultants and hundreds of lives would not have been lost.

We would also be able to decide if we want to spend more than £50billion on HS2 when, before it can be completed, it is predicted that driverless cars will be able to pick us up from our homes, deliver us to our offices or to meetings at the other end of the country, visit geographically distant relatives or go on holiday. On the journey we will be able to talk with friends, listen to music, read, sleep or have a meal in complete safety.

The expenditure of maintaining our political environment is in excess of £500million per annum. This would be substantially reduced while efficiency would be optimised.

### **In Summary:**

- Parliament's responsibilities should be taken over by qualified professionals who would be called 'Convocators'.
- The electorate would vote for these Convocators via mobile phones, media and web-based 'e-tech'.
- A reduced House of Lords, free of Party dogma would provide a debating Chamber with limits on debating time.
- Existing MPs would return to their constituencies, there to listen and advise their constituents and also to provide input to the Convocators.
- The role of Convocators would be to devise at least three policies on which the nation would vote.

- The selected policy would remain for three years but could be modified by the e-tech route in the event of changes in world events or a proposal to invade a nation or a dissentient grouping.

No structure which is administered by human beings is without fault but Alternative Democracy, giving us all a voice in our own futures would be an advance on the present inadequate and anachronistic form of government.

From *'Shadows in the Wall'* [www.reflective-productions.com](http://www.reflective-productions.com)

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## **LOTS HAPPENING AT CONWAY HALL**

### **An Operational Update**

#### **Jim Walsh, CEO**

Firstly, can I express gratitude to all the members who kindly notified us as to whether or not they still want to receive the *Ethical Record* posted to their door. Over the past five months we have asked you all to consider whether or not you could help us save costs by referring to the online version of the *Ethical Record* rather than having it posted. I'm delighted to say that we shall be able to save a considerable annual expense because instead of printing and mailing to 600 we shall be reducing this service down to 70!

Secondly, I would like to share news of the first digitisation project that we are working on. Alongside Sophie Hawkey-Edwards and Samantha Callaghan, the Learning Advisory Group have selected "Architecture & Place", which will create a broad digital collection encompassing the architecture and sense of place, both currently and historically, of the Ethical Society. It will include online plans, pamphlets, artworks, photographs, letters, deeds and souvenirs all in one digital space to provide an accessible font of visual and textual information for everyone from members to researchers to local communities and the public. We are hoping that it will "go live" in September/October this year.

Also, in case you weren't aware, all of our historic issues of the *Ethical Record* dating back to 1895 are now available online from the Ethical Record section of the website – well over a thousand issues!

### **The Café**

There is good news about the café, and I know it feels like it has taken a long time, however we gained the required planning consent we needed from Camden Council at the start of the New Year. Also, we have just appointed our Building Control inspector and I'm hopeful that I shall shortly receive a project timeline from the architect and project managers so that physical work on the space can start soon.

We are getting ever closer with a new database and communication system – CiviCRM – which, once live, will connect to the website and be able to provide a far easier and sophisticated method of communicating to our members. Please ensure that we have your email addresses to facilitate this mode of communication.

For the past few months Jessica Beck has been working with us as she tackles her PhD on music and gender in our archives. Jessica is an AHRC funded student who was chosen, after a rigorous submission process, to be the winner of a Collaborative Doctoral Award, co-packaged by Conway Hall Ethical Society and the Royal Northern College of Music. As well as writing a PhD on the musical history of the Society, Jessica will work to produce either a pre-concert talk or possibly even a series of talks about her research once she is more firmly in command of her findings in a year or so.

This year has continued in much the same vein as the past two with improvements for our Venue Hire clients and members with enhanced audio-video capability in both the Main Hall and Brockway Room. So much so that as well as increasing our sustainability (through increased income) word is spreading to new hirers every month who want to make full use of our Live Streaming capabilities for their events. In addition, though, we can now offer video conferencing and a cinemas experience if so required.

### **London Thinks and Thinking on Sunday**

From a programming point of view in the last few months we have continued to have our own events, such as the now firmly established London Thinks series with such subjects covered as ‘Why do We Believe?’ and looking forward to 24th March, ‘The Theology and Ethics of Star Wars’. Thinking on Sunday events continue to provide a quality programme with talks ranging across a broad panorama of humanist and ethical concern, such as ‘An Atheist and a Muslim in Conversation’ and ‘Is Consciousness an Insoluble Problem?’

Our best ever season of Sunday Concerts for a long time – based on audience numbers – took off in September 2015 and continues into 2016. We have also played host to events from the Londonist, London Fortean Society, Central London Humanists, AHS, LGBT Humanists, Cosmic Genome, Z-List Dead-List and Rhinegold Live, 5 x 15, CFI, How to Academy, Sunday Assembly, School of Life, Now Live Events (Psychologies magazine), Action for Happiness, Stand Up For Darwin, (with BHA and Central London Humanists), Silicon Beached, Mind The Product.

The Arts Council funded ‘Conway Actants’ strand of our exhibition programme is just coming to the end which, as an artistic and curatorial collaboration between Deborah Gardner and Jane Millar, has proved tremendously popular and thought provoking, especially with Club Critical Theory holding a unique evening session to look deeper at the artists’ work. We are fortunate to have a reprise of Lis Field’s ‘Red Kimono’ exhibition in our window onto Theobalds Road to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Fukushima tragedy. The Conway Cohort, again Arts Council funded, is going from strength to strength and currently has a series of performance workshops led by members of the cohort. There is such a lot going on – it’s great!

### **Two Projects for Autumn**

Finally, I wanted to let you know about two projects that we are trying to put together for the autumn. The first is a course, and possibly more if we can make funding materialise, on ‘Radical Conflicts in Medicine’. I can’t say too much at

this stage other although it promises to shed light on developments in medicine from a perspective of radical history and that I'm incredibly pleased that Deborah Lavin is heavily involved from a curatorial position after the successes of her previous courses such as 'Alternatives to Religion', 'Stop the First World War' and 'The British Business of Slavery'.

