

PETER BAUER AND THE ENGLISH
CLASS SYSTEM
John O'Sullivan

It's a great pleasure to be here and a great pleasure to be among a group of people who, like myself, count themselves as not simply admirers of Peter Bauer but also as old friends of his. We regret his passing and can still summon up many happy memories of the time that we spent with him.

Now, it may seem odd to begin a talk about Peter by talking about Clement Richard Attlee, the leader of the postwar British Labour government and, throughout much of his political life, the butt of many jokes about his own irrelevance: "An empty taxi drove up outside 10 Downing Street . . . Mr. Attlee got out," "Mr. Attlee, a modest man with a lot to be modest about," and so on. But, when he reached the end of his life, he wrote a really amusing limerick of his own career, which goes as follows:

Few thought he was even a starter.
There were many who thought themselves smarter.
But he finished PM,
CH, and OM,
An earl and a Knight of the Garter.

For Americans who don't follow British titles, the Order of Merit and the Companionship of Honour are the two most senior titles that one can receive under the British system. This astonishing rise from a modest middle-class background to all-around eminence was probably the only thing that Attlee had in common with Peter Bauer. I've not come to the end of Attlee—he'll come back later. But, it is

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interesting that the two men did, in a sense, start from nowhere and end up at the very top of their chosen careers—at the very top of what Disraeli called the “greasy pole.”

When Peter arrived in Britain in 1934, the penniless son of a Budapest bookie, he spoke English hardly at all. At the time of his death 50 years later, he was a peer of the realm, a fellow of the British Academy, professor emeritus at the London School of Economics, and the lifetime fellow of a Cambridge college. It is hard to beat distinctions of that order. This rise to eminence did not seem to affect or deeply mark Peter on the surface. He did not become haughty, arrogant, or snobbish. But I believe that it did deeply influence Peter’s view and concept of his adopted country. It made him, in my view, an English patriot of a very distinctive kind.

He saw England, as many East European refugees and exiles saw England in the 1930s, as a successful liberal society. I think he personally found it a congenial place. But he lived to see many of the features of English life he admired either abandoned or fallen into decay. And he joined in the last great campaign to restore that kind of liberalism—that kind of conservative liberalism—that Lady Thatcher led in the 1980s.

That is the theme of what I want to say today. But this talk is not a systematic analytical examination of Peter’s ideas in economics or in social philosophy. There are many other people here who are better qualified, both by their discipline and by their knowledge of his work, to do that. These remarks are rather to be seen as reminiscences based, in part, on my working with Peter on a number of articles in the 1970s and 1980s and on maintaining a friendship with him until the end of his life.

Peter liked journalists. I was one of several whom he sought as collaborators on various articles. We used to collaborate around his dinner table: having first an extremely good dinner, then sitting down to work for two or three hours, and then finally when he felt we had done enough, being allowed to have a nice glass of port before going home. Those occasions were as much tutorials as working dinners. He would throw out all kinds of questions, test your knowledge, and generally turn the whole thing into a tremendously entertaining game.

I remember on one occasion—I believe this test is familiar to economists, but it wasn’t to me—he asked Frank Johnson (an editorial writer for the *Daily Telegraph* and later editor of the *Spectator*) and me, “Tell me: A professor goes on holiday to Cyprus. He is well-known and respected. He returns home having paid his holiday bill with a single check. The man is so well-known and respected in

Cyprus that the check is never presented to his bank in England but instead circulates around Cyprus with people endorsing it and re-endorsing it endlessly. Who will pay for his holiday?” Frank and I discussed it and then we eventually agreed that the entire population of Cyprus would pay for his holiday as a result of the small increase in the money supply that his check represented. Peter said we might be right—there was some dispute about this among economists.

Then about a week later, he rang up and he said, “What you and Frank concluded on that occasion has just been empirically verified. There has been a bank strike in Ireland for the last month. It has now ended. But it has been discovered that during that period the people kept their spending going by endlessly endorsing checks, one after the other. And, in the course of the month, they have just written themselves a 12 percent increase in the money supply.”

Well, from these dinner debates over a period of years, one got a good grasp of Peter’s mind, of how it worked, of his attitudes, and so on—in particular, I think, about his attitudes toward his adopted land.

