



## Resisting the Conservative Mainstream: On Some Writings of the Monday Club

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## Resisting the Conservative Mainstream: On Some Writings of the Monday Club

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### Introduction

Of all the ginger groups which have revolved around the Conservative Party in the second half of the twentieth century the Bow Group has long been the most influential. It has been widely acclaimed for the quality of its contribution to the formulation of conservative policies and a number of recent studies<sup>1</sup> seem to confirm this impression by stressing the fact that it served as a political springboard for many of the most prominent members of the party as well as conservative governments in the 1970s and 1980s. Bow Group membership served as a stepping stone to senior positions within the party for such leading politicians as Geoffrey Howe, Leon Brittan, Norman Lamont, Michael Howard and Peter Lilley and opened many doors for them.

It is commonly thought that the Monday Club is not a patch on the Bow Group both in qualitative and quantitative terms, in terms of membership, of contribution to the political debate within and without the party, and in terms of influence over the leadership. It seems that recent events tend to call for a reappraisal of this commonly held view and vindicate a retrospective glance at the opinions expressed by Monday Club members in the 1960s and 1970s. In view of the outcome of the election to the leadership of the Conservative Party on September 13, 2001, it is our suggestion that the Monday Club cannot be dismissed as a mere anachronism but that it displayed features which are still relevant to conservative politics today and which can assist our understanding of them.

### Resistance as a defining notion

Resistance is undoubtedly a defining notion for an organisation whose founding members justified their decision to come together to form a new ginger group by pointing to the necessity to mount a firm opposition to Macmillan's Wind of Change policies. The appellation "Monday Club" bears witness to the crucial importance of Macmillan's Wind of Change speech in the decision to set up the Monday Club as well as to the centrality of the notion of resistance in its history.<sup>2</sup> When called upon to define the aims of the Monday Club, members would tend to resort to the official version which runs as follows :

The 'raison d'être' of the Monday Club was the failure of successive British governments to grapple with the so-called wind of change in

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent and detailed study devoted to the Bow Group is James Barr's, *The Bow Group : A History*, Foreword By Lord Howe (London: Politico's Publishing, 2001), 272 p.

<sup>2</sup> Macmillan's Wind of Change speech was delivered on Monday 3 January 1960, later known as Black Monday to those who opposed decolonisation.

Africa. The Club was founded to preserve the Central African Federation and to maintain British presence in Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Opposition was also expressed to the current strand of Conservatism endorsed by Conservative leaders and the mounting influence of the Bow Group was unambiguously condemned. It was the Club's contention that the party was dangerously drifting to the centre ground of politics and its founding members intended to resist a process which they argued would result in the Conservatives losing their identity. Club members had identified a point of no return, beyond which lay the wasteland of unprincipled, counter-productive and ultimately unsuccessful clinging to power. To follow this trend would bring about the death of Conservatism. The tactical Conservatism of the party's mainstream, geared to addressing the concerns of politically-uncommitted citizens and to the courting of the "floating" voter was not only clashing with the historic aims of the Conservative Party but it would ultimately prove self-defeating as, or so the Club argued, it would become increasingly clear that making the Party electable again and conserving power would involve staunch resistance being opposed to current political trends. Resisting the conservative mainstream therefore implied that the Monday Club should attempt to reverse this trend and to regenerate Conservatism by evolving an alternative interpretation of its basic tenets. This entailed going back to the origins of the 'doctrine,' identifying the roots of conservative thought and providing a normative and prescriptive definition against which mainstream Conservatism would be condemned as deviant.

## Different Forms of Resistance

Resistance to the conservative mainstream could come under different guises. We shall be essentially interested here in the writings of the Monday Club and in the opinions expressed in its various publications over a period ranging from 1961 to 1979. During this time, the Club published a monthly newsletter, *Monday News*, a quarterly magazine by the name of *Monday World* and a series of over one-hundred pamphlets allowing specific issues to be investigated more thoroughly and seriously as the authors were given greater scope and could therefore avoid the catch-phrases and ideological short-cuts of the newsletter.