The second project is shrouded in mystery from the off. In the Foyer of Conway Hall there is a niche that has never held, to the best of our knowledge, the bust that it was purposefully designed for back in 1929. In 1927 we had the bust – we have photographic evidence. However, so far all attempts to locate any clues to its whereabouts have perished along with history. The bust is of course of Moncure Conway and it was done in bronze by Theodore Spicer-Simson and paid for by a "bust committee" in 1905 specially assigned to commission it from the sculptor. Carl Harrison has done a fantastic amount of research into the 'missing bust' and will submit something soon for the *Ethical Record*. However, I just wanted to alert you all to the interesting developments that we have planned for later in the year in this regard. "Watch this space."

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## **"POLITICS SHOULD MOVE TO THE LEFT"**

**Tom Rubens**, in favour of the Motion.

*Debate at the Ethical Society, 13 March 2016*

### **THE PARTY OF THE 90%**

This contribution delineates the outlook of a political party which does not yet exist, but which could come into being either as a completely new party or as one that is the radically reformed version of an existing party. Regarding the latter possibility: people who think that there are already too many political parties in this country, but who regard *none* of those which run in elections as either sufficiently to the Left or as adequately capacious in general outlook, may well be sympathetically disposed to the idea of an existing party transforming its objectives and attitudes into the ones which I ascribe to the Party of the 90%. Finally, although, the Party is not yet a fact, I will speak of it as if it were, and as being at the beginning of its political life.

*(Containing a number of important ideas supplied by Mr. John Howarth)*

### **SETS OF OBJECTIVES**

**ONE:** OPPOSE the economic power of the big industrial corporations and the big banks and finance houses. This power constitutes an area of about 10% of economic activity within the total national economy.<sup>1</sup>

The word 'activity' should be stressed: we are not talking about a 10% which is a *numerical* portion of the population. The actual number of people engaged in the 10% activity is much smaller than 1 in 10 of the whole population. So, the term 10% is being used only to designate a *quantity of economic activity*—and *not* the numerical 10% of the population. The actual people pursuing the 10% activity will be referred to as those in the 10% 'context.'

Likewise, the term 90% will be used to designate the quantity of economic activity engaged in by that section of the population not involved in the 10% activity. That section is clearly the vast majority, given that fewer than one tenth

of the population are engaged in the 10% activity. Further, the people pursuing the 90% activity will be described as those in the 90% 'context.' In European countries, the 10% activity accounts for about 60% of national wealth; in the U.S., it accounts for about 70%. (For more on these figures, see, *inter alia*, Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*, pub. 2013). Also, the people in the 10% context exert considerable influence on the body-politic.

AIM TO dismantle that power throughout the U.K. This objective to be pursued partly through a programme of informing the public in extensive detail about the scale and danger of this power. This information-project would itself be an enormous undertaking, and so would have to be conducted mainly through website facilities that were widely publicised. Ideally, it would involve a pooling of data with all other people opposed to the 10% activity—and especially with those active in the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).<sup>2</sup> A further point is that the Party readily accepts that the practical process of dismantling may well be very complex and slow.

AIM TO establish public ownership and control (actual, not nominal) of the major sources of material production and distribution, and of the major banks, and the major utilities. Public ownership and control would be administered on a democratic basis, with as much local-democratic control as was practically possible.

At the same time, the local control would have to be part of a general, co-ordinated form of organisation, one which would inevitably involve some degree of hierarchy. There would, then, have to be a certain number of key positions, occupied by key people. At all administrative levels, the holding of positions would be based strictly on merit and proven performance. The requisite degree of ability, commitment, self-knowledge and self-command would be essential. This appraisive approach to the individual would clearly transcend all class-based and prejudiced attitudes. Further, quite apart from administrative capacity, a requisite degree of technical expertise would be needed in those individuals playing a major role in the ground-level operation of a modern manufacturing system. The fact that the system was a mainly collective one would in no way eliminate this necessity.

All the above-stated aims would be pursued through the democratic electoral process, and therefore ultimately by means of parliamentary legislation. The Party completely rejects the view, held by some people on the Left, that fundamental economic and social change can be achieved only or mainly by non-electoral, non-parliamentary methods. At the same time, the Party does appreciate the importance of forms of public protest and activity which are extra-parliamentary e.g. demonstrations, strikes, occupations. But it insists that such protest should, ultimately, translate itself into votes at the ballot box.

This view of the centrality of the political sphere is, it should be emphasised, not simplistic. The Party, in fully recognising the extent of the economic power and political influence of those people in the 10% context, acknowledges that this power and influence have fundamentally weakened the functioning of the democratic political process. The Party is aware that the political sphere can never operate in a totally self-sufficient, self-contained manner: this sphere can never be unaffected by the economic power-structure which co-exists with it.

Hence the Party realises that its campaign against the 10% activity must be continually linked with efforts, shared with other like-minded groups, to strengthen democratic political institutions and practices by reinforcing the connections between these and the majority of the population i.e. those in the 90% context.

**TWO:** SUPPORT the growth of small businesses, and small-scale co-operatives, as a vital supplement to the public economy. The Party regards any dynamic economy as requiring an element of private initiative, inventiveness and flair. Also, by keeping in close touch with developments in the private sphere, the Party would—as is always necessary—continually expand its understanding of the general economic scene, and never claim a monopoly of economic knowledge. This understanding would be continually nourished by the shared dissemination of information through IT methods. The key thing is to value the private economy while at the same time setting strict limits within which it may flourish. These limits must be established by parliamentary legislation. Now, returning to the public economy and its management: the Party places major emphasis on ecology, esp. in relation to agriculture: for the obvious reason that the state of the natural environment determines all possibilities of economic activity and, of course, of social living. An additional point to make here is that the Party is attuned to regional cultures and outlooks, given the wide variety of these throughout the U.K. This attunement shapes its approach to cultural as well as economic issues.

