

Book reviews

A left-liberal tries to pin down conservatism

Jesse Norman

Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition

BY EDMUND FAWCETT
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
544pp, £30

What is conservatism? Is it dogma or disposition, ideology or instinct? And what are conservatives? What do they have in common with each other, past and present, and how do they differ from socialists and liberals?

These are some of the thorny questions Edmund Fawcett sets himself to address in *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*. As with its sister volume of 2015 on liberalism, the book is ambitious to a degree: nothing less than a history of conservatism and conservatives in four countries over a quarter of a millennium.

But it is intended to be more even than that. Fawcett describes himself as a left-liberal, and at its core this book betrays a practical, indeed polemical, intent: to map out the enemy's terrain, to identify their key generals and field commanders and to benchmark their forces and weaponry, so that when battle is next joined they can be routed and driven from the field. The result is a work of over 500 pages, which counterposes sections on "parties and politicians" and "thinkers and ideas" in Britain, the US, France and Germany from the early 19th century to the present day.

The appendices alone act as laser guidance to the target: there is one on conservative keywords, another on the philosophical sources of conservative thought, a third that is nothing less than a 38-page gazetteer featuring potted biographies of over 160 putatively conservative politicians and thinkers, from Edmund Burke to Pat Buchanan.

The book is thus part compendium, part Cook's tour, part tract. Yet in many ways it succeeds. The narrative is absorbing, the pace unflagging. The reader is carried along by the energy of the prose, by sharp insights and nice turns of phrase, and above all by the author's evident

engagement in politics and joy in ideas. A veteran of the *Economist*, Fawcett has lived in each of the four countries he has chosen, giving him inside expertise. And he has the knack of writing sympathetically about ideas with which he personally can have little sympathy.

Yet such a project brings with it its own difficulties. With so much material, so many names and ideas to be fitted in, the desire to push onwards and outwards constantly threatens to disrupt the intellectual thread of the argument. It becomes hard to discern the genuinely important from the merely incidental. Deroulède, anyone? Wilhelm von Kardorff?

Thinkers who are also campaigners gain extra prominence, which pushes the narrative away from the contemplative past and towards the activist present. Few would doubt the contributions of Roger Scruton, but one might ask if he should have more than twice the space allocated to Michael Oakeshott.

Especially since Oakeshott's seminal characterisation of forms of political association, and indeed the associative tradition in British conservatism from the little platoons to the Big Society, is all but ignored.

The task of sorting out the wheat from the chaff is not helped by Fawcett's insistence on conflating conservatism and "the Right". And it is made harder still by the vast array of different doctrines and

policies that have claimed the conservative mantle for themselves over the years.

Various people seem to have been included – Donald Trump, Ayn Rand, Steve Bannon – because they have been called conservative, rather than because they are. Others, such as Andrew Sullivan, one of the most thoughtful and influential conservative writers in America today, have been missed out altogether. And of the conservative tradition in left-wing politics, exemplified in Britain by Blue Labour, there is barely a mention.

It is not until page 427 that Fawcett acknowledges that "Forcing past philosophers into present-day partisan boxes is a kind of intellectual ballot-stuffing." Well,

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quite. But the converse is also true: there can be ballot-stuffing of partisans too. Telling one from another requires the articulation of a theoretical core to conservatism, but here the book opts for description and inclusivity rather than a clear and focused philosophical argument.

Fawcett's reservations about nomenclature do not always extend to politicians

Continued overleaf



Michael Oakeshott: A champion of little platoons

and controversialists, as we have seen. But there is one example in the book that is especially striking: his classification of Boris Johnson as a “hard right” politician. Moments of Brexit rhetoric apart, this will surprise anyone who has studied Johnson’s policies, either as mayor or prime minister. Coming from Fawcett, who is Boris Johnson’s uncle, it is more surprising still.

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US-Iran relations and the folly of imperial power

Charlie Gammell

America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present

BY JOHN GHAZVINIAN
ONE WORLD
667pp, £16.99 (Kindle ed); \$37.50

John Ghazvinian has written a magnificent, bold, wide-reaching and potentially significant book on the thorny subject of Iranian-American relations. A subject that has been covered elsewhere (Barry Rubin’s *Paved with Good Intentions*, for example), Ghazvinian throws fresh historical light on the original exchanges between Americans and Iranians, and shows us fascinating historical characters, brought vividly to life with pen portraits and amusing anecdotes.

He does all this with the added advantage of having actually travelled to Iran, and of speaking the language. We can see both sides of the story, in full Technicolor, and with all the detail and personal touches required to do such a huge topic justice. It covers empire, oil, excess, religion, nuclear power and present-day geopolitics, and is a history of so much more than the relations between these two nations. The framing of the book into four seasons, ending with winter, is a stroke of genius as it lends to his overall argument a poignant resonance: there are better days ahead.

The book charts the US-Iranian rela-



Protests in Tehran last January after the killing of Qassem Soleimani

tionship from its positive, hopeful beginning, when the US was looked upon favourably by a succession of beleaguered Iranian monarchs beset by Russian and British imperial interference. In 1765, Harvard started teaching Persian language classes, and American interest in Iran was political as well as cultural: the lives of Xerxes, Darius and Cyrus, their exemplary leadership abilities were seen as models for a new republic. Nineteenth-century Persian monarchs, the Qajars, saw the US as a benign power, capable of partnership with Iran, not colonial exploitation. The US was, for Iran, a beacon of independence, pragmatism and upright moral standing.

Indeed, one of the first martyrs for the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1906 was an American missionary, Howard Baskerville, “a Lafayette of Tabriz”, as one American paper described him. Ghazvinian takes us through the high 20th-century years of British imperialism, as the US stood up for Iranian rights at the United Nations, and covers the American-Pahlavi alliance, beginning with the CIA-MI6 orchestrated 1953 *coup d’état* (which toppled a democratically elected leader, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and placed a young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi on the Peacock Throne).

Ghazvinian describes well how the US became entranced by the wealth of the Pahlavi oil boom, and the obscene dec-

dence of the 1970s as an increasingly close association with the hated and brutal Pahlavi regime turned sour, culminating in the Islamic Revolution. The post-1979 to Trump era is covered more as a piece of long-form journalism and occasionally lacks the brilliance of his earlier chapters, but nevertheless Ghazvinian tells his story with a lightness of touch and an eye for a catching and pithy sentence: his writing is masterful at points.

The killing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ General Qassem Soleimani in December 2019 ends the book on a sombre note, but an epilogue expertly lays out the case for Iranian-US alignment, and puts forward a bold proposal for a Grand Bargain to break the deadlock. Given the depth of entrenched animosity on both sides, however, such a Grand Bargain is unlikely.

Yet despite doing a fine job of deconstructing the self-defeating nature of the US approach to Iran since 1979, Ghazvinian stops short of calling Tehran to account for its regional policy adventurism and occasionally reckless behaviour. Iranian support for proxy groups in Iraq and Afghanistan, groups that killed many hundreds of US and UK service personnel, is not something Ghazvinian covers in detail, and this can appear lopsided in a discussion about US-Iran relations, and the nuclear issue especially. The US, rightly or wrongly,