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Enoch Powell
Politics and Ideas in Modern Britain

Paul Corthorn

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For many British people, particularly those who are older, white and working-class, Enoch Powell remains remembered solely, and affectionately, for his controversial 1968 ‘rivers of blood’ speech, in which he prophesied racial conflict in Britain, due both to the scale of immigration during the late 1950s and into the 1960s, and the fact that these immigrants would then have children of their own, thus further increasing the non-white population of Britain. He thus called for an end to immigration, and, indeed, a policy of repatriation. This speech alone ensured Powell’s legacy, and even today, mention of his name will often evoke fond memories among some elderly voters; some of them might even suggest that Powell was ‘the best Prime Minister Britain never had’. Certainly, when there have been sporadic urban riots, or clashes between black youth and the police, even in the 21st Century, a few voices will always be heard asserting: “I’m not racist, but Enoch was right, wasn’t he?”

Yet Powell is a very important political figure in post-1945 British history for reasons far beyond his trenchant views on immigration, important though these certainly were. Paul Corthorn’s *Enoch Powell* is therefore to be welcomed for several reasons. First, it is not a biography of Powell per se, but an authoritative and well-informed account of his beliefs and philosophy – their origins, their substance and their development. Second, this lucidly written book makes extensive use of Powell’s own previously unpublished archives, private papers and correspondence, and thus provides a truly original addition to the existing literature on Powell’s life and works. Third, rather than adopt a purely chronological approach, the book is organised thematically, with each chapter examining Powell’s stance and thinking on a specific policy. Fourth, Powell’s ideas and beliefs are contextualised, so that we understand what or who Powell was reacting to, or engaging with, in terms of policy developments and political events. Fifth, Corthorn highlights the manner in which Powell often found himself arguing with (or against) individuals and organisations who were, in many respects, his intellectual and ideological allies and kindred spirits. This aspect of Powell indicated his iconoclasm, for he sometimes found himself challenging, through didactic speeches and rigorous logic, erstwhile colleagues on the Right, such as the Conservative Party, and free-market think tanks like the Institute of Economic Affairs; his targets and criticisms were certainly not confined to the Left.

Beyond his opposition to immigration, Powell was most renowned, at least among academics, for his economic stance. He was widely viewed as a maverick or lone voice for his economic views during the 1950s and 1960s, when he eloquently extolled the alleged virtues of the free market (what would now be called ‘neo-liberalism’) in an era when many very senior Conservatives had accepted aspects of dirigisme via Keynesianism, economic planning, and incomes policies. Powell denounced this, insisting that the immutable laws of supply and demand, and ‘the market’ could not be circumvented or eradicated by such idealistic naivety or intellectual fads. He shared, with Friedrich Hayek, a deep concern that State intervention in economic affairs was cumulative and exponential (what Hayek had warned was ‘the road to

serfdom'), not least because politicians became convinced that further political control and regulation were the cure for economic problems, rather than often causing or exacerbating them – the medicine was actually making the patient more ill. He lamented the 'prejudices which have been allowed to harden against the market economy' [54], although by the 1970s, his economic arguments and warnings were being more widely accepted among some Conservatives, and it could be argued that he prepared some of the intellectual ground for Thatcherism in the Party, and its transformation into a party of neo-liberalism.

The irony is that by the time Powell's economic ideas were finally becoming more widely respected and accepted among some senior Conservatives, he had left to join Northern Ireland's Ulster Unionist Party. This was after having urged British electors to vote for the Labour Party in the February 1974 general election, because Labour (but not the Conservatives) was pledging a referendum on whether the UK should remain in the European Economic Community (even though it had only joined the previous year). As a staunch opponent of UK membership – he was an unashamed nationalist and passionate advocate of 'parliamentary sovereignty' – Powell was prepared to countenance a Labour government solely to ensure a referendum in which he could actively campaign for the UK to 'Leave' the EEC. As with his economic ideas, Powell was in a minority at the time, although widely recognised as a very articulate and eloquent speaker and campaigner, a 'cult figure' perhaps, and maybe 'ahead of his time', but today, his hostility towards the EU – like his free-market economic ideas – is widely shared in the Conservative Party; indeed has become its default position.

