

The recasting of conservatism

[John Stone](#), 19 November 2016



Last month Paul Kelly wrote an interesting article [about Britain's future under its post-Brexit Prime Minister Theresa May](#), based on what he rightly called May's "historic speech" to the then recent Conservative Party conference – setting out to "bury Margaret Thatcher's legacy" (later largely adopted by Labour's Tony Blair) of free market economic liberalism, and seeking "to inaugurate a new political age".

In the speech, she laid out the project by which the Conservative Party will effectively colonise the political ground now occupied both by the UK Independence Party and by those traditional Labor voters who, having long given that party their allegiance, now find themselves betrayed by its sharp swing Left under Jeremy Corbyn.

Ruminating on May's words (and Kelly's article), two main thoughts have struck me, the first relating to Britain, the second to Australia.

While Mrs May took her Oxford degree in Geography, she no doubt has advisers steeped in nineteenth century British constitutional history. She will therefore know that, in effect, she is seeking to emulate one of her most famous predecessors, Benjamin Disraeli, who set out, very successfully, to woo the British working man (women then had no votes) to his Conservative Party's cause.

When Lord Grey's Whig government passed the 1832 Great Reform Bill, the House of Commons comprised two long-standing parties, the Whigs and the Tories – both still dominated by great agrarian landlords who dispensed political patronage via the rotten boroughs they controlled. But in 1846 the then Tory Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, himself a product of the newly emerging manufacturing classes, was confronted with the great Irish famine and took the momentous step of repealing the hugely protectionist Corn Laws that had long kept the price of wheat (and hence bread) disgracefully high.

Peel's astonishingly selfless action outraged the Tory landlords, whose ensuing revolt soon led to his downfall.



Meanwhile Disraeli had argued (via Taper and Tadpole, the two cynical party professionals in his 1844 novel *Coningsby*) that the Whigs and the Tories should simply be renamed the Ins and the Outs, because there was so little real difference between them.

A year later, via a further novel, *Sybil or The Two Nations*, he argued that Britain was made up of Two Nations – the Rich and the Poor. This, he argued, was a socially and politically dangerous situation, a view to which the rise of the Chartists – not to mention Engels's book *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* – was already lending strength. The Tory party, he argued, should bring the people together to form One Nation.

When Peel's government fell – an outcome to which Disraeli's own passionate House of Commons oratory had significantly contributed – Disraeli found himself a leader in what now remained of the Tories.

Six years later he became Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons in Lord Derby's administration (now termed Conservative), and in 1874, with widespread support from the newly arising and newly enfranchised aspirational classes, the Conservatives under his leadership gained for the first time a majority in the House of Commons.

Disraeli had put upon his party a stamp that was to endure for the next century. Mrs May now essays a similar transformation.

As Kelly said, this "recasting of conservatism will resonate" to Australia. Just as "an angry Britain has voted for change", so did an angry Australian electorate begin to do so last July,

when some two million electors refused to vote for either Labor or the Coalition. The major beneficiary was One Nation.

Pauline Hanson's party still has many deficiencies; but like Theresa May she is speaking simply and straightforwardly to "the disadvantaged, the aggravated middle class and the alienated". Like her, she wants a much tougher attitude to immigration policy, and like her, she totally "repudiates the idea of a cosmopolitan citizenship" (commonly known as multiculturalism).

She too "speaks as a patriot", and admits "the failures of globalization". She too "targets the elites" and those "many people in positions of power who behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people . they pass in the street".

Hanson would agree with every word of May's most famous line: "If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere" – a line that, as Kelly said, "puts the human rights lawyers on notice". She too, like May, believes her country should "reclaim its sovereignty" from assorted supranational bodies, such as the United Nations and its ever-multiplying busybody agencies.

Of both Britain and Australia might it thus be said, "Cometh the hour, cometh the woman"?