

The New Criterion

Features September 2006

Should he have spoken?

by Roger Scruton

On the household gods of liberalism.

In 1968 the products of the postwar baby boom decided to seize the European future and to jettison the European past. In that same year Enoch Powell delivered to the Birmingham Conservatives the speech known forever after as “Rivers of Blood”: a speech that cost him his political career, and which, on one plausible interpretation, made the issue of immigration undiscussable in British politics for close to forty years. It is a speech that raises in its acutest form the question of truth: What place is there for truth in public life, and what should a politician do when comfortable falsehoods have settled down in government, and their uncomfortable negations seek forlornly for a voice?

“Human kind cannot bear very much reality,” said T. S. Eliot. It is not one of his best lines, but he used it twice—in *Murder in the Cathedral* and in *Four Quartets*—and in both places its prosaic rhythmlessness reinforces its sense, reminding us that our exaltations are invented things, and that we prefer inspiring fantasies to sobering facts. Enoch Powell was no different, and his inspiring fantasy of England caused him to address his countrymen as though they still enjoyed the benefits of a classical education and an imperial culture. How absurd, in retrospect, to end a speech warning against the effects of uncontrolled immigration with a concealed quotation from Virgil. “As I look ahead,” Powell said, “I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood.’” These words were addressed to an England that had forgotten the story of the *Aeneid*, along with every other story woven into its former identity as the “sweet, just, boyish master” of the world—to borrow Santayana’s luminous phrase. It is hardly surprising that Powell’s words were instantly converted to “rivers of blood,” and their speaker dismissed as a dangerous madman.

It is, in fact, the Cumaean Sybil who utters that prophecy in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, and although she is foreseeing the troubles that come from immigration, it is to the troubles suffered by an immigrant that she refers. The immigrant in question—Aeneas—travels to Italy at the head of a determined retinue, carrying his household gods and a divine right of residence. His intention to settle is not to be brooked, and if this means “wars, horrid wars,” so be it. Modern immigrants don’t, on the whole, behave so badly. They don’t need to. They come as the heads of families, and

even if the family might comprise four wives and twenty children, it arrives to a red carpet of legal privileges, eagerly unrolled by publicly funded lawyers, and to a welcome trough of welfare benefits that few indigenous citizens can claim, however much they have contributed to the common fund.

Yet, like Aeneas, our immigrants come carrying their household gods. Like Aeneas, they come with an unbrookable intention to make a home for themselves. And if their gods dislike the indigenous rivals, they will soon make this fact known. Such predictions as Powell made in his speech, concerning the tipping of the demographic balance, the ghettoization of the industrial cities, and the growth of resentment among the indigenous working class have been fulfilled. Only the sibylline prophecy has fallen short of the mark. Even so, the Madrid and London bombings and the murder of Theo van Gogh are viewed by many Europeans as a foretaste of things to come. It is now evident to everyone that, in the debate over immigration, in those last remaining days when it could still have made a difference, Enoch Powell was far nearer the truth than those who instantly drove him from office, and who ensured that the issue was henceforth to be discussed, if at all, only by way of condemning the “racism” and “xenophobia” of those who thought like Powell. As for the racism and xenophobia of the incomers, it was indiscernible to the liberal conscience, which has never been able to understand that liberalism is an *unusual state of mind*.

Liberalism emerges from a long-standing rule of law, shaped by the Enlightenment view of citizenship, and dependent upon the shared customs, shared language, and shared culture of a people who have lived together in a common home and acquired the habit of defending it. But it is virtually unknown among people who are seeking territory, and who have conscripted their gods to fight for it. The book of Joshua tells the story of such a people, and it contains in its bloodthirsty pages not a single liberal sentiment. The one gesture of kindness that the book records towards the indigenous people is bestowed on those who had betrayed their native city to its foes. This reward offered for the basest form of treachery indicates how far the Israelites were, in their need, from any liberal view of the human condition.

At the time when Powell made his speech, British politicians were schooled in the Bible and the Greek and Roman classics; they could dispute the factual basis for Powell’s prophecy only by putting out of mind what they had every reason to know, namely that many of the newcomers to Britain would be strangers to liberal values, attached to their own communities, suspicious towards the host culture, and anxious to insulate themselves and their children from its influence. In the face of those manifest truths our political class had recourse to Doublethink. Like the White Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, they practiced the art of believing six impossible propositions before breakfast, including the proposition that pious Muslims from the hinterlands of Asia would produce children loyal to a secular European state.

This flight from reality is not a new feature of political life. It is always easier to bequeath a problem to your successors than to face it yourself, and when the problem is intractable, Doublethink will soon erase it, as Hitler was erased from the thoughts of the appeasers, and the

Gulag from the political map of the peaceniks. Nor are American presidents any more realistic than the rest of us. When the embassy in Tehran was invaded and United States citizens taken hostage, President Carter chose not to notice what was, certainly *de facto* and probably *de jure*, a declaration of war. That may prove to have been the costliest mistake made by America in the Middle East. Likewise, the silencing of Enoch Powell has proved more costly than any other post-war domestic policy in Britain, since it has ensured that immigration can be discussed only now, when it is too late to do anything about it or to confine it to those who come in a spirit of obedience towards the indigenous law.

