



Eaton Alive

**Publish Date:**

August 2019

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*This article from the [August 2019 IPA Review](#) is by IPA Research Fellow, [Andrew Bushnell](#)*

In its 12-17 April edition, the British political magazine *New Statesman* published an interview with the renowned philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, conducted by a journalist of considerably less renown named George Eaton. In advance of its publication, Eaton spruiked the interview on Twitter, claiming that Scruton had “made a series of outrageous remarks” about Hungarian Jews, Chinese people, and Muslims. What followed was a classic social media pile-on, first from the internet’s Jacobin fellow travellers but then, unforgivably, with even Conservative Party MPs Tom Tugendhat and Johnny Mercer and grandees like the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne throwing their bodies on the heap. Housing Secretary James Brokenshire sacked Scruton from his unpaid advisory position as chairman of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

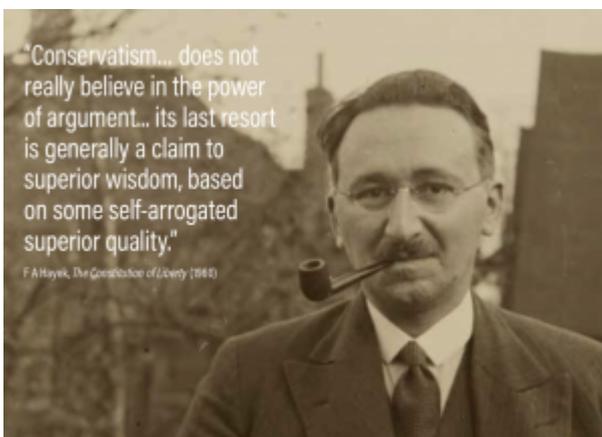
Tugendhat, Mercer and Brokenshire all subsequently had to apologise to Scruton, and in the end,

on 23 July, Brokenshire reinstated Scruton to the role. Why? Because, of course, it quickly turned out Scruton had said nothing particularly controversial, the left-wing activist posing as a journalist had distorted the truth, these quasi-conservatives had once more wet themselves 'on principle', and the internet is eating civilisation alive. None of which may surprise you. Even though this hit job failed, this incident is still noteworthy because the facts are rarely packaged quite so neatly.

Eaton's tweets had contained short quotes from Scruton and a link to the interview in which these quotes were given scarcely more context. But it was clear even from the article that Eaton's tweet about Scruton's commentary on "the Chinese" being replicas of one another was actually about the Chinese Communist Party's aspiration to make "robots out of their own people". When the tape was eventually released, after a campaign by the writer Douglas Murray, it revealed that Scruton had been his usual reasonable self. Regarding Hungary, Scruton had not been "heedless of the anti-Semitic portrayal of the philanthropist George Soros as a Jewish puppet-master" but had rather reiterated his previously-stated view that anti-semitism was a barrier to a coherent Hungarian national identity. Regarding Muslims, Scruton did indeed claim that the word 'Islamophobia' had been coined by the Muslim Brotherhood, but it was in the context of defending the compatibility of a certain interpretation of Islam with the British form of governance. And so on.

The true purpose of politics is to establish an idea of what is good

For his part, Scruton was in no doubt what had transpired, telling the BBC he had been the subject of a "witch-hunt" designed to "silence the conservative voice". And who could reasonably disagree? After Scruton's firing, Eaton posted to Instagram a picture of himself swigging from a champagne bottle. The picture was captioned, libellously, "The feeling when you get right-wing racist and homophobe Roger Scruton sacked as a Tory government adviser". The Guardian's Zoe Williams concluded that Scruton, and by extension any conservative being "bullied", simply missed the context that naturally excludes his views from public discourse: "the principles of universal human rights—more than that, love, fellowship, solidarity—are more important than whether or not a reactionary dude gets to keep on chairing a commission".



The huffing came from right across the academia-journalism stupidity complex. King's College London professor Jonathan Portes whined that Scruton "is part of an intellectual culture giving respectability to racism" and enlightened souls "understand the direct links between the views of Scruton and Murray and those of Tommy Robinson and Gerard Batten" (the latter two being associated with the UK Independence Party).

Though the *New Statesman* issued a perfunctory apology on 8 July, Eaton was not censured; he had done his job, which was to provide an opportunity for high-minded commentary about the fundamental incompatibility of conservatism and polite society, and to hasten the chasing of one from the other.

As Eaton demonstrates, it is increasingly the function of journalism to promote ideology as fact. Eaton is not a journalist in the traditional sense; he does not tell stories, does not investigate facts or incidents, does not inquire into the world at all. He has only one story to tell, and it is always the same. Yet for that very reason, conservatives should not retreat to the position that only the facts matter—doing so leaves conservatism vulnerable to attacks of this kind by failing to explain why the facts ought to matter in politics. An ideological argument demands an ideological response.

