

CONDITIONS FOR THE CENTRE'S SURVIVAL.

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To David Wolfson and Ian Gow only.

"What's in a name?"

To speak of conditions for The Centre's survival, we must first define The Centre. As is the case with any institution, there must come a point beyond which the Centre's identity would be compromised by changes incompatible with its own essence. The Centre is more than name-plate and headed notepaper. It is an institution with a specific character. Deny that character, and at best, you have a different institution bearing the old name, at worst, you have a body without a soul, doomed to wither on the vine within a couple of years.

The Prime Minister will decide the Centre's future; do we not have a duty to present her with the implications of her choices? If she wishes to have a qualitatively different entity in its place, you would do well to produce a blue-print and work to a plan, rather than allow events to take control, to have "de-shermanisation for de-shermanisation's sake", without anything positive to replace my scheme of things, which, whatever its undoubted shortcomings, was coherent, and worked.

To avert misunderstanding, let me make it clear that I do not claim that we are better than any other institutions, organs of the Conservative Party included. It is simply that we are different, and that were we not different, we should be supererogatory. For all I know, there may be a good case for expanding the CRD or CPC. But to attempt to achieve this by "partifying" the Centre, or appending it to these or other organs of the Party, would be self-defeating. (I can take this argument further if challenged, but hope that the case speaks for itself.) By the same token, there may be a good argument for setting up inside or alongside the Party some organisation for bringing academics closer. What I should question is the wisdom of de-shermanising, or indeed "de-Centrising" the Centre, and trying to graft this new organisation onto the stem, least of all in advance of any very clear ideas of objectives and modus operandi.

So far, the Centre has been a success story. Friends, opponents and enemies alike believe that we have been of great influence. This has been achieved with miniscule resources.

(True, I believe that I could have achieved a good deal more had I been given a freer hand and marginally more resources to relieve me of great difficulties, i.e. wasting time trying to find new secretaries because the old ones were under-paid, attending four evening meetings a week through lack of assistance. But we achieved a great deal.)

What is the essence of the Centre? It lies, I think, in two things. First, in the synthesis between access to the Party leadership and independent access to opinion-forming and policy-making circles. From the outset we were seen as both an emanation of Sir Keith Joseph, and subsequently of Margaret Thatcher, enjoying good relations with some other leading Conservatives, while at the same time respected by much wider circles, going well beyond the Conservative Party, for our intellectual integrity, intellectual curiosity and intellectual courage.

Secondly, the principle which I fought hard to maintain under pressure: say only things which your audience have not heard before and do not already know. I have held to this rule both in publications, and in private briefings for our patrons and clients. Without this reputation, we should have been ineffective in all three functions: as opinion-former; as ideas-bank; and as forum - enabling Party leaders and officials, businessmen and representatives of economic interests, academics, journalists, friendly officials and others to exchange views.

Were this respect for our integrity, originality or freshness of ideas at all compromised, the Centre's influence would crumble, perhaps irretrievably, and we should run the risk of being written off as propagandists.

True, one could build any other organisation one liked behind the same name-plate, but this new organisation would not be the Centre sensu stricto. Nor would it inherit the Centre's unique standing for long, but would have to stand on its own merits. These might indeed be great, perhaps greater than the Centre's as I and my collaborators have made it, but I think it would be wiser to work out the nature of this new creation destined to occupy "Number Eight", before taking any action which might undermine the Centre as is.

Until recently, I never really knew what Hugh's views on the Centre's identity and role actually were. For the first two years or so after his appointment, I saw surprisingly little of him, and he was reluctant to discuss matters of principle with me, indeed weeks would pass without his agreeing to discuss anything at all. So long as implicit views are not made explicit, the danger of cross purposes exists. Cross-purposes were minimised so long as Hugh's involvement was minimal. Now that Hugh has decided to play a greater part in the Centre, possibly as paid Executive Chairman, and also to change the composition of the Board, it is important that his views be presented explicitly and coherently. Is it too much to ask that I be consulted? After all, I invested ten years of my life in the Centre.