**THREE:** Until such time as big business and big finance can be dismantled, TAX the super-rich people engaged in the 10% activity—and in ways designed to help clear the National Deficit and National Debt, and to ensure that taxes on the very wealthy are progressive, in strict ratio to taxes on those at lower income levels. This goal calls for an extensive tightening-up of the existing tax system, esp. in connection with tax havens, plus the introduction of new taxes on the super-rich. The latter should include a ‘Robin Hood’ tax on transactions in money markets, a Land Value tax and a Mansion Tax. Specifically as regards the National Deficit, the need to clear it is linked with the need to reduce reliance on banks and financial institutions by reducing government borrowing.

**FOUR:** ENDORSE social mobility and the varieties of personal aspiration—educational, occupational, cultural—provided these ambitions are not aimed at the acquisition of super-wealth. As a related point, SEE social mobility as something which should take forms which are *not* mainly economic. In the kind of society which the Party wishes to see—one without huge differences in income—upward movement in occupational status and cultural experience would not result in large discrepancies in economic level. The outcomes of that movement would certainly be very complex and worthy of close study, but their most important features would not be economic ones.

In its cultural dimension, this mobility should lead to an increased appreciation of the centuries of achievement in the humanities, the sciences, and the fields of social and political development. At the same time, these achievements should always be understood in relation to the socio-economic conditions in which they arose. The importance of the past should be valued no less than that of the

present. This importance, the Party believes, can best be conveyed through a system of liberal education rather than one which is mainly job-oriented. Overall, the Party is against any argument for imposing cultural closure on people's outlooks; it perhaps goes without saying that open access to enlightening culture, whatever that culture's source, brings genuine enlargement of understanding and mutuality. The emphatic concern with culture indicates that the Party is as much interested in addressing the sphere of cultural liberties as it is in addressing that of economic necessities.

**FIVE:** In close connection with Point Four, DEMONSTRATE appreciation of the variety and complexity of modern society, esp. its range of personal expertise, accomplishment, and cultural orientation. AVOID the kind of thinking based on rigid 'class' concepts. The Party sees the population chiefly in terms of the divide which exists between the people in the 90% context, and who are on lower and middle incomes, and those in the 10% context. As regards those in the 90% context, the Party is not concerned to dwell on the social, occupational and cultural differences obtaining within this numerical majority. Hence it has no wish to view any one social / economic group as more 'significant' and worthy of attention than others, or as possessing an historical 'destiny' of any kind. Provided those in the 90% context are neither part of, nor acquiescent in, the power-structure of the super-rich, the Party regards them all as potential allies in the task of dismantling that structure—contributing, in their various ways, to that goal. It knows that, in prosecution of this task, it will need all the intelligence and talent it can muster, from whatever social quarter they may emanate.

**SIX:** SEEK to co-ordinate with other parties and movements in other countries which have the same or similar objectives. The campaign against those in the 10% context should be international. The concerted aim must be to attempt to establish a global economy which is, in the main, co-operative rather than competitive, and where material productivity is, by and large, collectivist in organisation and purpose. This co-operative system would be based on a network of regional economies, with each region involving various countries. Also, the system would be upheld by democratically-elected governments. Hence both the economic and political dispensations would be majority-endorsed.

A co-operative arrangement of the above kind would manifestly be a 'first' in world history. However, though described in such grand terms, it should not be regarded as unattainable. History has, after all, seen many firsts which had previously been thought impossible. As a further historical consideration, we should attend to the arguments of thinkers such as Marx and Pareto: namely, that the massive extent of armed conflict between states which history displays has been due largely to rivalries between self-interested elites—the elites which dominated those states. These elites were, roughly speaking, in the 10% context of past societies; and they prosecuted their wars by persuading or conscripting those in the 90% context to back them. The same point applies chiefly to the imperialist ventures of states, in cases where those ventures did not involve war with rival states. Overall, if the Marx-Pareto perspective is in the main correct, then we see clearly that the project of endeavouring to establish a co-operative global economy between states is also an endeavour to end war and imperialism: clearly, an objective of no small value.

All in all, the Party of the 90% would seek to do radically more than achieve limited improvements in the living conditions of the majority of people, while omitting to tackle the problems of the economic supremacy and disproportionate political influence exerted by the people in the 10% context. It would see these people as the chief problem facing society: a massive log-jam whose clearance would be a necessary condition for opening the way to address the other major economic problems.

In differentiating sharply between the 10% and the 90% contexts, the Party would, to repeat, display maximal appreciation of the people in the latter, in all their variegation and many-sidedness. Such an appreciation is vital for any modern political movement aspiring to end the economic dominance of a particular class or group—and, at the same time, seeking to preserve or create a cultural outlook and intellectual climate which are liberal, in the strictly philosophical sense of that term. Linkage between these objectives would be quintessential to the Party's outlook and policy; its economic goals would always be inter-twined with its cultural perspective.

The history of the 20th century is multiply scarred with examples of political movements which sincerely sought to end the dominance of self-interested economic elites, but which had little or no interest in maintaining or establishing a liberal intellectual climate. This lack of interest was due chiefly to fixed adherence to rigid ideology; and the rigidity of ideology resulted from a grossly oversimplified picture of social and cultural realities. Such distorted outlooks led, as we know, to policies which, though carried out genuinely in the name of ideology, were nevertheless horrendous—the product of disastrously inflexible, over-certain and self-righteous attitudes. Such a scenario would, for reasons already given, never be the creation of the Party of the 90%.

The Party is just what is needed to revive the centre-left, liberal and social-democratic spheres of U.K. politics: spheres which, for a considerable period, have been in decline. (This decline is also evident in other Western European countries. Hence, the emergence in these countries of equivalents to the Party would have a similarly beneficial effect there<sup>3</sup>). The balance the Party would strike between public and private economy; the equal interest it would take in all social, occupational and cultural groups across the 90% context; plus its concern to maintain and enhance a liberal intellectual culture and therefore a genuinely open society: this combination of approaches constitutes the deeply synthetic, eclectic, flexible, non-doctrinaire, knowledge-grounded and experience-based character of its outlook. It is true that the constituent qualities of this outlook are found, in varying measure, in the perspectives of some other Parties as well, but definitely not to the same extent.