Britain in the 1930s

Now, in one respect, Peter was not an uncommon figure. Britain in the 1930s was a haven for many people from Eastern and Central Europe, particularly intellectuals. It was also, as I said, a successful liberal society. It was a democratic society too. Yet it didn’t seem to Peter to have the vices that other democratic societies developed: it wasn’t leveling, it wasn’t intrusive, privacy was respected, and institutions had an independence, which in other countries governments restricted. It managed to be more stable and prosperous than other societies of that kind.

I several times interviewed F. A. Hayek before his death, and he said something very similar. He said to me, “England was the first place I felt at home, and the Reform Club the place where I felt *most* at home.” I can’t explain that myself. I’ve been a member of the Reform Club for more than 30 years and I was once a mere two deaths away from having a permanent bedroom there, but I would hesitate to think of it as home. It’s a pleasant sort of place and I’m glad that they’ve allowed me to stay in, but it doesn’t seem to me to be a very domestic place. But as Hayek and Peter in different ways both said, it reminded them that this was a country in which you were allowed a good deal of privacy—and this was true of social life as it was of political regulation. Or, as Hayek once said, “I like England because English people can break off a conversation without giving offense.”

Hayek was an established academic, as were many others when they arrived. Peter was in a very different situation and might have had a very different experience. He had no money, he spoke no English, he had no degree at that point (being in the middle of a law degree in Budapest). He had come to Cambridge at the urging of a friend of his father's and also because he wanted to study under two distinguished international lawyers. Peter simply turned up one day in Cambridge in March 1934 and presented himself at half a dozen colleges at the tutorial hour of the senior tutors. Remarkably, he got five acceptances, and from them he chose Caius.

In 1985, Peter discussed those early days and his early memories of Caius in an interview with the Caius magazine, *The Caiian*, in which he made plain—here I'm coming to the point about class—how well he was received. Let me just read you his own words:

I had serious problems. I was gauche and ignorant, both of the ways of the country and of the language. I found it very difficult to follow the lectures or even ordinary conversation. I had never read a book on economics or on economic history before coming to Cambridge. I did not know where coal was being mined. I could not have managed to get through Part I, let alone get a First, had it not been for the great help I received . . . I also had very little money, much less than the Miners Federation of Great Britain allowed to the undergraduate whom they sponsored in Cambridge. From mid-February 1935 to the examinations I hardly ever had a proper meal for lunch, only coffee and crisps. In my second year I was awarded an Exhibition which eased my financial position considerably.

In summing up his experience, Bauer notes:

I encountered no prejudice of any kind and experienced friendliness, hospitality and tolerance. The notion that this college or Cambridge generally was then pervaded by xenophobia, anti-Semitism and exclusiveness is simply untrue. I believe this widely held view has been reinforced by the film *Chariots of Fire* [then recently out, and this hostile view has been since reinforced by the series on British television about the Cambridge spies]. I did not see this film, but I had read enough reviews and heard enough comment to know that it would make me very angry.

Now, that was Peter's personal experience, and I believe it was a terribly important shaping. It does carry a possible objection to itself, of course. Was not, perhaps, Caius an oasis in an otherwise intolerant country? Well, Peter did not dismiss that possibility. He did acknowledge that there was some intolerance in Britain. He thought it relatively low by the standards of other countries. More to the point, he was impressed by the fact that it was possible for independent

institutions like Caius to ignore popular sentiment and opinion even when that was very powerful and strong.

In his interview, he cited two episodes in which there was a wave, as he put it, of xenophobia sweeping the country. The first was after Klaus Fuchs was revealed to be an East German agent. It was at that point that Peter was up for a fellowship, and the college simply went ahead and appointed him even though, as Peter himself says, it would not have been perhaps surprising if people had been suspicious of Central Europeans from then-communist countries. The second was after the battle in which the “Glorious Glosters,”—a Gloucestershire regiment, fought bravely in a Korean war engagement but was decimated by the Chinese. The college appointed a Chinese student to a fellowship who, in addition to being from communist China, made plain to the selection board that he intended after the period of the fellowship to return and continue his work there.