Alongside those written contributions to the political debate through which the Monday Club hoped to capture the soul of the Conservative Party and exercise decisive influence over the definition and formulation of policy, resistance was instigated in more tangible ways. It was organised within the parliamentary party by those Club members who were also sitting at Westminster and who, on occasion, were led to display their mastery of the whole gamut of oppositional tactics and procedure such as the tabling of early day motions or the defying of party whip by crossing the floor of the House or abstaining on a whipped vote. Arguably by today's standards, after the Maastricht rebellion in 1992 or the challenge to John Major's leadership in 1995, the Club's opposition may be said on the whole to have remained within reasonable limits, yet there were instances

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<sup>3</sup> Leading article, *Monday World* (spring 1970), p. 1.

— namely over Rhodesia — when resistance could verge on rebellion. In his famous study of the Monday Club, Patrick Seyd<sup>4</sup> identified Club members as forming a faction within the parliamentary party.

Active resistance was not limited to the confines of the House of Commons but was organised in the country at large, in local conservative associations in the constituencies, and in student associations.<sup>5</sup> Monday Club members would speak up against the leadership and sometimes pronounce damning indictments of party policies. Their strategy was to seek to influence the party from the grass-roots, and particularly to try to monitor the selection of conservative candidates at the next general election. The case of Surbiton in 1969, where Club members mounted a slanderous campaign in the *Surrey Comet* against official conservative candidate Nigel Fisher, provides evidence for the claim that the Monday Club was ready to consider the use of force and “guerrilla” tactics as appropriate options to attempt to infiltrate the party in the country and influence the selection of like-minded candidates, a strategy which it was hoped would put the Club on a fast-track to political recognition. Such *coups d’éclats* were widely reported in the national press and on the whole they have tended to overshadow the more intellectual challenge mounted by the Monday Club. Its publications were rarely ever mentioned, the opinions which found expression in its writings were rather successfully marginalized by the party’s mainstream yet they allow a rather interesting insight into the minds of members of the British Radical Right.

## The causes of resistance

It might be useful at this point to distinguish between two interrelated sets of causes which can account for the Monday Club’s decision to take up arms, metaphorically speaking, against mainstream Conservatism. The first set of causes are directly related to the Club’s perception of the probable impact of the practical policies championed by the leadership of the party. The second relevant factor which can account for the Club’s decision to challenge the party’s official line on a number of issues has to do with the more objective parameter of the Conservatives’ electoral (mis)fortunes in the 1960s and 70s.

The Monday Club’s publications dealing with the consequences of Conservative Party policies emphasize a sense of emergency through the repeated use of a rhetoric of decline and annihilation. An extremely large proportion of their writings make extensive use of the rhetorical arsenal of most extreme and radical movements of the right and of the left and conjure up a picture of Britain set on a collision course, heading for disaster and destruction at the end of a long spiral

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Seyd, “Factionalism within the Conservative Party”, *Government and Opposition*, 7, 4 (November 1972), pp. 464–487.

<sup>5</sup> Although never a mass organisation in its own right the Monday Club succeeded in mustering the support of some 2500 to 3000 members nation-wide in the late 1960s–early 1970s and had set up 55 groups in universities and technical colleges by 1971 with a total membership of approximately 7000. On this particular point see R. J. Biddle, *The Western European Right : a comparison of the National Front and the Monday Club within the framework of the European Right* (M.A. Thesis, Colchester, University of Essex, 1972).

of decline. How ingenuous were the authors of the pamphlets is a moot point. Were they simply striving for effect or expressing a world view as well as heartfelt concern for the future of the nation? What remains indisputable is that such warnings — some would rather use the phrase ‘scare-mongering’ — were particularly well-adapted to the troubled electoral times the Conservative Party had to face up to in 1964, 1966 and even after the narrow, short-lived victory of 1970. In those lean electoral years for the party the question at the back of most conservative minds was certainly how to regain office with adverse circumstances triggering a process of soul-searching which many sought to capitalize upon. The Monday Club chose to exploit the Conservative Party’s vulnerability through the questioning of their policy options, the wrong-footing of the leadership on many issues such as immigration and the formulation of alternative policies. The Club would highlight issues which senior politicians had swept under the carpet and expressed fears not to let off steam but to fan discontent. The rhetoric of decline, the useful if unsophisticated unifying theme of impending disaster was the instrument through which the Club was seeking to appeal to those estranged Conservative voters who were dissatisfied with a party leadership which they thought was floating with the tide of dominant ideas and was incapable of formulating an innovative, unmistakably conservative programme to reverse the trend of decline.