### **The Party is not Utopianist**

Firstly, the Party's aims and objectives do not mean that it is utopianist in outlook. It seeks to help create a better society—ultimately a better world society—but does not aim at producing a perfect one, since it regards the latter as unattainable. Even in the event of achieving most or all of its economic and cultural goals at a specific point in time, it would not make the mistake of assuming that all possibility of criminality and corruption had been eliminated.

It does not envisage any future society which would not require a judicial system, a police force, and even a military force, to protect the law-abiding from the (inevitable) law-breakers. Again in the event of achieving most or all of its goals, it would never rule out the possibility of social groups emerging which sought to become new dominant elites.

Next, the Party is fully aware of the problems existing now and in the past with regard to differences—sometimes immense—between individual people in point of calibre of intellectual, cultural and moral achievement. It sees no reason to think that these discrepancies, and the problems they entail, will simply disappear with the adoption of a new economic system. The possibility of their continuance after economic reform—even if, perhaps, on a smaller scale than now—is one the Party never discounts.

Further, given the above points, the following must be added:—The Party, despite its general support for people in the 90% context, does not commit the error—one frequently found among progressive radical groups—of assuming that those sections of the population who lack economic and political power are, simply by virtue of their powerlessness, uniformly of high moral calibre. Clearly, there is no logical necessity whatsoever in this assumption. Nor is there any empirical justification for it. The Party is the first to acknowledge that, among the enormous number of people who constitute the 90%, there are those who are neither highly motivated nor highly aware, and who show no signs of ever becoming so. This observation is accepted, without embarrassment, on straightforward empirical grounds. The Party knows that, to be politically effective, it must be socially realistic; and to be realistic means constantly attuning outlooks and objectives to the facts of experience. It is strictly on the basis of this realism, and of the qualifications and modifications which this realism entails, that the Party campaigns for those in the 90% context.

## References

1 Further, it should be noted that the 10% activity involves a top portion of individuals who account for the most lucrative 1% of the 10% activity. These people are exceptionally wealthy even by the standards of those in the remaining 9% activity. Also, in Britain their current share of national wealth is the same as what it was for their counterparts in the 1930s.

2 NGOs such as War on Want, Global Justice Now and Friends of the Earth have, in fact, long been playing a leading role in disseminating information about the global malpractices of big corporations and banks.

3 Also, incidentally, a Europe-wide movement of this kind could help develop an alternative *general* sense of the Continent to the one which now prevails in official circles. Instead of what is, by and large, a big-business conception of Europe, or, at best, one dominated by mainly economic considerations, there could be a much more social and cultural conception. This could display a greater knowledge and appreciation of the Continent's tremendous achievements, from the time of ancient Greece onward, in the humanities and the sciences. Such a general sense could be very effective as creator of a large measure of social cohesion across Europe.

# POLITICS SHOULD NOT MOVE TO THE LEFT

Reply by Tim Bale, Professor of Politics,  
Queen Mary University of London  
*Debate at the Ethical Society, 13 March 2016*

I don't doubt that Tom puts his finger on some serious problems with the way we live now. And some of the solutions he suggests may, albeit in some amended form, have something going for them – even if they aren't the ones I myself would be keenest to see implemented. But I don't doubt, either, that any new party advocating them would be utterly crushed at any UK general election – at least in the world we now live in.

Put bluntly, the shape of public opinion and the characteristics of our first past the post electoral system mean that opposition is not the time to pitch bold and visionary left-wing ideas to British voters. Once in office, there is – as politicians such as Attlee, Thatcher and, more recently, George Osborne, have proved – rather more room for manoeuvre and for changing the parameters of the politically permissible. But even then profound change is best pursued incrementally.

## **The Market is Best, Except for ...**

But first a confession. I believe that, all other things being equal (and I acknowledge they rarely are), a society's ultimately finite resources are best distributed by the market.

We have seen what inevitably occurs when states are governed by parties who disagree with that axiom. Those parties soon end up denying citizens' fundamental human rights and eventually resort to imprisoning and murdering them. Supposedly enlightened bureaucrats and technocrats turn into the *nomenklatura* necessary for dictatorship. The party becomes the state and vice versa. Outside of the pages of Plato, the supposedly morally superior ruling class becomes an immoral law unto itself. War and conquest do not end; they carry on regardless.

That said, there are clearly several areas of life in which the market is almost bound to fail, in the sense of not providing sufficient quantities of what are generally agreed as the requirements for a decent standard of living and quality of life. Moreover, those failures end up damaging the ability of the market to provide the goods we like to have as well as those we literally need. The list may be familiar but it is worth restating: health; education; security and defence; income support for those who cannot seriously be expected to work or who can't find work; and, as we well know in this country, housing.

There is also a good argument for a degree of redistribution through both forced saving and state (or state-backed insurance) benefits – be it over the life-cycle (from working adults to children and pensioners), between rich and poor, between capable and incapacitated, and between places which are struggling and places which are not (both within the country and beyond its borders).

## **Correction, not Confiscation**

But there is a big difference between correction and confiscation – not only substantively but in terms of voter perception. What may seem fair to those on

the left can all too often seem far-fetched to the vast majority who place themselves, intuitively (but not necessarily inaccurately) in the centre of the ideological spectrum. Any measures taken, however well-intentioned and however pressing they may seem to those advocating them, require broad consent in a democracy. Much of what Tom suggests would be seen as simply going too far by most citizens of this country – at the moment at least.

Voters may be sceptical as to whether material success always originates in hard work; but they believe that hard work can and should be rewarded by material success and don't want to see that possibility removed. They also believe in the right of the individual to pass on the fruits of his or her labour, be it a pot of cash or other assets - most obviously a house or flat. In addition, they want to prevent the nation's patrimony from being consumed via benefit claims and the use of already overstretched public services by people who haven't grown up here and with whom they feel no affinity.

Finally, they're not keen on any offer from a political party that looks like it's trying to turn the clock back to a time when life had fewer conveniences and home comforts. Given all this, there would, I suspect, be precious few takers for what Tom is suggesting.