It impressed Peter, I think, that Britain was a society in which independent institutions could defy popular whims. And, in a slightly different context, as the scholar Shirley Robin Letwin has said, the superiority of a liberal society is demonstrated by the fact that it allows enclaves of socialism and communism to operate within itself. A communist society does not allow such enclaves and, indeed, will treat those people who behave in capitalist ways—like, for example, manufacturing and selling pencils—by imposing heavy sanctions on them right up to the death penalty. And they do not accept capitalism inside their own society for the very good reason that too many people would become capitalist.

When he came to consider British society more broadly in the light of his own experience, Peter discovered that he was often, as Basil Yamey said, in the minority and in opposition to the general point of view. He found in this case that he was confronting a powerfully entrenched myth—namely, that Britain was a rigid and oppressive class society. Malcolm Muggeridge once said that intellectuals have sex on the brain, which is a very uncomfortable place to have it. Peter replied, no, that was not true. The intellectuals actually had class on the brain, and he cited numerous cases of intellectuals asserting that Britain was a society in which movement across classes was more or less impossible because of the rigidity of class barriers.

Peter denied this. In his essay, “Class on the Brain,” first published in 1997 and reprinted in *From Subsistence to Exchange*, he argued that Britain was, in fact, a very open society. And he was able to cite plenty of statistics to buttress his view. He cited all the latest social science evidence demonstrating the openness and social mobility of Britain, which was approximately equal to that of Australia and the

United States. In fact, he then cited something most interesting, which is a report from the magazine *New Society*. Let me read it to you:

Over the past few months, John Goldthorpe and his colleagues in Nuffield College, Oxford, have begun to publish the results of their analysis of social mobility in Britain. . . . And these, for once, challenge rather than reinforce stereotypes. For they show that Britain is a much more mobile society than the received wisdom suggests: that we are a surprisingly open society, with people moving up and down the occupational escalators in a bewilderingly complex pattern. For example, only a quarter of those in social class 1—managers and professionals—had fathers in the same category: rather less than the proportion drawn from a manual working-class background. . . . Nor is the loud silence which has accompanied the publication of these findings an isolated example of the reaction to research which doesn't fit easily into conventional pigeonholes.

Now, even though the latest social science research confirmed Peter's skepticism about the "rigid class" theory, statistics were not for Peter very often the decisive matter. I remember having dinner with him on one occasion, and he asked me what I thought of national income statistics. I said I supposed they were okay. He replied that I ought to know they were nonsense. He argued from this example: "Did you have a good dinner tonight?" And I said, "Yes, very good." He said, "No you didn't! It was a terrible dinner! Last year when you came, you had an excellent dinner. That's because my housekeeper has changed in the meantime. In the last year, my standard of living has taken a dramatic fall—but that is nowhere registered in the national income statistics!"

When it came to the question of Britain and social class, therefore, Peter relied first of all on his own experience—which you've heard about—and second on the anecdotal evidence of the men and women who have risen to the top of British society from humble positions. Anecdotalism is not held in high regard by social science today, but the sheer accumulation of evidence in the number of careers of poor but successful people in his book is powerfully persuasive; it goes on for page after page. Those of us who knew Peter know that he could cite an almost endless edition on separate examples as well.

I will just confine myself to one passage, which is describing people who have reached the top of politics:

Disraeli was prime minister from 1866 to 1868 and 1874 to 1880; Lloyd George, a very poor orphan brought up by an uncle who was a shoemaker, was chancellor of the exchequer by 1908 and prime

minister from 1916 to 1922; and Ramsay MacDonald, illegitimate son of a fisherwoman, was prime minister in 1923–1924 and from 1929 to 1935. None of them had been to university. Lloyd George and MacDonald had elementary education only, and Disraeli attended a relatively unknown secondary school. More recently, although Mr. Heath and Mrs. Thatcher went to university, their backgrounds are not exactly upper-class. Nor, of course, were those of Mr. Wilson, Mr. Callaghan, Mr. Healey, Mr. Kinnock, and Mr. Smith [all leaders of the Labour Party]. Mr. Major, of course, came from a very modest background and left school at the age of sixteen with only two O-levels. Of the contenders for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1997, Mr. Clarke, Mr. Hague, Mr. Howard, and Mr. Redwood all went to state schools and were, respectively, the sons of a watchmaker, a small businessman, a Romanian refugee, and a cost accountant.