Hugh does not agree with my basic view of what the Centre's identity should be. A few months ago, as you know, he wrote to me urging me *expressis verbis* to "place the Party above my own integrity". Now I am not arguing here about the merits and demerits of placing the party above one's own integrity. It is simply that I personally could not do so. Nor would it be of any service to the Prime Minister if I did. There are plenty of people around who can, and who are much better than I am at all these things. My part in the division of labour is to be, and be seen to be, an independent mind related to the Prime Minister by personal loyalty, acting as a link between her and all those who come into the Centre's ambit. If that function is no longer considered necessary, then I become personally redundant.

But will the Centre as it came to be during its nine years existence, particularly during its heyday, become redundant too? It is not only my own personal status and role which come into question. Unfortunately, Hugh has not only begun to de-Shermanise the Centre, which I suppose is his right to do, though it makes utter nonsense of his earlier protestations that he saw his main task as to facilitate my working along my chosen lines, but is seeking to impose on it Party conformity, including conformity to decidedly non-Thatcherite policies and attitudes of any Conservative politicians who happen to have his ear, at any given time and for any given reason, irrespective of the way this impinges on the Prime Minister's wider scheme of things.

Any attempt to subordinate the Centre to individual ministers or other party officials also introduces the question of party membership. An enduring strength of the Centre is that it has never been confined within party lines. Our link with the party was through personal relations with the Leader of the Party, Keith Joseph and other friendly personalities. By no means all our members belong to the Conservative Party. Some voted Conservative for the first time in their lives in 1979. A few have been Labour, Liberal or SDP. Some members are on the Right of the party, others do not share our views on all matters yet contribute to the work of their group. Most would now be dubbed Thatcherite, but remember that not all "Thatcherites" are Conservatives, and not all Conservatives are Thatcherites.

The whole new set of problems which would be created by "partiification" are exemplified by Hugh's current attempt to subordinate the Health group, which will simply drive them out and leave nothing in their place. Hugh wrote to the Chairman, George Bunton, a distinguished surgeon, prominent in the teaching hospitals' organisation and professional bodies, that "It is of great importance that the chairmen of our study groups establish real, creative and friendly associations with the ministers concerned..." he then asks the group to arrange a special meeting with Norman Fowler to listen to what he says as a prelude to their continued existence under Hugh's and Elizabeth's control.

Now this is putting the cart before the horse with a vengeance. Of course, we have always been delighted when we are able to enjoy creative and friendly relations with Ministers, some of whom we can regard as patrons or "clients". But these can only be reciprocal, based on something in common. They are at their best when, in addition to the client relationship, there is an element of creative tension. I am glad to say that there are still ministers, inside and outside the cabinet, who turn to me personally, though I now have neither status nor facilities.

(Ministers with whom we have enjoyed fruitful working relationships, in addition to the Prime Minister and her Number Ten Staff, include Patrick Jenkin; Cecil Parkinson; Ken Baker; Rhodes Boyson; Keith Joseph; Tom King; Geoffrey Pattie; Ray Whitney - qua politician rather than qua minister - David Howell; Gerard Vaughan; Ian Sproat. In addition, I enjoy good personal and working relationships with many others, qua Alfred Sherman tout court.)

My own personal relationship with Norman Fowler is good - he is, after all, a fellow-journalist who got to the top in politics - but the Health study-group's relationships with him reached a dead end, through no fault of their's, but basically because the civil servants at the DHSS wish to keep us at arms length. (Of course, most, though by no means all, civil servants would like to do the same, but they are responsive to the signals they get from the top.)

Under the circumstances, therefore, the group decided to cut their losses for the time being, and go in for policy-search and publication, which was after all the group's original raison d'être. Things could change, but only if Norman wanted to maintain two-way relationships with us. (I should be meeting Norman at his request to discuss the matter, I hope before leaving this Friday. But one thing is certain: relationships cannot be imposed on a group; they must be reciprocal and entail willingness on both sides to accommodate creative tension. None of the groups will put up with bullying by Hugh or Elizabeth for ten minutes. I do not believe for a moment that Norman wants Hugh to put pressure on the group, which could only sour relationships - Norman is reasonable and relaxed - but there is a danger of his being embroiled if either Hugh or Elizabeth flaunt their brief authority, and become plus Catholique que le Pape.)

The group keeps in touch with Norman Fowler in any case, and would naturally be delighted to be able to be of help to him, which is another way of saying: influencing him. But any pressure from Hugh will be counter-productive. The group resents Hugh's letter and intervention, and if he presses further, I fear that a very distinguished multi-disciplinary group may simply close down or walk out.