### **The Left has to Show Competence as Well as Compassion**

I recognise, of course, that what people want or don't want is – to some extent anyway – socially constructed and that it is open to a party to try and shape people's preferences. But this is much more easily done – inasmuch as it is ever 'easily' done – in office than in opposition. Sticking the true story of what 'the ten per cent' are allegedly up to (or getting away with) on the web simply won't cut it with most of the 'ninety per cent' – unless, perhaps, the ten per cent we're talking about includes the Kardashians and the others who appear day-in-day-out in the *Mail Online's* 'sidebar of shame'.

I recognise, too, that the aim of a left-turn may not be to win office. It may instead be about an attempt to somehow anchor the centre of gravity in British politics so that the country doesn't shift too far to the right and thereby simply dismiss the solutions Tom suggests out of hand. Sadly, however, the evidence suggests that this strategy simply doesn't work. All it does is to ensure the opposition to the centre-right is unelectable, allowing a Conservative government, as it did in the eighties and is doing again now, to do pretty much what it calculates it can get away with.

To prevent this, the left has to win office from opposition, which means building a cross-class alliance, which means winning over those fabled 'C2' voters, which means locating oneself, at least rhetorically, in the centre, and which means stressing delivery or incremental but important reforms over 'the vision thing'.

The left wins in Britain – as it won in the sixties and the late nineties – when it can convincingly argue that there's no contradiction between competence and compassion. This, and not an overly radical platform by a new party that, ultimately, no-one could (or indeed should) trust to be as nice as Tom himself, seems to me to be the path it should try to tread.

## EPIPHENOMENALISM – A REJOINDER

Chris Bratcher

*A commentary on Norman Bacrac's article "Is Consciousness an Insoluble Problem?" which was published in the Ethical Record, February 2016, page 19.*

Epiphenomenalism has been posited to try to preserve a closed-off causal realm of brain activity (Norman's Axiom 2\*) whilst accounting for consciousness. This, I think, it signally fails to do.

Crucially, the theory lacks an example of a comparable epiphenomenon in the sense required. Thomas Huxley coined the term to express the view that consciousness is "completely without any power... as the steam-whistle which accompanies the work of a locomotive engine is without influence upon its machinery": this remains the most common analogy. However, the whistle is caused by a diversion of the steam produced by the engine, with obvious physical effects on engine pressure and force, and of course generates a sound wave. It has a clear effect and function, neither of which the theory allows to consciousness. [A]

Characterising consciousness as a by-product does not help; a by-product is an incidental or secondary product, as in 'zinc is a by-product of glassmaking', or it can mean an unintended but inevitable secondary result, as in 'native poverty is the by-product of colonial prosperity'. Either way, something results with effects in its turn. The analogy is not illuminating, and from the very premises of the theory as to the universality of cause and effect, it is impossible to posit one. To be axiomatic for a moment, we can posit that anything that exists will have effects by virtue of its existence. But the whole point of epiphenomenalism is to not concede this to consciousness.

### **Identity Argument Rightly Rejected**

Hardly anyone doubts that conscious experiences are created by inputs and processes in the brain, and that mental states are different from brain states, as Norman rightly concedes, and therefore distinct. (Philosophical arguments that they are identical have rested on a special and unconvincing criterion of identity). If there is a causal relationship between brain states and mental states – and that relation is not altered by terming it a material cause (whatever that may mean), rather than efficient one, then the desired closed causal realm of brain activity and the rest of the physical world is lost. [B]

The alternative for epiphenomenalism is to posit concurrence: some form of pre-established harmony between the occurrences of brain and mind states. This is why the humanist philosopher Ted Honderich calls epiphenomenalism "a disgrace... more awful than dualism", (*Philosopher – A Kind of Life*, 2001, pp.247, 278); and his fellow atheist, Daniel C. Dennett dubs it "a dreaded relic of pre-scientific philosophy" (*Brainchildren*, 1998, p.65). Essentially, epiphenomenalism plays fast and loose with the notion of a cause: it tries to find some word for the relationship of brain to mind that recognises that it applies but falls short of it. [C]

The issue of the function of consciousness is perhaps most illuminatingly approached by asking the question ‘Why is some of the information that we receive through our senses made conscious, whilst the rest is not? What does consciousness bring to the table?’ We do not merely passively have what are termed ‘qualia’ – say, a hot feeling and a blob of red in our mental space when we approach a fire. They are not a sideshow. Having them makes possible the whole gamut of mental activity that is part of consciousness in the broader sense of the term. We cogitate on and in consequence of what we are conscious of. Saying that the mechanics of thought is achieved just by our little grey cells misses the point that consciousness is required.

We can operate without consciousness. Sleepwalkers can apparently navigate without it, even to the point, in the celebrated 1987 Canadian case of Ken Parks, of driving to his in-laws’ house and killing them. (He was found ‘not guilty’.) More familiarly, car drivers can drive for stretches ‘on automatic pilot’ without being consciously aware of the road. We would say they had lost or not needed a level of oversight of their actions: it is not good enough to simply say that with other brain states they would have had that level of control; awareness itself gives us that potential control. [D]

### **The Problem of the Existence of Consciousness**

Epiphenomenalism does not solve the problem of the existence of consciousness. If anything, it makes it even more mysterious, by seeking to ‘park’ consciousness without a role. I don’t need to tell you Darwinians that every other major property in Nature has arisen and been retained as a result of selective evolution, by providing an adaptive advantage. If consciousness has no function and is inherently useless, it is inconceivable why and how it arose, *and* been preserved, if brain states alone do the job. [E]

Why it has not subsequently been dropped in some variation of otherwise sentient species, which would operate as now – and therefore, supposedly with exactly the same brain states as now, but with ones which contingently did not deliver consciousness? Maybe there are: I leave aside the problem of ‘other minds’, of knowing whether other creatures are conscious, or merely ‘zombies’. Norman’s intuition that the thought experiment of fully functional zombies is unreal only goes to underline the fact that consciousness has a role and is necessary for *us*. [F].

It is beside the point to say, as Norman does, that were *we - as we are now constituted* – to operate as now without consciousness, we would have different brain states – of course we would, because *our* brain states deliver it. To repeat, what is posited is a creature that had what *for the rest of its genus* would be consciousness-*sufficient* brain states - exactly the same in neural complexity as now - but never developed, or lost, the supposed epiphenomenon of *unnecessary* consciousness. They would be a kind of organic robot. For a Darwinian, it is only to be expected if consciousness does nothing.