The truth, as it emerged in Peter's arguments and as I believe to be the case myself, is that Britain is a class society insofar as classes exist and are denoted by accent, clothes, education, and taste. These classes exist, though they have changed very remarkably in the last 40 years. The existence of these classes gave society balance and stability—you might say that Britain was a sort of community of communities. But it was easily possible for people to rise and fall from one class to another; to become what Bernard Shaw called "upstarts" and "downstarts." And when they did that, they simply adapted to the manners of their new class position; or, as Ogden Nash put it, "In America, a rich butter and egg man is simply a rich butter and egg man. But in England, he is Sir Benjamin Buttery Bart"—Bart. being the compression for Baronet.

New Obstacles to Class Mobility

It was not, therefore, a society that was rigid but a society open to talent. Peter then went on to point out that, ironically, the changes since 1934 designed to ameliorate its alleged rigidity and to reduce class distinctions—and to replace them with either merit or equality—had in fact led to the erection of new barriers to advancement that in some respects were greater obstacles than the class barriers of 1934. He himself pointed out in the interview I mentioned that it would not be possible today for a young man to arrive in Cambridge with no financial backing, speaking no English, and to be accepted into the college and given the assistance that he was given.

Of course, Americans will recognize the same situation in this country in which credentialism is increasingly a barrier to people who discover that they have abilities later in life that were not detected by

them or by others at earlier times. And, as anyone who has been in a position of having to hire or fire people knows, there is an additional set of requirements that prevent talent from reaching its proper level in the form of racial and gender preferences.

There is finally another consequence. In pursuit of these ideas, particularly equality, the British government has recently intruded upon the independence of the universities in a flagrant manner. Caius and all the other institutions whose independence Peter valued have fallen under the sway of philistine social engineers, who regard academic excellence as, at best, a secondary consideration. It is to Peter's reaction and resistance to this creeping egalitarian intrusion that I now turn.

Peter's role in developing and advancing what is now called Thatcherism has never been given, in my view, proper credit. But it was a very major one. First of all, Peter was part of the revival of classical liberalism in Britain. I date that from 1957, when the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) was founded by Ralph Harris and Arthur Seldon. Peter was one of the major figures, along with others present like Basil Yamey, in the IEA network that then spread. The IEA published his work on development economics and these ideas subsequently began to influence conservative politics from the 1960s onward. Lady Thatcher herself learned them from Sir Keith Joseph; and Sir Keith himself from Peter Bauer's personal influence.

In fact, there was one occasion in which Sir Keith was giving a talk in a suburban constituency and a man stood up and asked for his opinion of government aid. Sir Keith gave a characteristically anguished reply. He said, "Well, as a believing and practicing Jew with a strong respect and attachment to the Jewish tradition of philanthropy, I really feel we have an obligation to help these countries that are poorer than ourselves. On the other hand, I've recently been reading the works of Professor P. T. Bauer, who argues that foreign aid is an actual obstacle to development and serves to assist the oppression of poor people by their despotic governments. But what do you think?" The man replied, "I am Professor P. T. Bauer." They went on to become good friends or, as I think Keith would have put it, teacher and pupil.

Second, Peter was a member of the influential intellectual salon around Shirley Robin Letwin and her husband Bill, both Americans, incidentally, from Chicago. That circle included Michael Oakshott, F. A. Hayek, Enoch Powell, Arthur Shenfield, Kenneth Minogue, and many others. It was the center of an enormous amount of early conservative rethinking, and through its contacts, a strong influence on the Tory rethinking of the 1970s. Mrs. Letwin's son Oliver, by the

way, is now a leading figure of the Conservative frontbench and one of a troupe of talented Cambridge graduates who Shirley brought into the cadre of conservative intellectuals.

Third, Peter played a role directly in conservative organizations. Notably, he was an active member of the conservative philosophy group that used to meet in the houses of the Members of Parliament in the 1970s. A paper would be read—Oakeshott first delivered his distinction between civil and enterprise associations to that group. Dinner would be served. Then, after dinner, there would be a lively debate. Lady Thatcher often attended—she has never really stopped being an attentive student. And Peter was a strong, witty, effective debater on those occasions. Because he was of a conservative disposition as well as a convinced exponent of classical liberal positions, he persuaded many otherwise nervous traditional Tories to adopt the risky business of monetarism, deregulation, and the reform of the trade unions.