As I implied, Powell was also in flight from reality—the reality of British society as it was in 1968. The British people had lost their imperial identity without gaining a national identity with which to replace it. There were Scottish nationalists, Welsh nationalists, and Irish nationalists, but no English nationalists and therefore—since England was the core of Britain, the seat of government, and the central fact of our history—no British nationalists either. Powell’s invocation of Virgil fell on deaf ears—or rather on ears that pricked up only at the sound of “blood.” And his punctilious syntax, resounding with the rhythms of the Book of Common Prayer and rich in allusions to a history that was publicly remembered, if at all, only as an object of ridicule, created the impression of a *paterfamilias* in some Edwardian play, strutting at the front of the stage while his disobedient daughter flirts unnoticed in the background.

Moreover, Powell’s fantasy vision of Britain was absolutely necessary to him. The truths that he wished to put across were uttered in defense of Old England, and it was unthinkable to him that he might be speaking into the void. Powell’s England was a place made sacred by Chaucer and Shakespeare, by the Anglican settlement and the anointed monarch, by the common law and the Great Offices of State. It was the very same England that Churchill had invoked in his wartime speeches: a country whose past was lost in Arthurian mists, whose title was as God-given as that of the Israelites and whose patriotism outshone that of Rome. Those who silenced Powell therefore believed that it was not he but they who were on the side of truth. They were introducing realism and sobriety in the place of dangerous romantic dreams. Not for nothing, they said, did Powell refer to authorities who wrote in dead languages and believed forgotten myths; not for nothing did he choose, when invited onto BBC radio’s “Desert Island Discs,” only episodes from the *Ring of the Nibelung* of Richard Wagner. The man was clearly living in Cloud Cuckoo Land. And Powell accepted the expression with a wry smile: After all, it comes from Aristophanes.

Truth, Plato believed, is the business of philosophy, but it is rhetoric, not philosophy, that moves the crowd. So how can we protect people from fatal errors, such as those that tempted Athens into conflict with Sparta, or those which, much later, led the Germans, mesmerized by Hitler, into an equally suicidal war? Plato did not believe that philosophers would be listened to: Their words would sound strange and ambiguous, and their eyes would be turned from present and time-bound emergencies towards the stratosphere of eternal truths. Nevertheless among the rhetorical devices of politicians, it is still possible to distinguish the noble lies from their ignoble negations.

The noble lie is the untruth that conveys a truth, the myth that maps reality. It is thus that Plato justified the stories of the gods and their origins which inspire people to live as though nearer to the source of things, and to discover in themselves the virtues that exist only when we find our way to believing in them.

In the Platonic scheme of things, Powell's vision of England might be seen as a noble lie. He was exhorting his countrymen to *live up to* something, and that thing was an ideal image of their country, shaped by myth in the style of Hesiod. The England of Powell's dream was fashioned from heroic deeds and immemorial customs, from sacred rites and solemn offices whose meaning was inscrutable from any point outside the social context that defined them. By fixing their sights on this vision, the British people would be in some way perfecting themselves, and establishing their right to their ancestral territory. In place of this noble vision, however, they were also being offered an ignoble lie. The emerging multicultural community would make no place for a common obedience, a common loyalty, or a shared history: It would inevitably deprive the British people of their geographical, cultural, and political inheritance. And yet they were being told that it would not harm them, that they would even be improved by it, since it would inject energy, variety, and youth into a tired old way of life.

The problem with Plato's theory of the noble lie is that noble lies have to be believed by the one who utters them. Otherwise people will see through the deception and withdraw their support. And a lie that is believed is not really a lie. It was impossible to discern, in Powell's steely manner, ancestor-laden syntax, and fixed, expressionless gaze, whether he really believed in the nation that he described with his toneless incantations. He was invoking England in the way that a Professor of Classics (which once he was) invokes Greece—as an idea whose roots are buried deep in the archaeology of consciousness.

Plato's theory of the noble lie was a first shot at describing the role of myth in human thinking. Myths are not falsehoods, nor are they scientific theories: They are attempts to capture difficult truths in symbols. Myths also arm us against realities that are otherwise too fateful or disturbing to bear contemplation. Powell's deep attachment to Wagner went hand in hand with his own desire for a national myth of England. The composer of *The Ring of the Nibelung* was adamant that the work possessed "the ring of truth." Myth, for Wagner, was the opposite of fantasy: It was a truth-directed, rather than an illusion-directed, device. He made this observation in connection with the old myths of Greek tragedy, and saw the tragedians as disinterring from those myths the "concealed deep truths" about the human condition that they symbolized. In the same spirit Wagner wished to use the old myths of the Germanic peoples to explore truths about the modern psyche. His success in this is of less importance than the attempt. Thanks to Wagner, myth-making became a deliberate enterprise, rather than the work of the collective unconscious.

