

Off The Cuff

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Toff rule is OK ya? (... or is it 'yo'?)

A RECENT SURVEY for the website PoliticsHome.com has discovered that most people don't mind being ruled by toffs: well over three quarters of those surveyed thought that it didn't matter at all or at least not very much if a politician was born with a silver spoon in their mouth.

This tends to confirm the bitter experience of Labour supporters at May's by-election at Crewe and Nantwich where they lost the election to "Tory Boy Timpson" the "Tarpoley Toff". Despite the grave disadvantage of being very privileged indeed, Edward Timpson, a millionaire barrister from a seriously posh bit of Cheshire won almost fifty per cent of the vote. It appears that the working class in Crewe and Nantwich didn't care if the Tory chap was "Lord Snooty" or not. They were decidedly unimpressed by the Labour supporters who followed Tory Tim around the constituency wearing top hats and jeering at his wealth, education, profession and social standing. They might have done better if they had remembered the observation on the subject of top hats made by a *prole* to Winston Smith in 1984: "They've gorn right out they 'ave." Indeed they have.

It is odd that that Labour Party supporters or even those further to the left should attempt to

figure privilege with top hats which are now largely restricted to wedding hire, and words like "toff", used only by newspaper sub-editors worried about space or interested alliteration. It is odd because these ideas: the "fat" capitalist, the "idle" rich do not describe, or effectively caricature, a lean, tanned, hardworking capitalist class, more given to extreme sports than lounging lizard-like in hotel bars. Of course it is doubtful if these ways of figuring power and privilege ever had much force. Certainly, the beery cockney song which starts: "She was poor, but she was honest/Victim of the Squire's whim" long ago lampooned the caricature of class relations in which it was "the poor what gets the blame" and "the rich what gets the pleasure" by concluding that it was "all a bleeding shame."

More startling perhaps than the survival of these late Victorian and Edwardian fictions in the minds of Labour hecklers, socialists, and headline writers is the news that Enid Blyton has come "top of the list of the nation's most cherished and best-loved authors" in a survey for Costa Book Awards. Here, is a vision of class relations drawn from a middle class imaginary as tense as *Brief Encounter*, as down-to-earth as *This Happy Breed*, as magical as mid-night feasts in the dorm, raiding the tuck shop, or boarding at that *retro* institution of more recent invention, *Hogwarts*. Enid Blyton tells of a world of social peace in which all conflicts are resolved amicably; it is a world in which serious dissension or nastiness, if alluded to at all, is always kept outside the circle. Of course, these resolutely middle class or suburban fantasies, *Noddy*, *The Famous Five*, *The Secret Seven*, and a great many others, are not just cherished in dear old Blighty; they are more widely read than Barbara Cartland. *Crikey*, they're almost as popular as Lenin, and trans-

lated into more than sixty languages. These amusing tales or stirring adventures contrived by a schoolmistress raised in Beckenham, living in places as far-flung as Surbiton, Chessington and Beaconsfield, continue to have a powerful appeal; this imaginary England continues to exist for millions in places as diverse as Sarajevo, Mumbai, and Auckland. But, most of all this imaginary England is rooted firmly in England itself.

Nowadays, of course, this English middle class world is somewhat world weary and a bit dog-eared. When the Council Tax bills arrive the borough treasurer is lucky if he escapes assassination; it is certainly clear that a great many people would like to gently garrote the Environmental Crime Officer in retribution for violating an Englishman's right to deposit his rubbish, unsorted, in promiscuous profusion on the pavement on any day of the week that he chooses. But, you should not be fooled by our truly Olympian capacity for moaning. Despite an epidemic of foreigners, hoodies and benefit scroungers, the English middle class remains secure in its surreptitious snobberies, its time honoured decencies and parochial responsibilities; its perfidy, courteous repetitions, innate superiority and bashful militarism. It has none of the embattled insecurities associated with an intermediate class, which elsewhere might be called *petit bourgeois*. England does not have a *bourgeoisie*, petty or otherwise.

That socialists of various stripes have with diminishing returns attempted to insert the rhetoric of class resentment, class conflict, even *class war*, into this world is an indication of a profound dislocation between traditional ways of figuring socialist aspirations and the actual society in which we live. Attempts have been made, by focusing upon the *poor*, the *low paid*, the *disadvantaged*, the *underclass*, to derive

some way of dealing with the political disappearance of the working class. These attempts have by and large proved fruitless. For all intents and purposes the working class does not exist in any coherent sociological, cultural or political sense. Consequently, the working class cannot be stirred, motivated, or united by references to toffs, Sloanes, Tory Boys, or chinless wonders.

The failure of the class-based appeal of traditional socialism in the midst of modern service economies has been ameliorated to some extent by attempts to broaden the outlook of the left in relation to ethnic and sexual minorities and by broader red-green alliances around issues of pollution and ecology. But, still the nagging absence of the working class has tended to undermine the entire socialist project.

The irony of this is that the working class is larger than ever before, and in the absence of strong unions, more vulnerable to the whims of big employers than at any time since the early thirties. People engaged in routine manual or clerical labour, without much control over their jobs or the manner in which they are performed, form by far the largest element within society. The ordinary family, without significant investments, is wage dependant: the typical household's take-home pay amounts to little more than £2,335 a month. *It's no wonder Mum's gone to Iceland*. This is the reality for the *working class*, never mind the low paid, the pensioners and those dependent on benefits of one sort or another.

Yet, most people do not think of themselves as proletarians. Despite common problems they do not seek *collective* socialist solutions because most workers do not believe in a world without inequality or hierarchy. They doubt that it is possible and they're reasonably sure that they wouldn't like it anyway. This is why they

remain invincibly resistant to any attempt to tell them otherwise.

Poor people do not love rich people. Hardworking people take as dim a view of the *idle poor* as they do of the *idle rich*, and those who have it hard are sure that those who have it easy “are up to no good”. This much is clear, but unless you’re the editor of the *Daily Mail* or a member of the BNP you cannot rest politics on resentment and suspicion. Most working class people already know this, and they have known this for some considerable time.

Consequently, the belief that you can popularise socialism by promoting a politics of *class against class* is bloody daft. This strategy, common among the Labour and socialist left, runs entirely counter to the experience and outlook of the working class. If socialists want to deepen and extend democracy, political equality and social solidarity they had better think of something more effective than bashing toffs and trying to ‘politicise’ workplace disputes in their tireless efforts to ‘educate’ *the working class*.