Fourth, Peter had strong links to journalism and many friends among journalists. He wanted our help in some ways because, although a good writer, Peter did suffer from one thing: he wanted to distill every sentence so that it not only contained his central point but also was armored against every possible objection to it. The result was a kind of armadillo prose, which limped slowly across the page. He believed also, like Hayek, that journalism was vital to getting out the truth to the wider public. One of Peter's most familiar phrases to us all was, "What matters in the modern world is not the voice, but the echo." He was very friendly with journalists like Colin Welsh, Paul Johnson, Andrew Alexander, who is here, Perry Worsthorne, and others. In fact, I remember one occasion in which Frank Johnson was working with Peter on something. Frank used to try to prove Peter was wrong, largely from motives of mischief. On one occasion he said, "I've just been reading the works of this man, Professor J. K. Galbraith. And he says your arguments on the market, *they're all wrong*. He says that corporations now control the market through advertising, and they've abolished consumer sovereignty. What's your reply to that?"

Peter said, "What is my reply to that? What is my reply to that? Why don't you play me a pop song and ask me what is my reply to that?"

Anyway, Frank and he collaborated for many years very happily.

Frank was, like me, on the staff of the *Daily Telegraph*. And Peter's relationship with the *Telegraph* is I think important and interesting. Peter was one of our gurus when I was on the staff at the time. We ran articles by him and his name often appeared in other people's

articles as well. In retrospect the *Daily Telegraph* in the 1970s, particularly, was a key institution in developing a classical liberal critique of the Tory-Left consensus under Ted Heath and in developing the set of ideas that subsequently Lady Thatcher picked up and that became known as Thatcherism.

What were the results of Peter's efforts in all these fields? First of all, the British economy was significantly reformed in the 1980s. It is now a successful enterprise economy, and that success has been entrenched by the fact that both major parties accept the market as the basis of the economy. There was, secondly, relatively little change in the British government's foreign aid policy under the Thatcher governments. Jim Buchanan will not need to be told the reason: it's directly related to his theory of public choice economics. The political costs of curtailing government-to-government aid were very substantial and the fiscal gains were extremely modest. And, for that reason, Peter's views on this were never developed by the Conservative governments. Still, Peter himself became a peer, something of which he was very proud. Lady Thatcher selected him for the peerage partly because of his past work and also, as a working peer, she wanted him actually to add intellectual support in the House of Lords. Perhaps, too, she was tired of hearing Peter complain that the Tories, unlike Labour, never rewarded their academic friends. At any rate, she shut him up on that one.

Now, to have been a pioneer of Thatcherism is not universally regarded as a sign of virtue. In recent years, the Tory governments of the 1980s have been under attack from two directions. First, the Left has condemned their neglect of society, misquoting her phrase, "There is no such thing as society"—I'll be happy to explain the origin, if you're interested—and ascribing such developments as the increased crime, family breakdown, the growth of the underclass, and the social pathologies to this alleged neglect of society. That analysis has, secondly, been repeated in a slightly different way by some traditional conservatives. And they see the same social pathologies as a result of the weakening of traditional British institutions, such as the civil service, neighborhood organizations, and even trade unions under the pressures of individualism and market forces.

What weakens these two critiques in my view, however, is the matter of dates. When did these pathologies start? When did crime start to rise? Illegitimacy to increase? Family breakdown to get seriously worse? Divorce figures rocket? And so on. Well, we do in fact know precisely when this started to happen. The sociologist Christie Davies, a friend of Peter's incidentally, has recently pointed out in his book *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*, that we can date the major

changes of this kind—in particular the crime and illegitimacy figures beginning to rise—from 1955. The other changes follow in inexorable succession. By 1978, the socialist writer Jeremy Seabrook lamented in his significantly titled book *What Went Wrong?*² how low-income council estates were squalid and crime-ridden, how crime was increasingly endemic, how illegitimacy was rising, how families would be weakened, how an underclass had been created.

The upheavals of the following year's winter of discontent were eloquent testimony to the fact that the social cement of fellowship and community feeling had already crumbled away. Mrs. Thatcher is open to criticism for failing to tackle some of these pathologies in the years that followed. I would argue myself that she had no alternative but to tackle the more pressing problems of economic decline, inflation, and the Soviet threat first. But whether I am correct in that or not, Thatcherism can hardly be held responsible for events that began 24 years before she entered office.

