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# Decomposing Cameron

By Paul S

I've had a few hours to mull over David Cameron's speech at the Tory Party Conference, and also some time to cool down. When I saw the highlights on the news, I wanted to throw things at the television. Luckily nobody else was in, as for the duration I shouted some very rude things in my annoyance. I dislike Cameron *intensely*, and the thought that this thinly-disguised Thatcherite will in all likelihood be the next Prime Minister makes me rather sad, not to mention angry.

As I say, though, I've had time to cool down. I'm going to focus here on a couple of things Cameron mentioned in his speech, and attempt to show what is wrong with them. My targets will be, firstly, Cameron's attack on the human rights society and, secondly, his troubling rhetoric regarding the family.

Unfortunately there doesn't appear to be a transcript up anywhere of Cameron's speech (and I cannot face watching the whole thing), so I'm going to have to do this from memory. Let's kick things off with the following soundbite, which I'm afraid isn't verbatim but should be close enough. Cameron railed against the human rights culture, which apparently, from the tone of his voice, is a bad thing.

It's easy to see why Cameron (or perhaps better, Cameron's speech writing team) played this move. There is a considerable back(?)lash against the idea of human rights, as evinced by many articles to be found in the Daily Mail, or from frequent commentators on the BBC's *Have Your Say* section (for some of the best examples of this, and for a good laugh at the very worst offenders, go to [www.ifyoulikeitsomuchwhydonyougolivethere.com](http://www.ifyoulikeitsomuchwhydonyougolivethere.com)). By railing against the human rights culture Cameron is playing a safe card; he's pandering to those voters who are fond of saying that people have too many human rights, and who blame the Human Rights Act for giving asylum seekers a free ride, etc. Indeed, I've frequently come into contact with precisely these kinds of attitudes, typically voiced by the children of such voters, whom I've periodically helped teach a class on the political philosophy of human rights to. So this is something of a personal hobby-horse for me.

It's worth reflecting on what Cameron might mean when he talks of overturning the human rights culture. There seem to me to be two ways in which a Cameron government could go. I call the first the *Tony's Gift* model, and the second the *Arbitrary Conferral* model. Let's talk about *Tony's Gift* first.

The *Tony's Gift* model is named after Tony Blair, who has a conception of rights nicely encapsulated thus:

Rights correlate to duties. They are privileges of citizenship. But citizenship also brings with it duties: duties to behave as a good citizen should. After all, why should good, decent, law-abiding citizens be taxed to fund the lives of those who do not live good, decent law-abiding lives?

Before we can decompose Cameron we must first decompose Blair. The first part of the quote is mere political bluster; any political philosopher will tell you that rights correlate to duties - that is a matter of logic *and nothing more*. At this stage, nothing substantial has been said. The first significant thing Blair says is the second sentence: that rights are privileges of citizenship. I disagree, fiercely. For I adhere to a school of political and ethical thought which - for long and complex reasons I will not delve into here - believes that human beings have rights by virtue of the fact they are human beings. They are born with them. Rights are not *acquired* after being handed down from those in positions of authority - in other words they are *not* privileges of citizenship at all, but are rather prerequisites of meaningful citizenship. The next move in the Blair speech (citizenship also brings with it duties:

duties to behave as a good citizen should) is also one I object to. The thought process goes like this: rights are a privilege conferred onto citizens, and only so conferred when citizens perform the duties demanded by the rights conferrer. The rights conferrer is the State, and hence individuals don't get rights until they perform the duties the State demands of them.

This thought process is one I object to, deeply. It basically says that you - and me, and everyone else - get rights on condition of good behaviour, where good behaviour is defined by the State. Now you don't need to be a revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist to see that this has the following consequence: you don't get rights until you behave, and you lose rights when you misbehave, and therefore you don't have the right to misbehave. And when misbehaviour is defined by the state, that has the severe implication of meaning that you lose *political* rights. But as history shows, it is those activities the state does not like which are the ones typically protected by political rights, for the sake of the liberties and wellbeing of ordinary people. Furthermore, some people - myself included - would class many political rights as human rights. For example freedom of speech and association, but also more complex rights like a right to equal political representation or equal entitlement to the protections and services of the state, are in my opinion both human rights and political rights.

The *Tony's Gift* model should now be easy enough to understand. It is the view of rights according to which people get them only on the condition of good behaviour, and this puts political rights - many of which are human rights, I suggest - in jeopardy of being gifts only conferred upon citizens when the State chooses to confer them, and taken away when the State so decides. And a little look at history will indicate that this makes such rights effectively worthless. And that is a bad thing.

So if Cameron opts to replace the 'human rights culture' with a *Tony's Gift* model, he will be advocating an approach to rights which puts all the power in the State's hands. That, I suggest, is antithetical to the tradition of political and human rights, and in turn to any tradition of the freedom of the citizen.

Defenders of Cameron will of course say that this is nonsense - Cameron is railing against precisely the Blair approach! He doesn't want to impose some technical, statist, pro-big government concept of rights - after all he's a Conservative for crying out loud. No, he wants to go back to 'common sense', to reverse what Labour has done and make things good again. If that is the case, then as far as I can see - but if you see an alternative please do respond - that leaves the following option: the *Arbitrary Conferral* model.

The *Arbitrary Conferral* model is more simplistic than *Tony's Gift* and works like this. We scrap all this talk of 'rights', and of people being able to claim 'duties' from the state on the basis of some abstract concept they have at birth. Likewise we scrap the talk of the State dishing out rights. Instead we go back to 'common sense'.

What, exactly, is 'common sense'?

