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MEMOIRS

by

KINGSLEY AMIS

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ENOCH POWELL

IT IS NO part of my business, here or anywhere else, to discuss what gets politicians into office or debars them from it, but in the case of two noteworthy contenders of our time, J. Enoch Powell and Anthony Wedgwood Benn, the reason for their failure to reach the top is surely obvious. They both look barmy. I understand this as an elastic term which would include Benn's appearance of general dislocation as well as Powell's of more specific derangement. Please be clear that I say nothing about the reality, only the impression.

Benn I have run into only once, early in his career, when by a misunderstanding he arrived on my doorstep expected but not heralded by any name. The door was one of those with a glass panel affording a preview of the caller. At the first sight of the present arrival the thought flashed into my mind, 'Who is this English cunt?' The distinguishing adjective is important. There are Scottish cunts, there are even Welsh cunts, and God knows there are American cunts, but the one in question could have come from nowhere else but this green and pleasant land. Something about the set of the lips.

Other guests arrived at the same time and my silent question went unanswered for the moment. I offered drinks. Someone asked for a gin and tonic. I turned to the cunt. 'Same for you?' He reacted much as if I had said, 'Glass of baby's blood? It's extra good today,' and somehow in that moment I knew him, recognised him from television. He settled for bitter lemon, 'with plenty of ice,' he added firmly. (I once heard him say unequivocally, also on television, that his sole interest in life was and had always been politics, which to my mind should debar anybody from standing for Parliament. Even Ted Heath has his yacht and his choirs.)

Benn at any rate gives an impression of physical harmlessness: he would never, you feel, go for your throat. Not so Enoch Powell. He merely looks definitely but mildly barmy when looking straight

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ahead; it is when he moves the pupils of his eyes into their corners that he looks, to me, physically dangerous. He makes me think of a book on how to learn to draw I had when I was a boy, in which the artist had cleverly shown how the expression of a face could be transformed from meekness to brooding ferocity by this one change. Powell was affable enough on our first encounter, merely addressing me and one other as if we were at a public meeting, as politicians will, for a couple of minutes before switching to informality with startling speed and thoroughness – ‘But we don’t want to go on nattering away about boring stuff like that, surely to God,’ or words to that effect.

Powell and I had a more prolonged and testing session at a small dinner party given in about 1970 by Ralph Harris (now Lord Harris of High Cross) and his wife José at their house in Hadley Wood. Among the other guests were my old friend Colin Welch, then in a senior position on the *Daily Telegraph*, and his wife Sibyl. I was on my hostess’s left, Powell on her right, so that we faced each other at the end of the table. All went normally, at an easy pace, until I remarked to José Harris,

‘Yes, there’s obviously going to be [or has been] considerable Soviet impingement in the Middle Eastern countries.’ Well, one has to show willing.

Powell, who had been paying attention but not contributing much, at once showed a lively interest. ‘Impingement, Mr Amis,’ he said. ‘May I ask you: whence do you derive that word?’

‘Well now, Latin *impingo, impingere, impinxi, impinctum*, meaning something like “I shade in”,’ I said, never having come across any such verb in my life (nor does it appear to exist), but feeling I was doing pretty well for ten o’clock or so at Ralph’s table, which was never frugal.

‘Alas no, Mr Amis,’ said Powell, shaking his head regretfully, but smiling in appreciation of a nice try. ‘*Impingo, impingere, impaxi,* impactum*, “I strike . . . a blow”,’ and he struck one, quite a hard one of fist into palm. His eyes were gleaming, but not in their corners.

‘I obviously must concede the point to you, Mr Powell,’ I said, feeling like someone in a costume drama, and a prat too.

**Impaxi* is my recollection, but so impeccable a classical scholar as Enoch Powell must surely have given the form correctly as *impegi*.

'Yes, I think you must.'

Well, there we were, but not for long. Powell, as if charged up by his linguistic triumph, after a minute or two leaned across to Colin Welch, who was sitting next but one to me. 'Mr Welch, may I ask you a question about the conduct of your newspaper?'

'Of course.'

'I am curious to know why the intention of the Right Honourable J. Enoch Powell, P.C., M.P., to give a speech in Brussels [I think] attacking the proposal that the United Kingdom should apply for membership of the European Economic Community should have gone unreported in your columns.'

'Well,' said Colin in a conciliatory tone, 'I had no direct hand in that, Enoch, but I imagine it was felt that we'd wait until we'd read what you actually had to say before we went into the matter.'

'Ah,' – this defence had been foreseen – 'but surely the *known intention* of the Right Honourable [etc.] to give a speech attacking [etc.] was an event in itself worthy of record in a newspaper such as the *Daily Telegraph*.'

Colin apologised, promised to do better in future, etc., and I fancy, though I would not swear to it, that the matter was allowed to drop there. On chewing things over afterwards, I reflected that if I, like who knows how many other people, had heard or read that to refer to oneself in the third person is or may be a sign of paranoia or one of those, then surely a man of the education of the Right Honourable J. Enoch Powell must have come across the same information somewhere. Or had he stopped reading after mastering the principal parts of *impingo*? Or . . . I gave it up.

My last meeting with Powell, and I mean last, as the reader will see, took place at the *Spectator* party in 1988. I spotted the great man standing by himself, wearing his familiar look of slightly resentful slight bafflement, went up to him and said, 'Hallo, Mr Powell, it's Kingsley Amis,' all unaware that I was about to receive the most economical put-down of my career. So far. Julian Barnes, who was standing next to me, confirms that I pronounced my name loudly, slowly and clearly.

Powell pursed his lips like a flautist's. The notation does not exist that would indicate how short a time it took him to pronounce his next vocable.

'Who?'

'Kingsley . . . Amis,' as before or more so in all respects.

'Oh.'

That was it, and no wonder that within the next three seconds I had spotted someone I knew standing near by with whom I simply had to go and have a word.

Again, what can one say? Probably the less the better. It does seem, I think, that nothing personal was at stake. But it also perhaps needs saying that the world is built on people babbling things like, 'Of course, my dear fellow, how very absurd of me not to have recognised you,' when they have no idea whom they are talking to, and if you are going into politics with hope of success, instead of some obscure branch of the truth-at-any-price business, you had better come to terms with that widely grasped fact. And of course he knew perfectly well who I was, and if he was not prepared to put up with such possibly disagreeable encounters, what was he doing at that party? I like to think he had not forgiven me for coming as high as second over *impingo*.

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