## Some examples of resistance

Club members put pen to paper to oppose a number of conservative policies and political choices and to criticize the stance adopted by the Party on a number of issues. If we first focus on practical policies, by order of priorities, Monday Club publications devoted much space and attention to decolonisation in general and in particular to the more intricate case of Southern Rhodesia. Pro-imperialist feelings ran high in the Club’s writings and their defence of imperial rule revolved around arguments reminiscent of Kipling’s *White Man’s Burden* which put the stress on the civilising influence of the British Empire. Widespread resistance to decolonisation rapidly found a focus with the case of Southern Rhodesia, a former self-governing colony whose white minority government had declared unilateral independence in November 1965 in an attempt to break free from the pressure exercised from London to reform its constitution and system of government and to put an end to racial segregation. U.D.I. was almost unanimously condemned and the then British Prime Minister Harold Wilson decided to impose sanctions on Rhodesia. The Monday Club was highly critical of the government’s Rhodesian policy and argued that the Conservatives had failed to distance themselves from the Prime Minister’s line<sup>6</sup>; the Conservative Party, they argued, should uphold the kith and kin principle and support white rule in Rhodesia; they had failed to speak up for Britain’s interests in the world and they had allowed themselves to be contaminated by progressive mottos such

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<sup>6</sup> After much wavering the Conservatives eventually opposed the government’s sanctions on Southern Rhodesia in 1966.

as “one-man-one-vote” and majority rule, the end of the Rhodesian system of racial segregation and democracy. Falling a victim to political correctness, the Conservative Party had allowed Britain to become a puppet manipulated by the two superpowers pursuing their own vested interests.

The Rhodesian question dominated the Monday Club’s political agenda for the whole of our period and remained a major bone of contention with the Conservatives for much of the 1970s. The Conservative Party’s official line on Rhodesia was opposed on a number of grounds. The Monday Club persistently stressed the vital importance of Rhodesia for Britain’s strategic and economic interests<sup>7</sup> and argued that any real concern for Britain’s standing in the world should result in the adoption of a more cynical and self-interested stance on the Rhodesian issue. Club members quite unashamedly advocated “realpolitik” in southern Africa, seized any opportunity to expose the manipulative policies of the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. and dwelled on the challenge to British supremacy in the region. The end of white rule, Britain’s retreat from the region orchestrated from Moscow and Washington, was opposed on the grounds that the withdrawal of a peace-loving nation with a civilising mission would only spell disaster for the entire world. The days of Pax Britannica would never return, the highly unstable bi-polar world which had replaced it was fraught with dangers, with a nuclear war its Armageddon.

Nevertheless, the Monday Club’s defence of white rule in southern Africa did not limit itself to such practical concerns. It can be argued that Rhodesia takes on an archetypal dimension in those publications which chose to glorify the Salisbury regime and Rhodesian society as the quintessential expression of traditional British virtues. In addition, the Club argued that in the protected environment of southern Africa, the values of pure, unadulterated, text-book Toryism had been allowed to thrive when they had been thwarted in Britain. The rampant egalitarianism which was threatening to undermine Britain’s social structure had not yet reached the safe haven of Rhodesia’s organic society: the population lived peacefully under the benign protection and authority of the country’s traditional elites. Its political system had not been contaminated by democratic creeds, its population had been spared the tyranny of the majority and finally social, racial and sexual differentialism was allowed to prosper in an environment which proved respectful of diversity. In the eyes of Club members, Rhodesia was a successful test-tube experiment as well as the indisputable evidence that, given the right circumstances, an ideal society could be built on principles congenial with “true” Conservatism. In short, Rhodesia’s Tory credentials were impeccable; the British genius had found fertile grounds in its African exile and Rhodesia had become the obverse version of a decadent Britain. Threatened with contamination, sacrificed on the altar of ‘political

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<sup>7</sup> Looming large in the Rhodesian crisis was the question of Britain’s relationships with South Africa : supporting the Salisbury government was seen as a means to restore relations with the Cape.

correctness,' Rhodesia stood to fall and British politicians were speeding up the process by which it would be destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

