

Dr Antony MULLEN

Senior Research Associate
University of Bolton

T.S. Eliot and the Conservative Imagination

This talk considers T.S. Eliot the conservative. After his death, T.S. Eliot was gradually framed by conservatives in the USA, like Russell Kirk, as a kind of grandfather of conservatism comparable to Edmund Burke. In the UK, Keith Joseph echoed Eliot's Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1948) in his own Notes Towards the Definition of Policy (1975) and, during the Conservatives' long spell in opposition from 1997 onwards, David (now Lord) Willetts cited Eliot as evidence that conservatives have always believed in small government and sound money.

But as David Bradshaw notes, Eliot's conservatism - insofar as he was one - was a nostalgia for a return to a classicism that Eliot had never known. In his own time, Eliot's social and political views were considered reactionary and archaic by the standards of the day, never mind that of those who have since attempted to appropriate the idea of Eliot for their own ends.

It is my intention to explore how Eliot the conservative cannot be separated from Eliot the modernist, that the latter is the principal context in which he should be understood, and that Eliot should not be considered a grandfather of modern conservatism, despite efforts to posthumously frame him as such.

Keywords: #conservatism #modernism #Eliot #culture