



Outclassed

You may have been too occupied with the ongoing Tiger Woods scandal to notice, but here in Britain, class war was declared at the beginning of December. The

Sarajevo moment came when Gordon Brown accused David Cameron of dreaming up his inheritance policy “on the playing fields of Eton.” Cameron (Eton and Oxford) mobilized his forces for the coming struggle. If Brown wanted to fight a class war, he said, his chin wobbling slightly, bring it on. “It’s a petty, spiteful, stupid thing to do, but if that’s what they want to do, you know, go ahead.” Fer sure, fer sure. You know, like totally.

This is a phony war if ever there was one. Even if Labour was sending out dog whistles to the socially disadvantaged, the Tory policy of raising the inheritance tax threshold was not about class but about money. England is no longer a class act. There are probably not enough people of class left in this country to form a croquet league, let alone wage a class war. Some of the old class labels are still used, to be sure, and class resentment is not uncommon, but the hierarchical structures that class once proclaimed, and the deference it once inspired, have largely disappeared. It seems a bit of a pity, really.

When I was a boy, there were at least eight classes: the lower working class (or “undeserving poor”), the working class, the upper working class, the lower middle class, the middle middle class, the upper middle class, the upper class, and the aristocracy. There may even have been a lower upper class. By and large, the country was run by the upper middle classes, most of whom had been educated at public (i.e., private) school,

very often at Eton. Money was not then the measure of all things. Those of good birth were sometimes poor, and their needs were attended to by such charities as the Distressed Gentlemen’s Aid Association.

Even children were class-conscious in those days, sometimes keenly so. The first question I was asked at my public school was “Reid, are you U or non-U?” I later discovered that U stood for “upper class” and non-U for dead common and that the terms had recently (1954) been made popular by Nancy Mitford, who was about as U as it was possible to get.

In the Fifties, social standing depended not just on accent but on vocabulary. Here are some non-U words with their U equivalents in brackets: toilet (loo or lavatory), pardon? (what?), perfume (scent), dessert (pudding), glasses (spectacles). “Pleased to meet you” was non-U; “How do you do?” was U. “How do you do?” is not a question that should be answered. You don’t say, “I’m good, thanks. How ’bout you?” The proper response is, “How do you do?” You might think that such an exchange would inevitably end in the equivalent of a Japanese bowing competition, but it does not, at least if you are well-bred.

My mother, being a bit class conscious, would beat me senseless if ever I said “toilet.” And it wasn’t just my own dear mother or my generation. Thirty years later others had the same obsessions. In her 1981 book *Class*, celebrity writer Jilly Cooper confessed, “I once

heard my son regaling his friends: ‘Mummy says that ‘pardon’ is a much worse word than ‘f--.’”

Class barriers were weakened during World War II and began to tumble during the socialist Sixties, but it took a Conservative—Margaret Thatcher—to knock Britain into something closely resembling a meritocracy. Daughter of a provincial shopkeeper (lower middle class by Mitford standards), she was almost as wary of Tory toffs as she was of the undeserving poor. Under her, the Conservative Party became the party of aspiration and social mobility.

Such is the egalitarian mood now, such the inverse snobbery, that men seeking high office sometimes conceal their privileged backgrounds. In their potted biographies on the Conservative Party website, neither Cameron nor his policy review chief, Oliver Letwin—“Oliver is a passionate champion of progressive social reform”—admits to having been at Eton, though check out Liam Fox, shadow defense secretary, and in the first paragraph you will see that he went to his local comprehensive school (and doesn’t care who knows it).

What a dismal thought it is that Conservatives should have helped lay the yoke of egalitarianism on the British neck. I would suggest that the special relationship has not served us well here. “Elite” was a dirty word among the American conservatives with whom Mrs. Thatcher liked to do business, and it is now a dirty word here, too. What’s that about? If conservatives won’t defend the elites, who will? Once you get rid of your elites, you get Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin, and we get (maybe) a Prime Minister called Dave. A victory for conservatism? Get out of here. ■

Hometown Hero

Robert Nisbet's conservatism of community against the state

By Susan McWilliams

THE TOWN OF MARICOPA, in the southwestern corner of California's San Joaquin Valley, has one diner and one gas station. Its landscape is all oil wells and sagebrush, grit and heat and dust, just as it was a century ago when the sociologist Robert Nisbet, one of the 20th century's great conservative minds, grew up there.

It wasn't a pretty hometown, not the kind of place you'd ever see pictured on a postcard or memorialized in a Norman Rockwell painting. Nisbet would later write, in his elegant and restrained tone, that Maricopa's setting offered a "hostile challenge to the human spirit."

Even so, he remembered life there as happy. If the residents were daunted by their bleak surroundings, they didn't let on. In that unfriendly environment they thrived, largely by being friendly with one another. The Nisbets were part of an active small-community scene in Maricopa. His father had a regular poker game, his mother had her church friends, and Nisbet had devoted teachers and a well-stocked local library.

As a child, Nisbet felt the power of what would come to be a central focus of his work: the "intermediate society" that lies between the individual and the state and gives dignity and depth to both. Everywhere he went in his early years, Nisbet saw the influence of intermediate society: in the memories shared by his grandparents' neighbors in Macon, Georgia; in the clubs that defined his high-school years in Santa Cruz; and in the bohemian subculture among his classmates at Berkeley in the

early 1930s—the "Old Berkeley" he called it.

It was at Berkeley, under the tutelage of the iconoclastic Frederick J. Teggart and his department of social institutions, that Nisbet found a powerful defense of intermediate institutions in the conservative thought of 19th-century Europe. Nisbet saw in thinkers like Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville—then all but unknown in American scholarship—an argument on behalf of what he called "conservative pluralism." Against an ever-centralizing modern state, these thinkers saw small, partial, and local centers of authority as vital to human freedom and any genuine sense of community.

Nisbet's discovery of this European conservative tradition would supply the enduring focus of his intellectual life. First as a professor at Berkeley, then as an administrator at the University of California in Riverside, later as the occupant of Columbia University's prestigious Albert Schweitzer Chair, and finally as an American Enterprise Institute scholar—he made it his mission to articulate the ideas of thinkers like Burke and Tocqueville in America.

For Nisbet, conservatism is premised on protection of the social order—"family, neighborhood, local community, and region foremost"—from the politically centralizing and socially atomizing effects of the modern state. This involves more than a single-minded commitment to order or liberty—and it certainly doesn't mean privileging one of these goods at the expense of the other.

Nisbet criticized libertarians who think unfettered markets should lie at the center of conservative doctrine. "There has never been a time when a successful economic system has rested upon purely individualistic drives," he wrote. Yet he was more trenchant about those conservatives for whom order implied militarism. Military statism, he wrote, contributes to the "brutalization of cultural standards" and a disabling "bureaucracy and regimentation."

Order has to be built from the ground up, nurtured and reinforced within the structures of a local community. When centralized authorities try to impose it from a distance, the result is actually disorder: individuals become increasingly isolated, cut off from participation, and convinced of the meaninglessness of the political process. Liberty, too, is realized most fully in social groups. "The individual alone is powerless," he wrote. "Individual will and memory, apart from the reinforcement of associative tradition, are weak and ephemeral." Even what we tend to think of as individual greatness depends on a healthy social sphere: Nisbet emphasized that the figures we call "founders" and "geniuses" were not solitary creatures but social animals embedded in communities marked by shared memory.

The present-day United States, Nisbet warned, is like most modern states in that its intermediate society has become desperately weakened. The many ways in which Americans seek a sense of belonging—in the psychiatrist's office, in psychotropic drugs, in cults and "easy