The Monday Club's concern with Britain's standing in the world also ensured that it should contribute to the debate over Britain's membership of the Common Market. A highly divisive issue for all parties, the question of Britain's European integration was debated in non-partisan terms with supporters and opponents to be found on both sides of the political divide. The Monday Club was divided too with opinions expressed both for and against membership. Opponents insisted on the unacceptable demotion from world power status to that of regional power and resisted the idea that a pooling of resources at the European level might not involve any significant loss of national sovereignty. The proponents of entry interpreted membership as the opportunity to regain some lost ground through the long-standing British tradition of "rule by proxy," *i.e.* ensuring domination and ascendancy through some form of cooperation with a third party. Towards the end of the 1960s the enemies of entry had outflanked the advocates of Britain's European integration, a development which stemmed from the radicalisation of opinions within the Monday Club, which itself reflected the changed composition of its membership and its growing impatience with the Conservative pro-European leader, Edward Heath. It can nevertheless be argued on this issue that the shared preoccupations of opponents and proponents of entry are at least as revealing of the Club's political identity as their differences. Both currents of opinion were primarily concerned with enhancing Britain's standing in the world, the dispute did not concern the nature of the goal which had to be reached but the best means to achieve it. Opinions also converged in the high esteem in which de Gaulle was held by Club members on both sides of the European divide. The French President's outlook on European integration, his emphasis on the need to create *une Europe des États*, was found congenial by a majority of Club members. The priority given to widening Europe instead of deepening it through a strengthening of its institutions was in keeping with the Monday Club's own appreciation. Finally, de Gaulle's authoritarian figure, the firm stance taken in defence of France's national interests and the French President's own brand of 'Conservatism' which made him an heir to Barrès and Péguy, provided a model which put the conservative leadership to shame.

On the home front the Monday Club's publications focused on a number of issues whose common denominator was their association with policies identified as unleashing forces which conspired to destroy Britain. The Conservative leadership's attitude towards immigration, namely to rule out the possibility that it might become a political issue, was strongly condemned by the Monday Club. Articles were published in which it was argued that official conservative policy on immigration amounted to imposing a form of "gag rule" on the population; banning immigration from public debate was unacceptable. The drift towards Britain becoming a multi-racial, multi-cultural society was resisted from an unambiguously racist standpoint, with racist overtones making their way into

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Soref, 'Delenda est Rhodesia', *The Monday Club's Newsletter* (January 1978).

the Club's publications after Enoch Powell had set the tone in 1968. The anti-immigration campaign, "Keep Britain White," culminated with the decision to support voluntary repatriation at a time when the Club was being infiltrated by the National Front. Voluntary repatriation remains to this day what the Monday Club is remembered for, and this close association contributed largely to the discrediting of its views on other issues; it disqualified the Club as a potential vehicle for the propagation of new and radical ideas on the Right.

Swelling the ranks of the enemies within conspiring to destroy Britain were the trade unionists who were busy spreading subversive ideas, the communist moles who were infiltrating the British trade unions and working their way up from the shop-floor. In the eyes of most Club members, the Conservatives could be held accountable for the strength and influence of the trade union movement. It was the conservative mainstream who had launched and consolidated the corporate state, who had allowed the trade unions a say in the decision-making process, who had adapted to collectivism and accepted the principle of state intervention. As a result, the Monday Club argued, Conservative policies could not be distinguished from Labour's. As an antidote they advocated stringent legislation to curb trade-union power and ensure that organised labour would be made to toe the line.

Also undermining Britain was the accelerating evolution towards new social mores, new social conventions marking a departure from the strict moral code of the Victorian age. The Monday Club chose to occupy the moral high ground and criticized the Conservative Party's leniency towards the 'Permissive society' which could be held accountable for a whole succession of evils from the breakdown of the nuclear family to the decadence of British Art.

Resistance to mainstream Conservatism was therefore expressed in more ways than one, the issue was addressed from a variety of standpoints, looked at from a multiplicity of angles. The Monday Club's publications were therefore harbouring a variety of oppositional traditions of the Right whose common denominator was their rejection of so-called 'progressive' Conservatism and their determination to fight it: neo-liberal concerns over current collectivist and corporatist trends could interlock with statements of pro-imperialist views, instances of high-minded, paternalist Toryism were brought into somewhat unlikely coexistence with rather strident calls for the emancipation of the individual.