But conscious myth—the noble lie—is a different thing altogether from the myths that emerge from the unconscious fears and longings of a people. Unconscious myth conveys truth because it is the residue of life and the after-image of suffering. Conscious myths, however, are the

instruments of human purpose. In the work of a great artist like Wagner they may point towards the truth. Released into the stream of political life, however, they can be directed as easily towards falsehood. Many blame Wagner for that exercise in collective mythopeia which brought the Nazi Party to power in Germany and extinguished the light of civilization across the continent. And many, looking back on Powell's vision of England, believe that it showed the same dangerous tendency—not towards the truth of the modern condition, but towards a fantasy. Once released from the educated mind in which it was first conceived, this fantasy would run riot in the feelings of ignorant people and there fully justify the charge of "racism" that was wrongly but understandably directed at Powell.

Such is the controversy as we see it now, forty years on: an ignoble lie against a dangerous myth. Whichever way you look at it, truth was the victim, and while the truth can now be cautiously acknowledged, it is acknowledged too late. Decisions can still be taken, but only in the hope of limiting the damage. And even now, when opinion across Europe is unanimous that immigration must be controlled, and that Muslims must be integrated into the secular culture, liberal politicians are refusing to admit to a problem or to confess that they are the cause of it. They still preach "multiculturalism" as the sign of our "vibrant" future; they still condemn "racism and xenophobia" as the enemy; they still try to state and solve the problem by the promiscuous multiplication of "human rights." Their Enlightenment creed makes it all but impossible for them to acknowledge the fundamental truth, which is that indigenous communities have legitimate expectations which take precedence over the demands of strangers. True, indigenous communities may also have duties of charity towards those strangers—or towards some of them. But charity is a gift, and there is no right to receive it, still less to force it from those reluctant to give.

The destructive effects of liberalism are not usually felt by the liberals themselves—not immediately, at least. The first victim of liberal immigration policies is the indigenous working class. When the welfare state was first conceived, it was in order to provide insurance for poorer members of the indigenous community, by taxing their income in exchange for the benefits which they may one day need. The rights involved were quasi-contractual: a right of the state to levy contributions in exchange for a right of the citizen to receive support. The very term used to describe the deal in Britain—"national insurance"—expresses the old understanding, that the welfare system is part of being together as a nation, of belonging with one's neighbors, as mutual beneficiaries of an ancestral right. The liberal view of rights, as universal possessions which make no reference to history, community, or obedience, has changed all that. Indigenous people can claim no precedence, not even in this matter in which they have sacrificed a lifetime of income for the sake of their own future security. Immigrants are given welfare benefits as of right, and on the basis of their need, whether or not they have paid or ever will pay taxes. And since their need is invariably great—why else have they come here?—they take precedence over existing residents in the grant of housing and income support. Those with a handful of wives are even more fortunate, since only one of their marriages is recognized in European systems of law: the remaining wives are "single mothers," with all the fiscal advantages which attach to that label. All this has entailed

that the stock of “social housing” once reserved for the indigenous poor is now almost entirely occupied by people whose language, customs, and culture mark them out as foreigners.

It is not “racist” to draw attention to this kind of fact. Nor is it racist to argue that indigenous people must take precedence over newcomers, who have to earn their right of residence and cannot be allowed to appropriate the savings of their hosts. But it is easier for me to write about these matters in an American intellectual journal than in an English newspaper, and if I tried to write about these things in a Belgian newspaper, I could be in serious trouble with the courts. The iron curtain of censorship that came down in the wake of Powell’s speech has not lifted everywhere; on the contrary, if the EU has its way, it will be enshrined in the criminal code, with “racism and xenophobia” —defined as vaguely as is required to silence unwanted opinion—made into an extraditable offense throughout the Union.

The problem with censorship, as John Stuart Mill pointed out a century and half ago, is that it makes it impossible for those who impose it to discover that they are wrong. The error persists, preventing the discussion that might produce a remedy, and ensuring that the problem will grow. Yet when truth cannot make itself known in words, it will make itself known in deeds. The truth about Hitler burst on the world in 1939, notwithstanding all the pious words of the appeasers. And the truth about immigration is beginning to show itself in Europe, notwithstanding all the liberal efforts to conceal it. It is not an agreeable truth; nor can we, in the face of it, take refuge in the noble lies of Enoch Powell. The fact is that the people of Europe are losing their homelands, and therefore losing their place in the world. I don’t envisage the Tiber one day foaming with much blood, nor do I see it blushing as the voice of the muezzin sounds from the former cathedral of St. Peter. But the city through which the Tiber flows will one day cease to be Italian, and all the expectations of its former residents, whether political, social, cultural, or personal, will suffer a violent upheaval, with results every bit as interesting as those that Powell prophesied.

Roger Scruton (1944–2020) was an English philosopher and writer who first contributed to *The New Criterion* in 1982.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 25 Number 1 , on page 22

Copyright © 2020 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2006/9/should-he-have-spoken>