However, in the post-WWII era, conservatism has mostly refused to articulate in universal terms its claim that paying attention to specifics of time and place is good for society and good for individuals. This is why conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott dismissed FA Hayek's work as a plan not to have a plan, and why Scruton described conservatism as "dogma" rather than political philosophy. But this approach has invited the charge, from Hayek among others, that conservatism is merely an expression of self-interest without any guiding principle and therefore it has nothing to say to people who do not benefit from the status quo.

Such critics contend that conservatism, because it is unreasonable, stands opposed to the entire project of modern political philosophy, which they conceive as an attempt to reestablish the social order on a foundation of secular reason. Never stated though is the implication that if this narrow idea of political philosophy is true, then so is the assertion that its adherents are trying to drive conservatives from politics—the witchhunt Scruton identifies.

So, if there could be anything of merit in Eaton's approach to politics and to journalism, it is that he has reminded conservatives of the need to assert a basic value claim: a reason to be conservative. And this leads conservatives back to the true purpose of politics, which is to establish an idea of what is good.

Conservatism must take an ideological stance, however reluctantly

It is no coincidence that the Scruton incident took place against a background of renewed

argument within the centre-right. For several generations, there has been an alliance of conservatives and liberals of the type that Hayek called ‘Old Whigs’, based on a shared interest in preventing levelling doctrines like socialism from rationalising all institutions and individuals towards a particular vision of egalitarian justice. Part of this bargain for conservatives was the opportunity to borrow analytical rigour from classical economics. Framing arguments in economic terms allowed conservatives to pretend that they were merely, and non-ideologically, responding to empirical data—just the facts, so to speak. But that posture has left conservatives with little room to move in the face of mounting evidence that laissez-faire is not enabling the preservation and continued enactment of traditional forms of life, but rather contributing to their disappearance. For Old Whigs, this disappearance is no more than the expression of individual choice; for conservatives, it means the loss of important information about what the good life consists in and thus how individuals ought to live. Where do conservatives go when the facts are not in our favour?



*Sir Roger Scruton: the subject of a “witch-hunt” to “silence the conservative voice”. Photo: Elekes Andor*

Conservatism must take an ideological stance, however reluctantly. But in its struggle to articulate the loss it perceives, and to find an agenda that might hope to do something about it, conservatism confronts its maladaptation to modern conditions. Rising secularism, mass democracy, the omnipotent administrative state, and the internet combine to make political philosophy more important than before, as the means by which voters can interpret the actions and promises of the political class, and as the venue for debates about the purpose and nature of politics. Yet conservatives have retreated from making ideological claims, meekly accepting the view of their critics that conservatism and political philosophy are incompatible – which is

ultimately what underlies the condemnation of Scruton by Tory MPs who deeply desire recognition as the progressives they really are.

Unfortunately, Scruton walked unarmed into an ideological battle. Worse, the battlefield has changed dramatically in recent years. As we become ever more immersed in the simulacrum provided by information technology, it is clear that the Millian hope that a contest of speech would lead to the truth has been replaced by brutal realpolitik. The truth is now what we (or they) say it is. As the Scruton case illustrates social media and the internet have the capacity to rapidly accelerate and amplify politics: from interview to outrage to sacking to backlash in a matter of hours. Now more than ever, conservatism must be prepared to argue from first principles, positively shaping the world and redirecting people to the things that matter. Otherwise, reality itself will be buried beneath constructivist cant.

Conservatives must push back against activists such as Eaton

Scruton would not be surprised this is where we have ended up. His masterful *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (see the IPA Review of August 2016) describes the postmodern “nonsense machine” and how deliberately obscure philosophy provides a justification for reducing politics to an elemental struggle for power and supremacy. Indeed, in the Eaton interview, Scruton noted previous misrepresentations of his views and attacks upon his character were designed to undermine his authority, “and authority is the only thing I have, authority that comes from hard work and thinking”. But here Scruton appeals to a distinction that his opponents do not recognise, between power and authority.

Scruton is right that study and work ennoble power as authority, but this suggests what is needed is an ideological conservatism that insists upon objectivity, facts, and reality—not as prior to the good or separate from it, but as the means by which the good is made available to everyone. Conservatism can be thought of as the ideology that explains why the truth matters in politics. This is why it is increasingly vital. It is a small victory that Scruton has his job back, but activists such as Eaton will continue to push conservatives and reality out of the public sphere until conservatism starts pushing back.