Chapter 4
The Political Response

The concentration of power

All politics in the end is a response to a fundamental characteristic of social organisation. In every society, there is an inevitable tendency for power to concentrate in a few hands. The power may be expressed in physical, economic, social, religious or hierarchical terms – but at its most fundamental it is power to make choices, the freedom to choose, even at the expense of and against the interests of others.

In any society, those who are stronger, cleverer, richer or luckier, or who enjoy some other advantage, will inevitably acquire more power than others. They will then, with equal inevitability, use that power to enhance their advantage, accreting to themselves differential privileges which will make them yet more powerful, allowing them to entrench that advantage and defend it against attack, and by doing so to reinforce the disadvantage of others. The response that should be made to that intensifying concentration of power is the central and defining issue of politics – and the key characteristic of the response of many in democratic politics has been, traditionally, to resist and counteract it. If it were not for the overriding importance of that objective, why else would we bother with the messy and difficult business of democratic politics?

Not every response, of course, treats it as axiomatic that the concentration of power should be resisted. On the right of politics, efforts are made to find various ways of welcoming or at least of making acceptable the concentration of power and privilege in a few hands. Traditional Toryism takes the view that a hierarchical society, in which everyone ‘knows their place’, will offer the advantages of stability and certainty, and that the inherent unfairness can and should be offset by the doctrine of noblesse oblige, which requires the privileged to acknowledge and act, at least to some extent, to repay the debt they owe to the underprivileged.
That view is today seen as somewhat old-fashioned. On the right, a different and harder-edged approach has come to dominate, as we have seen, over recent decades. According to that view, it is asserted that if power is concentrated in the hands of the most able then the whole of society will benefit, and that attempts to frustrate this inevitable arrangement will mean that everyone, including the underprivileged, will be worse off. The adoption of this doctrine by powerful elements and its successful promotion in the mainstream of democratic politics is one of the major ways in which the past three decades have represented an important break with the past.

A softer view of inequality, which accepts that it is inevitable but nevertheless recognises that it is fundamentally unfair, maintains that its downsides can be mitigated by ensuring that there should be equality of opportunity, in the sense that everyone should be lined up at the same starting line. If some are then able to go further and faster than others, then so be it. It is not clear what should be done to ensure that those who gain power and privilege in this way are to be made to limit those advantages so that their heirs and descendants do not start their race with a head start, so that power is again concentrated in a few hands.

In progressive politics, on the other hand, there has been an understanding that the concentration of power is a threat to social cohesion and human progress over a broad front, and that if this concentration of power is to be avoided, a conscious effort must be made to ensure that the rewards and benefits of living in society should be fairly shared. This is not, of course, an argument for absolute equality or for saying that we are all the same (as critics often pretend to assume), but merely for ensuring that the concentration of power is not allowed to become entrenched over generations so that large numbers of citizens are kept in positions of more or less permanent disadvantage.

These important issues, and the varied responses to them, have been essential and valuable elements in the political debates that have characterised most democratic societies. This makes it all the more remarkable that at some point in the last thirty years those holding the progressive view seem to have abandoned the debate, and to have acquiesced in the triumph not perhaps of the traditional or patrician right but of a right that has been extreme in its view that the market must in all circumstances prevail, and that the concentration of power that the unfettered market produces should be celebrated and encouraged.