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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE CONSERVATIVE

In the spectrum of social attitudes there is no sharp line of demarcation between radicalism, liberalism, conservatism, and reaction. Each merges into another by imperceptible shades; so that it is quite impossible to say in respect to any idea, here liberalism ends and conservatism begins. The same observation applies as aptly to individuals as to society. A man may hold radical views about the coinage of money and be reactionary toward scientific dogma: he may be red in his attitude on some subjects and yet be yellow, green, or blue with respect to others.

Nevertheless, to recognize the gradations in social opinions is not to deny their separate existence, any more than the spectral phenomenon annihilates colors. Each habitual attitude has definite characteristics of its own. Conservatism is traditionally a philosophy of status quo. If Alexander Pope believed "whatever is, is right", he was a conservative, for he had faith in things as they are. Conservatives are contented people, and insofar as they have been successful in the pursuit of happiness they will resist change. Their attitude is essentially negative. Like the Supreme Court, they are deferential to usage and

custom — opposed to doing anything for the first time. A heavy protective tariff is levied on new ideas at all conservative ports.

A conservative is not stupid or lacking in vision. Seneca's denunciation of waterworks for Rome and the American notion in 1840 that bathtubs were undemocratic and ought to be taxed were reactionary, not conservative. The conservative will consider innovations but is inclined to follow the advice of St. Paul: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Natural selection, rather than mutation, is the technique of conservatism.

Senator Allison had a conservative mind — calm, sane, cautious. It is said of him that he refused to admit there were no black sheep in a flock because he could not see the other side of them. He thought in terms of facts rather than idealistic generalizations: he preferred statistics to plausible assumptions. The path of duty commanded all of his attention, and there was apparently no inclination to indulge in dreamy, sidelong glances to the horizon of speculative possibilities. Even in his youth, when men are supposed to be radical if ever, he was not a reformer; while as an old man he was not reactionary. Always a conservative, he seems to be an exception to Emerson's rule that "we are reformers in spring and summer; in autumn and winter we stand by the old; reformers in the morning, conservatives at night."

J. E. B.