

How to be a Conservative

What's in it for me? Discover how to think like a conservative.

Traditional conservatism isn't fashionable today. As we look toward the future, we're largely skeptical of traditionalist values. The West tends toward a soft-left liberalism; traditionalists are often dismissed as nostalgic and regressive. How can conservatives keep going in such an environment? And what can they bring to the political debate? In these blinks, you'll find out. You'll learn how the author, Roger Scruton, became a conservative in response to what he saw as the Left's worst blunders in the twentieth century. And among other things, you'll see how conservatives offer the last defense of the Enlightenment values that brought us modern democracy; and how their chosen economic system, the free market, is really the only one in town. In these blinks, you'll learn

how the price mechanism works; why Edmund Burke despised the French Revolution; and that the nation-state is a part of a healthy society.

Scruton grew up in a Labour-voting family, but twentieth-century events made him a conservative.

How do you go from a lower-middle-class childhood in inner-city Manchester, to a salubrious career in national journalism, and a life-long support of conservatism? It's not the most predictable of journeys. For the author, Roger Scruton, it began when he saw his father – a lifelong Labour voter – campaign against the suburban sprawl. He'd always been a socialist; he believed that the working class had been enslaved by the aristocracy, and that it was necessary to wage a class war. But he also had a deep fondness for the English countryside, the country's historical architecture, and the old ways of living and working. Modern housing – he thought – threatened all of that. This side of his father's character influenced Scruton's thinking. He came to see that it was always better to conserve things, especially when the proposed alternatives were so much worse. The key message here is: Scruton grew up in a Labour-voting family, but twentieth-century events made him a conservative. The second factor that turned the author into a conservative was the May 1968 rioting in Paris. Scruton was in the French capital at the time of the protests. As he watched students smash shop windows and attack the police, he felt a surge of anger. In his view, these middle-class intellectuals were railing against the very society that allowed them their privileged lives. Scruton's conservatism grew even stronger after Margaret Thatcher became the British prime minister in 1979. The 1970s had been a period of decline in the UK. To Scruton, it seemed as if the country, especially its institutions and universities, had succumbed to a self-hating leftism; a philosophy that denigrated all the good things that Britain had achieved. But, with Thatcher, the nation found a new confidence. She stood proudly for free enterprise and for freedom of the individual. While Scruton didn't agree entirely with Thatcher's rhetoric, he did sympathize with her basic philosophy: that people had to take responsibility for their own lives, rather than blindly trust the state. The fourth influence over Scruton's politics also came in 1979, when he visited what was then Communist Czechoslovakia. Scruton was there to give a talk; and when he examined his

audience, he saw firsthand where the policies of radical leftism led. There to listen to him were former lecturers, rabbis, novelists, and psychoanalysts. But now the Communist regime employed all these people as coal stokers. Each one of them had had their potential snuffed out by authoritarians who sought to control all aspects of human life. From that moment on, Scruton was firmly committed to the cause of freedom – something, he believed, that was worth conserving at any cost.

Conservatives believe that a society should be built from below, not imposed from above.

While he was in Czechoslovakia, Scruton saw how the socialist dream could turn into an authoritarian nightmare. The country's leaders may have had the best intentions, but what they created was a dystopian world, where everything, from work to family life, was surveilled and measured. Everything was put to work in service of the socialist ideal. But it wasn't just the Communists making this mistake. In the UK, under Thatcher, right-wing thinkers were falling for a very similar trap. Like the revolutionary socialists, they, too, were attempting to mold society into a predetermined shape. Czech socialists reduced individual citizens to tools of the regime. Britain's capitalist ideologists tried to reduce the whole of society just to market data. But societies don't work like that. They're far too complex to be reduced to an ideological structure, of whatever hue. No, they form organically, from below, and they're shaped by much more than a political plan. This is what a true conservative believes. The key message here is: Conservatives believe that a society should be built from below, not imposed from above. Among the earliest supporters of this idea was the nineteenth-century British philosopher and MP Edmund Burke. Observing the French Revolution, Burke felt appalled by the attempt to remodel society from above, ripping up centuries of tradition in the process. In his view, top-down edicts of the revolutionaries were disastrous. He thought that societies needed something different – things he described as affection and loyalty. By this, he meant all of the interactions that happen in families, workplaces, schools, local clubs and societies. It's at this level that people truly bond. It's here that they learn the important, simple things that lead to a cohesive society, like taking responsibility for one's own actions and offering assistance to those in need. It's this civil society that endures, rather than any top-down political vision. Modern evidence for this comes from the collapse of Communist countries. Among their ruins, it's this grassroots society that survived, not the policies of former regimes. The truth, according to the author, is that society is sustained by seemingly "purposeless" things, like friendship and neighborliness. Any attempt to impose an external purpose onto a society is bound to fail.