Now, this may seem to have taken us slightly away from the topic of Peter Bauer. Not so. It directly relates to Peter's view of Britain's society. Davies' book I mentioned a moment ago divided modern Britain into three stages. Between 1830 and 1890, there was "reforming Britain," in which major social, political, economic, electoral, and moral changes and reforms were introduced, transforming society, particularly changing the lower orders into the respectable working class. From 1890 to 1955, there was "respectable Britain," which I'll come back to. And since 1955 to the present, we've had "permissive Britain."

Now, it was respectable Britain to which Peter emigrated in 1934. That society was, as we have seen, a class society—but a mobile and liberal one. It was also a stable society; a religious society; a society marked by strong families, gentleness of manners, moral values of self-help, diligence, and respectability. It is easy to mock that kind of society, and I would not deny that aspects of it were stifling. But then, as Samuel Butler remarked, those who condemn respectability as a tepid and inadequate imitation of real virtue usually turn out to be the very same people who cannot live up to its inexacting requirements.

The society I'm describing was liberal in its economic and political arrangements, hence the independence of Caius that so impressed Peter. But it was conservative and even Puritan in its social customs and behavior. And the first political virtues rested on the second social ones. These two sets of virtues permeated all classes, except the intelligentsia and possibly the aristocracy. It took a great deal to knock the stuffing out of respectable Britain. Even after two world wars and an economic slump, it was still going reasonably strong in the early

1950s when I was in school. I still remember its dull and endless Sundays vividly.

What finally broke it, or so it seems to me, were the unintended consequences of the welfare state. Respectable Britain began to die after all in 1955, 10 years after the Attlee government was elected and 5 years after all the major welfare, socialist measures that it enacted. What we did in those measures and what we later augmented with the liberal social measures of the 1960s was to tell people that the Puritan self-restraints of respectable Britain were no longer necessary in an affluent society, and that there need be no or very few limits to the pursuit of personal autonomy.

Many other factors—cultural, economic, and social—played a role in this. And the same effects can be seen in different times and at different paces in other countries. But the end results were the social pathologies described, which then brought about an extension of state power and bureaucracy to cope with those pathologies, and finally the extension of that power over independent social institutions, like the universities that Peter valued so highly. Peter foresaw this. He opposed these developments while they were happening; he regretted what had been lost; and he attempted where he could in the policies of the 1980s to reverse those things—which brings me back, finally, to Clement Attlee.

Attlee was a child of the respectable Britain, as Peter was an immigrant to it. Attlee was a very creditable child: he was modest, happily married, a former soldier (known as Major Attlee for his early political career), a man with a social conscience (he worked at a charitable settlement in East London), famous for his silence (so that he was almost the British version of Calvin Coolidge), and conventional in his tastes and social opinions.

Just how conventional is revealed by this perhaps apocryphal story: When he was Prime Minister, one of his ministers was John Strachey, a well-known writer and intellectual who while in government amused himself by writing a slim volume of poetry. Under the Official Secrets Act, any book that a minister writes has to be cleared by the Prime Minister before publication. Strachey sent the book of poems to Attlee. He didn't hear anything about it. Some months went by. So, at the end of a ministerial meeting with the Prime Minister, he took advantage of the fact to raise the question of his book. He said, "By the way, Prime Minister, I suppose there's no objection to my publishing that little book of verse I sent you." Attlee replied, "Oh, I'm afraid there is, Strachey." Strachey was completely baffled and said, "May I ask you why, Prime Minister?" And Attlee said, "Certainly. I read the poems. Don't rhyme, don't scan."

Precisely because he was so conventional, Attlee took respectable Britain for granted. He did not have the imagination to see that the kind of measures that he introduced for what he thought was the good of the country might undermine the social virtues of which he himself was such a distinguished ornament. Peter Bauer, like other émigrés such as Hayek, saw that the England he arrived in was not only not a rigid, oppressive society but that it was a very unusual society in the combination of virtues it had reconciled. We have restored the economic foundations of that society—Britain is now a very successful European economy. But we still need to restore the social cohesion and decency that made liberal freedom work. That is the task that remains to be done. It is a great pity that we won't have Peter to assist us in doing it.