To illustrate the necessity for reciprocity in any relationship between a group and a minister, let me take two opposite and extreme cases: our relations with Patrick Jenkin at Industry, and with Jim Prior at Employment.

Patrick and his ministerial team not only listened to us, but invited us to produce second opinions for them, e.g. on telecommunications and the communications media. Our work found its way into legislation and ministerial decision-making, and on at least one occasion our role was publicly acknowledged by Patrick. There was real give and take in our relationship, and the good will remains now that Patrick is at Environment.

By contrast, Jim Prior articulately disapproved of us and of all that we stood for, i.e. "Thatcherism" in general and trade-union reform in particular. Our Trade Union group and the "Argonauts" therefore were of necessity oriented towards Number Ten, first through John Hoskyns and subsequently through Ferdie. Would there have been any justification for Hugh writing then - had he been as involved as he is now, instead of being an "absentee chairman" - that we had offended Prior, that we should ignore our private feelings, and establish real creative and friendly associations with him. Would Hugh have written then, in reference to Jim Prior at Employment in that context, that "of course, all of us have private feelings about particular individuals. Such private feelings have to be negotiated around if we are to be effective"?

By the same token, the Health group is also happier to work with Number Ten; the Policy Unit already sends a member to attend all its meetings. (A propos, we invite the CRD to everything, which they accept as far as possible, and I had also established good working relationships with several of the political advisers in the ministries.)

In our work there is bound to be a certain ebb and flow in relationships with those who hold executive authority; the golden rule is never to try to force things, but to find the best balance under each set of circumstances.

Another matter. We were, as you know, originally founded to shape the climate of opinion in order to widen the options open to the Conservative Party. All other activities - policy-search, advice, research - have always been auxiliary to this. We gained considerable success, not least a confidential platform for our clients, including Alaln Walters. Hugh has had strong reservations about dealing with the media, and the rough and tumble entailed. But cut this down, and the mainstay of our *raison d'être* goes with it.

Much of our effectiveness with those who are not Conservatives, or even Conservative voters, stems from their recognition, however grudging, of my integrity and that of my collaborators. If Hugh and Elizabeth try to impose conformity, the independence of the Centre will be undermined, and with it will go its unique qualities and many of its best associates.

Far be it from me to claim indispensability; indeed this would signal my failure to have built a self-sustaining organism. But what is indispensable is intellectual independence. Inhibit that, and we lose both our standing and our *raison d'être*.

You may consider what I have written far-fetched or unrealistic. In that case, I ask only that you keep it as a record, so that my prognoses having been "written down can later be used in evidence". But if you accept broadly my view of what the Centre should be, I urge you to give urgent consideration to the appointment of a real board. I see no alternative to your serving on it (that is to you, David.) I think that Ferdie should be on - in or out of Number Ten - since he has seen us at work at first hand, and is one of our more important customers. I should be very glad were Janet Young, or someone like her, to serve on it, since she would sense what was happening; it would not be proper for me to raise it with her. I think it would be very good were one or two active members of groups be appointed, let us say, Prof. RV Jones and George Hill, who is a first-rate organiser and conciliator and sits on the Party's Candidate-selection panel.

I also suggest that you monitor the work of the Foreign Trade Study group co-chaired by Richard King, and about to publish in the Centre's name, and generally watch the extent to which the Centre may find itself being made use of in order to advance his political fortunes, or those of other wealthy individuals. I should be happier were you to monitor the financial arrangements of the Centre, including budget, staffing, remuneration. Among other things, you will find that expenditures proposed by me and which were then denounced as ruinously expensive, will now be happily undertaken, and indeed overtaken, in order to make a success of de-shermanisation.

To sum up: it is, after all, the Prime Minister's wish that the Centre should continue. To have it maimed from inside would surely frustrate her wish. I should be less than truly loyal to the Prime Minister, were I to shrink from expressing my misgivings while there is still time. If, on the other hand, you believe that the changes now being introduced, linked causally with my exclusion, represent her express wishes, it is better that I be apprised of this soonest, so that I can disengage in good order.

The Prime Minister carries the cares of empire, hence I have avoided burdening her with matters concerning the Centre, except in the one case where her confidence in me was brought into question. So long as I can enjoy her confidence and esteem, a far greater accolade than any formal honours, I can happily leave it to you to handle these matters when and how you see fit.

end.