Robots are, at least potentially, a circuitry form of zombie. But the possibility of constructing one that can replicate aspects of human problem solving, learning and responses does not mean that for *us*, consciousness is without a role.

## **Freewill a Distinct Issue**

I think the issue of consciousness has been muddied by the issue of whether we have freewill. My purpose in writing is not to offer a solution to this double 'hard' problem, but to point to the hopelessness of epiphenomenalism. Freewill is a distinct issue; it is possible to conceive we don't have it, whilst giving consciousness an operational role. I would suggest we have two way causation. Mind is an integral part of Nature – it must be. It is neither a bystander nor a hanger-on. [G]

**An Appendix about Experiments.** Much has been made of those by the neuroscientist Benjamin Libet thirty years ago. First, he established that a threshold of relevant brain activity was needed for us to experience a touch, after a time delay. That is only to be expected. He then had subjects flex their wrists at a time of their choosing, and timed the onset of their brain activity and that of the action, and had them report afterwards the moment (as measured on a clock face) they decided to act. The latter occurred significantly after the onset of the apparently relevant brain activity.

Does this imply that a conscious decision is functionless, and that epiphenomenalism is at least partly right? Some have argued that a preordained task was not a true test, and the inevitable brain activity in setting yourself to decide to act, or deciding on when you will decide, muddied the water when the task was already determined. Merely thinking about moving may stimulate part of the motor cortex, in readiness. There are inherent problems about deciding what level of its activation is deemed to constitute the decision.

Most interestingly, Libet did not accept that freewill was an illusion. Subjects were apparently able to abort their decision as measured by cortex activity, which flattened out. From this, he argued for the existence of a 'conscious veto'. According to him, we have 'free won't'. He developed a theory of a 'conscious mental field' that emerges from, but in turn can act upon and influence brain activity. Philosophically naïve it may be, but it is close to how the man in the street conceives the matter.

## **William Grey Walter**

A kindred experiment of sorts was carried out by SPES member and neurosurgeon William Grey Walter in the 1960s. He had implanted electrodes in patients' motor cortices (as part of their treatment), and had them operate a slide projector by pressing a button. For some, he used the output from their brain to change the slide, with the result that it changed an instant before the button was pressed. The patients reported they lost any feeling of willing the action – whatever that may mean. Possibly this is what a zombie would say – or a robot, if, impossibly, it could make sense of the notion of willing!

Professor Alvaro Pascual-Leone of the Harvard Medical School has today done something similar with Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation of the brain (a non-invasive alternative) to make participants apparently change their mind over a chosen action: his subjects considered that that was their decision; when it wasn't. I hope I have changed your mind without such tinkering.

## Reading

Anyone – particularly scientists – attempting to ‘crack’ the problem of consciousness without a good awareness of the vast contemporary philosophical literature on the subject is doomed. Sue Blackmore’s *Consciousness: a very short introduction* is just that. John Searle’s *The Mystery of Consciousness*, Colin McGinn’s *The Problem of Consciousness*, and David Chalmers’ *The Conscious Mind* are in my necessary reading list.

### \* Bacrac’s two axioms of epiphenomenalism are:

1. Every conscious state is determined by a simultaneous brain state,
2. Every brain state evolves solely in accordance with physical law.

### Bacrac’s responses to Bratcher’s points:

[A] Chris is right that Huxley’s steam-whistle is not an exact analogy because steam is just as physical as the engine and so has a physical effect. For a better analogy, see [B].

[B] Marble is the *material cause* (in Aristotle’s sense) of a (marble) statue of a man, the stuff of which the statue is made, but the *form* or shape of the statue does not react back on, or in any way cause changes to the marble. The *form* is epiphenomenal, analogous to the relation of consciousness to the brain.

[C] No ‘pre-established harmony’, but the simultaneous production of the conscious state in the same way that the form of the statue is realised the moment the sculpture is completed.

[D] By Axiom 1, awareness, or consciousness is always the product of and determined by its neural correlates – it’s these latter which supply ‘the control’ referred to above and deliver the effect falsely attributed to consciousness.

[E] Consciousness was never ‘intended’ by evolution. It occurred automatically as a consequence of the brain’s complex activity (see also [F]). Large brains demand more energy, but consciousness demands no extra energy. In principle it could ‘devolve’, just as some mammals have returned to the oceans.

[F] Zombies are purely a speculative thought experiment. Beings with human-type brains are necessarily conscious in this universe and they can’t actually discard their consciousness without destroying neurons, which of course will change their behaviour.

[G] “Two-way causation” sounds like Descartes’ dualism. Two substances, one non-physical, which mutually interact, will disrupt the causal closure of science – a serious step to take.

### THINKING ON SUNDAYS SPEAKERS REQUIRED

If you have any suggestions for speakers (their contact details are required) or event ideas, please get in touch with Evan Parker at [evan.parker@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:evan.parker@warwick.ac.uk) Tel nos 07403 607 046 (mob) or 0202 565 5016.

## VIEWPOINTS

### **Epiphenomenalism and Free Will**

I read Norman Bacrac's article with great interest (*ER* Feb 16, p19) and have no reason to disagree with his central thesis. But can I be clear? He says, in effect, that the neural state "weighs-up" several factors before reaching a state in which the conscious mind feels it has made a decision -- the illusion of free will. It seems to follow that arguments and evidence (what one hears and reads) from others contribute to the neural state, in this way influencing (or confirming) our own views and behaviour.

I wonder if people have read *The Dice Man* by Luke Rhinehart (the pen-name of author George Cockcroft)? Luke allots decisions to the faces of his die when he rolls it. He decided what the six choices would be and decided to leave the die to choose among them, an attempt to negate the final choice or 'free will' by submitting to random outcomes which he would then act on.

Concerning law and penal codes, surely the knowledge of likely consequences (risk of being caught x impact of penalty) affects the neural state? Many crimes involve an absence of empathy and perhaps this is why the public (rightly or wrongly) welcomes a punishment in which the perpetrator experiences something similar to his (sic) victim or more recently arrangements for him to meet the victim -- both of these being intended to arouse the missing empathy and hence alter future behaviour.