Opportunity comes from opening things up, not closing them down.

When the Communists came to power in the 20th century, one of the first things they did was shut down any form of civil association they didn't control. They banned choirs, theatre groups, church institutions, walking clubs, discussion societies, and private schools. They believed groups like these might foster sedition. But they also thought

that some, like private schools and private members' clubs, confer advantages to those who join. That didn't fit with an egalitarian society. In a democratic society, clubs, and associations exist freely. And some of them, like private schools and private members' clubs, do confer advantages. This, naturally, leads to accusations of unfair privilege. How does a conservative approach this problem? Well, her answer is to make them more accessible, not shut them down. The key message here is: Opportunity comes from opening things up, not closing them down. Let's take the example of private schools. Most people agree that private schools confer advantages to the students that attend them: they often employ better tutors, run smaller classes, and have greater resources. The Left's answer to the disparity between private and state-run schools is – simply – to shut down private schools. But wealthy parents will just find other ways to give their children an advantage. They'll hire the best home tutors, or they'll purchase houses that fall within the catchment area of great state schools. All that a ban on private schools will achieve is the destruction of decades, even centuries of educational expertise. So what's the solution? To open things up. That would create social mobility. In the case of private schools, for instance, this can be achieved by offering poorer students bursaries and vouchers. More broadly, the conservative argues, private associations and clubs are all natural parts of society. They should be allowed to exist for their own sake, as places that confer expertise, give pleasure, and create bonds between people. As we discussed in the previous blink, it's this organic, civil society, not top-down statism, that's the glue which holds everything together. And if we set out to destroy that society, we do it at our own peril.

The nation-state is at the heart of a healthy society.

Is nationalism becoming a dirty word? Increasingly, we tend to connect it with the horrors committed in its name throughout the twentieth century. Just think of the Nazi atrocities or the ethnic cleansing that brought about so much tragedy to the Balkans. And it's true, nationalism can foster irrational prejudices. These beliefs can sometimes lead to the persecution of others based on their race, religion, or culture. According to the author, though, there's a difference between nationalism and the sense of belonging to a nation-state. One is a potentially destructive ideology; the other, a natural and necessary sentiment. The key message here is: The nation-state is at the heart of a healthy society. In fact, it's only through the nation-state that we learn to coexist with the many different people that live side by side with us. In a sense, the nation-state is like a family. In a family, we might disagree with each other, and even form factions with other family members. When we have a dispute, we argue – of course we do. But in the end, we reach a solution that works for the entire family – even if, personally, some of us disagree with it. Ultimately, we choose to stand shoulder to shoulder. If a family is to stay together, there has to be a shared identity, a “we,” something that holds despite disagreements. The same is true of society. It's this national “we” that binds us together in Western democracies, whether we're Christians or Muslims, socialists or capitalists, meat eaters or vegetarians. It's important that this shared identity should be based on the secular nation-state, rather than any of the myriad other options. It can only work if it's inclusive, in a way a religious or ethnic identity simply can't be. The national identity is the product of countless compromises that develop over time. It brings together people who are vastly different from each other. And in this sense, it's inclusive, because a nation-state is open to all. It can incorporate any minority – ethnic, religious or even ideological. So, rather than the extreme nationalism of the far-right,

conservatives embrace a gentler kind of belonging. They understand that it's only by acknowledging our shared home that we can learn to live in peace with our fellow citizens.

Conservatives should defend a free market society - with some caveats.

Sadly, inequality is a fact of modern life. For every person who has achieved success and personal wealth, there are many more who haven't done so well. What can we do about it, though? Well, a socialist would suggest that we need to set up a central authority to control the economy. Its job would be to ensure equal distribution of resources. This way - say socialists - we'll bring everyone to a similar level. A conservative knows differently, however. For her, a free market society is really the only one that's practical. The key message here is: Conservatives should defend a free market society - with some caveats. So why do we need to foster a free market? The answer is that an economy can't function unless people know the wants, needs, and resources of others. Without this information, you simply can't distribute resources accurately. The free market economy has the perfect solution to this problem. This is the price mechanism, where the needs of consumers and businesses interact to determine the allocation of resources. The price of something - whether a product or service - contains all the information you need. The free market is a system where the vital information is contained within the system itself; you can only access this data if you analyze organic interactions between sellers and buyers. Now let's look at a socialist economy, where a central authority sets all the prices. This authority has no access to this information, as there's no market-based "price mechanism." Eventually, the system breaks down, as there's no way to accurately gauge demand. Just think about all the queues, empty shelves, and - yes - occasional gluts that plagued the Soviet Union in that country's dying days. At the heart of the socialist economy is dysfunction: people either have too much of something or struggle to get what they need. Conservatives should defend the free market. But there are some caveats. On its own, the free market can't lead to a stable society. There must be something else; something that ensures that people bear the costs of their actions, not just reap the benefits. Without this extra "something," problems emerge. Just think of the subprime mortgage crisis that led to the 2008 economic crash. It happened, largely, because lending companies and investment banks weren't bearing the cost of their actions. Such behavior is reckless and indefensible. So, for a free market to work, it needs to be constrained by the rule of law. But that's not all. As we saw in a previous blink, society works best when it's underpinned by moral values that emerge from the grassroots. And so does the economy.