Yet Corthorn reveals that for much of the 1960s, Powell was actually in favour of UK membership of the then EEC, primarily because of the expected boost it would provide to Britain's ailing economy and British agriculture. Powell's stance changed considerably at the end of the decade, though, to the extent that he subsequently became one of the most trenchant critics of the UK's membership. There was no specific event which prompted Powell's apparent u-turn, but he increasingly developed arguments which focused on the loss of sovereignty and nationhood which the UK would suffer by joining an increasingly bureaucratic supranational institution, and this objection soon superseded his erstwhile support for membership on economic grounds [111]. It also compounded Powell's personal and intellectual struggle with maintaining loyalty to the Conservatives' parliamentary leadership, because he found it increasingly difficult to reconcile his continued support for the former Party of patriotism and defence of British institutions (key tenets of Conservatism) with what had seemingly become the Party of Europe, with Prime Minister Heath openly and enthusiastically pro-European: the political became personal, and Powell's parliamentary speeches sometimes became acerbic in their rhetorical attacks on Heath, not just for his Euro-enthusiasm, but his increasingly dirigiste economic policies during 1972-73.

Meanwhile, in spite of endorsing the Labour Party in the 1974 general elections (there were two, one in February, and another in October), solely because he viewed the promised referendum as a means of campaigning for a vote to Leave the EEC, Powell also recognised a constitutional conundrum: he believed strongly in an indivisible and inviolate form of parliamentary sovereignty, in which an elected Parliament (or, rather, the elected House of Commons) comprised MPs who exercised their judgement in making decisions on behalf of the electorate – Edmund Burke's insistence that MPs were representatives, not delegates. Yet a referendum, in practice, meant empowering the electorate to express its views on a specific question on a particular issue, with MPs then expected to act on the electorate's verdict. Such a form of 'direct democracy' – regardless of whether it is desirable in principle – is

constitutionally incompatible with the precepts of parliamentary sovereignty, and Powell was uncomfortably aware of this.

Having opposed the Conservative Party's apparent commitment to European integration, Powell then became voluntarily embroiled in the tortuous politics of Northern Ireland, where paramilitary violence was a 'normal' occurrence in some districts. He joined the Official Unionist Party, a Protestant party committed to maintaining Northern Ireland's constitutional status as a full member of the United Kingdom, and thus vehemently opposing (re-)unification with the Republic of Ireland. Yet even here, Powell soon found himself in conflict with some of his new party colleagues, because whereas many Unionists wanted Northern Ireland to be granted considerable devolution and self-government within the UK, Powell was an 'integrationist' who wanted Northern Ireland to be politically tied more closely to the rest of Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) – a genuinely United Kingdom. Having opposed the UK's membership of the EEC on the grounds of parliamentary sovereignty and opposition to European integration, Powell subsequently urged greater integration of Northern Ireland into the UK political system, which would thus mean that the Province would be much more actively and closely subject to the sovereignty of Parliament. In Powell's view, the type of devolution and self-government favoured by many of his Unionist colleagues weakened the Union (between Northern Ireland and Britain), created divided loyalties (who were the Unionists loyal to – a devolved government in Belfast or Westminster?) and undermined the sovereignty of the UK Parliament, because the latter was expected to surrender considerable day-to-day control to a semi-autonomous sub-national political institution elected by the people of Northern Ireland only.

What becomes clear from this clearly-presented and very well-written book is the extent to which Powell thought carefully and deeply about key issues and policies, spanning economic affairs, Europe, immigration, international relations, Northern Ireland, and sovereignty. Sometimes, as over British membership of the European Economic Community, his critical thinking and genuflection led him to change his mind, and in so doing, led him to diverge from the stance of the Conservative Party at the time (indeed, even depart from the Party altogether). On other issues, it was his firm beliefs and strong convictions which caused tensions with those around or close to him in the first place, such as his commitment to Northern Ireland's closer integration with the UK, which was not widely shared by his Official Unionist party colleagues. Ultimately, one does not have to agree with Powell(ism) to acknowledge that he was one of Britain's most iconoclastic and fascinating political figures, and no stranger to controversy, both because of some of his views, and the manner in which he expressed them.

Moreover, he was simultaneously an intellectual in the Conservative Party, and a populist politician, with his views on issues such as immigration, and Europe, positing a distinction and divergence between 'the people' and 'the political elites', with the latter betraying the former. This particular theme has strongly re-emerged in recent years, as was clearly evident in the campaign for the UK to Leave the European Union, in order to curb immigration and restore parliamentary sovereignty. If Powell was still alive today, he would almost certainly have felt wholly vindicated. On the other hand, he might have felt apprehensive that neo-liberalism, which he did so much to promote and proselytise, now seems to be on the defensive, as 'market failure' has become exposed to more critical scrutiny and greater public awareness, in the context of austerity, decimated public services, lack of affordable housing, graduate debt, poverty wages, and massive inequality; the 'trickle down' of wealth long ago dried up – assuming, of course, that it ever occurred to start with.