I heard of a tribe that requires each youth to undergo rite-of-passage drug-taking that causes nausea for several days and is said to induce a sense of responsibility for others and the capacity for remorse, ie becoming an adult. Linked to that, an African proverb says 'If you don't bind a young man to the tribe by an initiation ritual he will burn down the village just to feel the heat.' So there may be some wisdom in turning teen boys' neural state towards thinking of others before self? Western society seems to do the opposite.

**Jay Ginn - Coulsdon**

### **Consciousness an insoluble problem? Plug in and play**

Until we find evidence to the contrary it is fair to assume that we are all bio-robots bound to behave as our programme dictates.

Is there a programmer? No, and Yes. 'No' in the sense that no individual or co-operative intelligence has written the programme. 'Yes' in the sense that every thought and every memory has a physical correlate in the brain in the form of hugely complicated neural and dendritic connections and changes at the synapses, therefore any interaction that we experience with the thought of others may modify and update our own programme, and that of others, and affect future behaviour. Mutual re-programming is ongoing.

Are we 'boxed in' by this concept and the exclusion of free will, but is there a way out? In the absence of a non material soul or spirit, endowed with free will, and that can miraculously interact with ordinary matter probably not. Can science find an alternative? Max Tegmark at M.I.T. has suggested that

consciousness might involve a so far undiscovered phase change of matter and he calls matter in this phase perceptronium (see [arXiv.org>quant-ph>arXiv:1401.1219 v3](https://arxiv.org/quant-ph/1401.1219)).

If we move from the wilder frontiers of science to the borders of flippancy we might surmise that such matter could survive the death of ordinary matter and might be sustained, like Geobacter and Shewanella, by a pure flow of electrons. Plug and play! (see [NewScientist.com/article/ dn25894-meet-the-electric-life-forms-that-live-on-pure-energy](http://NewScientist.com/article/dn25894-meet-the-electric-life-forms-that-live-on-pure-energy)). If perceptronium is ever identified we will have to hope that any (temporary) survival of physical death is accompanied by full survival of perception. However it is very difficult to see any room for free will.

**Jim Tazewell - Somerset**

### **Is Consciousness An Insoluble Problem?**

Norman Bacrac's talk entitled "Is Consciousness An Insoluble Problem?" ['Thinking on Sunday,' 28 February 2016, printed in the Feb 16 ER, page 19] provided yet another example of how the Society can give a public presentation of a major philosophical subject in a way which is clear and concise, and which excites the interest of a large audience.

In response to Norman's lucid exposition, there were simply too many questions and comments to fit into the allotted time-span for the event: a clear indicator of his skills as a communicator and of the receptiveness of his listeners—who were, incidentally, of a wide age-range. This is further proof of the importance of the Society's role in presenting subjects which are germane to humanism and secularism, and which therefore underpin so much of the general exchange of ideas which we have at Conway Hall.

**Tom Rubens - London, N4.**

### **More on Statues**

I am disappointed to see more criticism of British historic figures in your Viewpoints pages (*ER* Feb 16, p16) using 21st century political correctness, with no consideration for the times and context in which the supposed 'crimes' were committed. As an example, Germans actually sat around a table and worked out a detailed plan to slaughter millions and put up concentration camps to expedite this plan. To compare, by implication, the camps set up in South Africa in 1900 and Malaya in 1946 with the German camps is posterous.

Likewise, to suggest that Rhodes should be expected to have applied 21st century ethics in the 1800s, or that General Haig deliberately set out to kill millions in WW1 is similarly lacking in logic. Any consideration of British colonial history has also to be judged against the record of Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, German and American colonialism to obtain a balance. Finally, your correspondents have criticised the conduct of Air Marshal Harris before, and you published a reasoned response from me in the Jan 2007 *Ethical Record*.

**Don Langdown - Canterbury**

The views expressed in this Journal are not necessarily those of the Society.

## THE CONSOLATIONS OF AUTUMN

Sages in Hard Times by **Hazhir Teimourian**  
Peach Publishing (2015) ISBN 978-1-78036-268-7  
Review by **Norman Bacrac**

Radio, television and *Times* journalist Hazhir Teimourian gave the keynote speech at the Ethical Society's Annual Reunion of Kindred Societies a few years ago; he has also spoken to the Society on Sunday mornings on the situation in the Middle East. In 1998, he gave four autobiographical talks on BBC Radio 4, entitled *A Kurd's Eye View*. These well-received talks are printed in this work as an Appendix.

Born in Kurdish western Iran in 1940, Hazhir came to London to study science and also became very interested in the great innovative geniuses of the past. He wrote a biography of the eleventh century Persian mathematician, astronomer and poet Omar Khayyaam, whose four-line verses are well-known from their English translation by Edward FitzGerald as the *Rubaiyat*. Khayyaam's troubles with orthodox Islam are well-reflected in these quatrains, extolling the simple pleasures of wine and friendship. Omar's words are carved on a wood panel above the fireplace in the Library, Conway Hall.

Besides Omar, some of the 'sages' Hazhir writes about in this book are Socrates, Epicurus, Seneca, Spinoza, Beethoven, Darwin, Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, Boris Pasternak and Hannah Arendt. Included are some of Hazhir's own poems. This book will give enjoyment and satisfaction to all those, like Hazhir, sympathetic to the cause of freethought and rational living in this, the only world, while being thoroughly antipathetic to the life-denying forces of religious and political dogmatism. For more information, see **KhayyamByTeimourian.com** or **LimehouseGroup.net**

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### BOOK REVIEWS – TWO VIEWS OF JEREMY CORBYN

**Comrade Corbyn** by Rosa Prince. Biteback Publishing 2016 £20

**Jeremy Corbyn - Accidental Hero** by W. Stephen Gilbert.

Eyewear Publishing 2015 £9.99 Reviews by **Mazin Zeki**

Corbyn will be of interest to secularists as he owes his very existence to Conway Hall. His parents met there when they both attended a meeting in support of the Spanish Republican cause. Both books were rushed into print to be *au courant*. Gilbert's reads like a long essay, is shorter and more chatty than Prince's and pro-Corbyn. Its best passages deal robustly with the misquotations, mendacious claims and smears against him. On the other hand I read Rosa Prince with mounting irritation. It was clearly hurried having slipshod research (with grating spelling errors throughout) which did not have the cooperation of Jeremy Corbyn, who did not talk to her or give an interview. He was surely right.