There is a difference between rights guaranteed by traditional liberalism and modern human rights.

The seventeenth-century English philosopher, John Locke, advocated something he called "natural rights." This concept grew from the idea of a "natural law," an ancient belief that there's some sort of universal code that applies to all people everywhere. Locke's natural rights were supposed to guarantee any one of us control over our own

lives. And they also promise the freedom to enter agreements and withdraw from them by mutual consent. Locke is often considered the father of liberalism. He understood that societies can only work when individuals have sovereignty over their own lives. How can this sovereignty be achieved? Well, key to it is guaranteed protection from external coercion. In other words, liberty. This understanding of human rights as liberties is a key tenet of all conservative thought. But today, the concept of human rights has taken on a very different meaning. The key message here is: There is a difference between rights guaranteed by traditional liberalism and modern human rights. Let's go back to Locke's idea of rights. His approach is based on what we might call a negative freedom. You prohibit coercion – there's our negative – and instead, you guarantee people their liberty. What this concept doesn't do is compensate for all the world's inequalities. Egalitarians struggled to accept this, so they thought they'd improve on the idea. To do this, they began to amend international conventions. These documents now contain new articles that ask states to perform a positive duty. For instance, the UN Declaration of Human Rights demands that the citizen should be allowed the "free development of his personality." It goes on to guarantee a right to work, leisure, and a healthy standard of living. From a conservative perspective, these are all claims, not rights. They can be used to guarantee assistance to people who might not deserve it. For instance, a criminal may escape deportation by referring to the "right to family life," enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights. Such claims can undermine the very purpose of the legal system. Let's say that a good human rights barrister triumphs over the other party in court. There's no reconciliation or compromise. An individual has trumped the government, sure, but he also trumped public policy which was, originally, in the common good. For the conservative thinker, this is quite obviously wrong.

Multiculturalism in Western countries works best when Western values are defended.

In the West, many different cultures, religions, and races coexist. Cities all across the West are diverse and cosmopolitan. The US, built on waves and waves of immigration, is the exemplar of successful multiculturalism. And, in fact, multiculturalism is so successful because of the West's Enlightenment traditions. They've created a secular, civic culture, where societies welcome everyone, regardless of their racial, religious, or kinship backgrounds. There are those, though, on the left, who forget just how remarkable an achievement this is. They look to denigrate these Enlightenment traditions. According to the author, without these traditions, we couldn't live in such a free and peaceful society. The key message here is: Multiculturalism in Western countries works best when Western values are defended. Since the middle of the twentieth century, there's been a trend to denigrate and even deconstruct the achievements of the Enlightenment. This is most pronounced in the attacks on reason and objectivity, key pillars of the Enlightenment tradition. Leading these attacks were thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who, in their different ways, deconstructed things that the Enlightenment had seen as given – concepts like rational thought and progress. Then, alongside this trend, in universities and other organizations, it's become fashionable to repudiate the West – all the while, remaining nonjudgmental about the cultures of elsewhere. Those who do endorse Western civilization are often accused of being racist. They are – allegedly – imperialists, who

believe that other races are inferior. But there's a flaw in this argument. The author points out that culture isn't the same as race. And yet, the accusations keep coming in. Campaigners are vocal and persistent – so it's increasingly difficult for traditionalists to criticize abhorrent cultural practices, like forced marriage, female circumcision and “honor” killing. Those who do stand up are liable to lose their tenure in universities, or suffer social exclusion. So what's the answer that a conservative thinker can offer? Well, a conservative knows that you can't build a cohesive society on repudiating a whole cultural inheritance. That will just lead to alienation and resentment. Conservatives, then, must defend the Enlightenment's inheritance. This shared culture, with its laws and freedoms, is something that we depend on. And it's this culture that has made the West so attractive in the first place.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Roger Scruton became a conservative after witnessing what he saw as the worst excesses of the Left in the twentieth century, from the May '68 protests to life behind the Iron Curtain. He developed a conservative philosophy that contends that society is best built from below; that the nation-state is key to a healthy society; and that the free market is, generally, the best economic system. He also believed that traditional human rights differ from modern human rights; and that multiculturalism works best when we defend Western Enlightenment traditions.