From what I can tell, when people on the right talk of 'common sense' they mean something like the following: cases should be decided on an arbitrary basis, appealing to established traditions and the prevailing moral intuitions of those in authority. Instead of upholding the 'rights' of a person, whom sassy liberal lefties like myself believe have the same rights as everyone else and an equal claim to have those rights respected and considered, we instead defer to the personal judgements - and prejudices - of the policeman, or the bureaucratic form-filler, or the judge, or whoever happens to find that they have power over the lives of others. Some people may find that model appealing. Personally, I find it terrifying. And not only do I find it terrifying, it strikes me as a terrible *backwards* step. Though of course, if you are against the 'human rights' culture, steps backwards may be desirable, aiding the hope of stepping all the way back to before the nasty 1960s when all the oiks and women

and wogs got above their stations. (Sorry I got carried away there, but iâve been good so far so youâll have to forgive me).

Now Iâm not going to say something overblown and silly along the lines of claiming that everything about human rights is straightforward and easy, especially their application. That would be daft and plainly false. But what I am going to say is that a world in which people are viewed as having fundamental human rights (which are possessed by simple virtue of being human) is far preferable to a world run along the lines of either *Tonyâs Gift* or *Arbitrary Conferral*. So when David Cameron says he wants to get rid of the human rights culture, I take him to be attacking a fundamental precept of a free society and of the equal concern and respect for all human beings. That is, the view that all human beings have certain rights, rights which they have not because the State chooses to confer them, or because arbitrary figures of authority or power choose to act favourably, but because of the simple fact they are human.

My second gripe with Cameronâs speech is slightly quicker to deal with (youâll be glad to hear). Itâs Cameronâs incessant rhetoric of the importance of family values, and in particular his proposal to promote the traditional family with economic rewards, specifically in the form of tax-breaks.

âWhatâs wrong with helping families?â I hear you cry. Well, on the one hand families of course should be helped (especially poor families, i would add). After all, raising kids is hard and expensive, so perhaps we should welcome tax breaks. But why, exactly, for *married* couples? It seems rather wrong-headed, as surely the right targets should be those raising children *full stop*, whether they be single-parent or same-sex parent families. And it might also be asked whether all families should get tax breaks. While at first glance it seems OK if members of society without children help support those with, on second glance things arenât so clear if the non-parent is poor and the two-parent married couple is considerably richer.

Letâs, however, put to one side those particular economic issues and focus on something else. Married heterosexual families are frequently happy and successful. Of course, sometimes they are not. Marriage is *not* a miracle cure. Remember that Cameron is supposed to be a Man with a Plan, not a miracle worker, and heâs claiming to be the one who can âfix our broken societyâ (though it is worth asking whether people thought it was broken before he started telling them it was). Yet it does seem a little miracle-esque to suppose that if more people get married - and to suppose that tax-breaks will a) encourage marriage, b) encourage marriage for the right reasons, and c) hold marriages together in the face of, say, more pressing emotional difficulties - then society will be helped to be âfixedâ. Marriage can be good, but it can also be bad - for men, women and often for children. It is therefore dishonest - though of course politically astute - to equate more marriage with a better society. It is plausible that other things like, for example, poverty, have more of an impact and that targetting things like (possibly through tax-breaks, possibly not) would be a more substantial measure. But then, that wouldnât be a very Conservative thing to do, would it?

Furthermore, it is worth reflecting on what tax breaks for married couples means: it is an economic incentive which discriminates against the un-married and the non-hetrosexual. If you are married you already stand to benefit from significant economic benefits vis-a-vis the unmarried. Cameron proposes to make that even more the case. Thus if you are gay, you will be poorer than many hetrosexuals. If you are unlucky enough never to meet the right person, you will be poorer than others who are so lucky. Indeed, you may be so poor as to feel it is worth entering into a marriage for primarily economic reasons. But is that the kind of marriage Cameronâs Tories want to endorse? I suspect not, but thereâs no avoiding that particular upshot.

Finally, let us not forget that the family is still, in many cases, a predominantly sexist institution. Women in most families will bear the burden of domestic chores, of raising children, of balancing a paid job with an unpaid one (being a housewife). What is more, due to the structure of our capitalist economy women who choose to have children are very likely to fall behind their male counterparts in terms of promotion, pay (which is already very often lower for women) and opportunity for advancement. The net result is a loss of economic independence and an increasing dependence upon the breadwinner, who will often be the man. This creates an economic asymmetry between man and woman, and puts power in the hands of men. Now, of course, when a family is healthy and happy these things might fade into the background. But how many families go wrong? How many women stay with their partners because they feel too economically vulnerable to leave - and not just for their own sakes, but for that of their children? Given that this is the existing situation, Cameron's proposal to *re-enforce* the economic benefits of marriage, and to make not being married economically less viable, is effectively endorsing the extension of a system in which women are more vulnerable than men. And ensuring that this increased vulnerability is endorsed and facilitated by the State.

Given all of this, and given the fact that the appeal to the "traditional" family clearly discriminates against non-heterosexuals, I think we can conclude that, as with the question of human rights, Cameron is endorsing steps *backwards*, proposing to take us back to a more unjust society, one that we had made steps to leave behind. On the analysis of just two components in Cameron's speech, I would suggest that the following is straightforwardly incorrect:

He [Cameron] also claimed the Conservatives were now the party of the NHS and the party of social justice, summing up his philosophy as "progressive ends, Conservative means". [BBC News website].

Cameron is not a progressive, nor does he advocate social justice. But he is a Conservative, through and through. Nothing's changed there.