In the run-up to the leadership election, tabloid journalists and others approached his colleagues in search of a story and combed cuttings files, desperately searching for damaging revelations. There were none, for the record of Corbyn is transparent. Like him or loathe him, what you see is what you get. Few of his colleagues responded and there was nothing to find. Prince describes Corbyn's early life. His biography is well-known and revolves around politics.

Neither book reveals anything new. Many of his positions, allegedly 'extreme', have become mainstream and 'proved right'. In future, Prince may appear more balanced than it may seem now. Since the high tide of Bennism, the Labour Party has gone into reverse. The annual conference, which was sovereign, was downgraded under Blair and Motions were phased out. The National Executive Committee lost power and was replaced with the National Policy Forum, a purely advisory body. Unfortunately this process occurred with the support and consent of the party as a whole. Corbyn was one of the honourable exceptions. Now the very same Blairites who waged an internal war on internal democracy are crying foul, 'we wuz robbed' and belatedly demanding 'democracy'. The hypocrisy is an indication of how low the Party had sunk under the Blairites.

Many Left-wingers, in spite of being continually marginalised under New Labour after the defeat of Bennism, stayed within Labour. Corbyn was one of the awkward squad with McDonnell, the late Bob Cryer, Skinner and few others. He has defied the party whip hundreds of times which, although condemned by opponents, lends authenticity to his position. Prince is particularly weak on the background to the splits within Labour before Corbyn became MP for Islington North. Its previous MP, Michael O'Halloran, was selected and elected in 1969, made a very brief maiden speech and was never known to speak in the House again. His whole entry into politics remains a mystery. Prince's work cannot be taken seriously and is littered with errors including spelling mistakes. It is in part a disguised character assassination of a 'politically obsessed' figure who has never pretended otherwise. It is also a first-hand account of the way that Labour Party, actually arguably two separate parties, elected a leader.

In order to be relevant and ostensibly erode the dominant role of Trades Unions, the new system created by Ed Miliband was extended which allowed 'supporters' on payment of a £3 fee, to vote directly for leader. Corbyn's candidacy created genuine enthusiasm. Halls were packed. At one meeting in Camden the overflow hall was also packed and Corbyn addressed supporters from a fire engine provided by a trade union. Members, and crucially former members, (Labour had suffered a halving of its membership under the Blairites) rejoined and the campaign was flooded with supporters and volunteers.

The New Labour leadership had been remote, arrogant and detached after they captured power. In effect they believed their own slogans and propaganda caused by the other contenders who could not galvanise their supporters. Indeed they had none. They stood for nothing except parroting platitudes and homilies about 'aspiration' in the wake of electoral defeat. They had done nothing to encourage such aspiration in office. For most Blairites, there is only a cigarette paper between them and any other party.

All parties have been taken over by the corporate sector. The SDP started among rogue elements in Islington, which left a blot of bitterness, and modernisers and sympathisers of SDP became active within New Labour. Later, after capturing Labour, they presided over the empty shell which Labour became. They should not be surprised that the membership, so long disregarded, chose to take their party back.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Conway Hall Ethical Society, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, WC1R 4RL.

Tel: 020 7405 1818 Website: [www.conwayhall.org.uk](http://www.conwayhall.org.uk)

Admission to Thinking on Sunday events is free for members of CHES and £3 (£2 conc) for non-members. For other events, no charge unless stated.

## THINKING ON SUNDAY

### MARCH 2016

Sunday 27 Easter break – no meeting or concert today

### APRIL

Sunday 3 **ARE WE OWED A LIVING?**

1100 **Barb Jacobson** on the concept of a basic income

Sunday 10 **IS THE END OF RELIGION NIGH?**

1100 **Lois Lee**, researcher into the sociology of religion

Sunday 17 **HAS TECHNOLOGY SABOTAGED WHAT IT IS TO BE MALE?**

1100 **Chris Bratcher** versus **Llywelyn**

Sunday 24 **IS HUMANISM DEAD?**

1100 asks **Bill Cooke**, author of rationalist history works

### MAY

Sunday 1 No meeting

Sunday 8 **TRIDENT RENEWAL – THE ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST**

1100 **Tim Wallis**, Quaker Peace and Social Witness,  
author of *The truth about Trident*

Sunday 15 **WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT PRISONS** says **Andrew Neilson**

1100 Director of Campaigns, Howard League for Penal Reform

## CONWAY HALL SUNDAY CONCERTS

Artistic Director: **Simon Callaghan**. Ticket £10 (free for 8 – 25s)

Full details on: [www.conwayhall.org.uk/sunday-concerts/](http://www.conwayhall.org.uk/sunday-concerts/)

*Concerts start at 1830 unless specified*

- April 3 **PIATTI QUARTET** Haydn: Op.33/1; Ravel: Quartet in F;  
Beethoven: Op.59/1
- 10 **GALOS TRIO** Clara Schumann: Trio Op.17  
Sterndale Bennett: Sonata-Duo for Piano and Cello Op.32  
Ireland: Phantasy Trio; Sterndale Bennett: Chamber Trio Op.26
- 17 **BRIDGE QUARTET & HIRO TAKENOUCI (PIANO)**  
Mozart: Piano Quartet K478; Schubert: String Quartet D87;  
Fauré: Piano Quintet No.2
- 24 **TRIO FIBONACCI**  
Mendelssohn: Trio Op.49; Haydn: Trio 'Gypsy';  
Beethoven: Trio Op.97 'Archduke'
- May 1 **MUSIC AND THE COMMUNIST IDEA**  
A talk by musicologist **Roderick Swanston** 6.30pm. Ticket £5