## The Future of Conservatism

If one moves from the realm of practical policies to turn to that of ideas one cannot fail to realize that the Monday Club's resistance to the Conservatives' "misguided" policies stemmed from the conviction that the Party had misconstrued Conservatism. The leadership had misinterpreted the basic tenets of conservative thought; as a result Conservatism was a spent force in urgent need of regeneration. It was the Club's ambitious purpose and self-appointed task to regenerate Conservatism by providing an alternative interpretation to that of the conservative mainstream. The normative, prescriptive definition of



Conservatism could be used as a gauge with which to measure deviance and resist any attempt to depart from the norm. Club members were also keen to ‘soup up’ Conservatism as it were, to produce a Conservatism ‘in battle dress’ which could withstand the attacks of rival ideologies and stave off the combined threat of ‘progressive’ Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism. In Gramscian terms, the Conservatives would have to win the battle of ideas and aim for nothing less than cultural domination.

Interestingly enough the Monday’s Club quest for pure, unadulterated Conservatism does not involve any extensive reading of the works of great British Conservative thinkers but rather a re-reading of British history. Club members were determined to provide a revised version of history with which to resist and challenge the dominant Whig interpretation. Adopting a decisively anti-Hegelian stance, Monday Club publications construe the defeat of traditional Toryism in the wake of the Glorious Revolution and subsequent ascendancy of the Whigs as mere accidents. The ‘mongrelisation’ of Toryism into Conservatism<sup>9</sup> loses its inevitability and the possibility of a return to the hierarchical and deferential, pre-lapsarian social order and political system of the Tory tradition is vindicated. Resisting the conservative mainstream consequently amounts to resisting History through disqualifying it. The Monday Club’s publications confront the mainstream theory of the adaptability of Conservatism with the opposite claim that true Conservatism is best defined as the advocacy of the endless reproduction of the same.

The success of the Monday Club’s endeavour also depended on their ability to find the irrefutable proof that their theory of Conservatism was the only acceptable one. The emphasis on the accidental nature of historical developments and the denial of the claim that “Reason” or “Wisdom” were manifesting themselves in History were first steps in the right direction. In the next step, Nature was called for to authenticate the intuitions of traditional Tories. The focus on the studies of ethologists Konrad Lorenz and Desmond Morris is a clear indication that the Monday Club was actively looking for the indisputable evidence which could grant legitimacy to its own interpretation of ‘true’ Conservatism. The works of Lorenz and Morris were claimed to have uncovered the natural laws governing animal societies; it was the Club’s contention that these immutable laws also applied to human societies<sup>10</sup> and should accordingly be elevated to the status of eternal, universal truths which justified a radical overhaul of Conservatism and a re-orientation of conservative policies.

The Monday Club’s quest for the Holy Grail of True Conservatism is a clear sign of the composite nature of British Conservatism. It highlights the rifts and fractures which cut across the Conservative Party. The Club’s resistance to the

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<sup>9</sup> A number of articles dwell on the idea that ‘true’ Conservatism lies in the Tory past, before the Great Reform Act led to the formation of a party representing a new coalition of interests and tolling the knell of Tory ascendancy.

<sup>10</sup> See two articles by Jonathan Guinness, “The Angelic Ape”, *Monday World* (winter 1971–72), p. 7 and “This Busy Monster”, *Monday World* (autumn 1972), p. 13.

conservative mainstream conjures up a picture of party and country as under enemy occupation. Confronted with the national conservative tradition, Club members must have felt strangers in their own land, sentenced to intellectual and political exile both in time and space. The strategy which was devised to challenge the dominant interpretation of Conservatism, namely to break free from the Burkean model and its emphasis on tradition and adaptability, forced (temporary) ideological banishment on the Club. The Monday Club's waifs and strays accordingly looked to the more kindred intellectual environment of the continental counter-revolutionary Right for ideological sustenance. Its publications draw inspiration from the works of French thinkers like de Maistre and Bonald, with Charles Maurras also proving a favourite source of inspiration. The Club's publications look back to the heydays of the traditionalist, reactionary Right and forward to those who, like Raymond Denegri and Thomas Molnar, have tried to uphold and disseminate the same principles.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the Monday Club is confronted with the ambivalence of its own writings which at the same time as they constitute a bid for power, an attempt to move from the wilderness of the backbenches to the centre ground of politics, also exclude Club members from the national conservative tradition. It therefore seems that resistance in the Club's publications is more of a *raison d'être* than a simple strategy; it is about political identity and self-perception. The Monday Club indisputably belongs to the tradition of the Right of resistance which has habitually proved uneasy with the exacting demands of power. The final test to the Club's resistance may well be the Conservative Party's capacity to resist it.