Question: Critically examine the features of Conservative Political Theory

**Introduction**

Conservatism is one of the major political philosophies of the Western world. Conservatism as a political theory evolved during 1750 and 1850, beginning with the idea of enlightenment and French Revolution (1789) and continuing with the industrial revolution. As an approach and pragmatic outlook it has opposed many progressive ideas such as universal adult suffrage (especially for women), emancipation of slaves, and religious freedom etc. Its foundations were laid by the Irish politician Edmund Burke (1729-1797). He became the father of philosophy of conservatism. According to Sabine, “Burke is rightly regarded as the founder of self-conscious political conservatism”.

**Meaning:**

The term ‘conservatism’ is derived from the Latin ‘**conservare’** meaning to **‘protect’** or ‘preserve’. Its usage in a political sense began to appear only after the French Revolution of 1789. Conservatism is a political ideology that values the creation and maintenance of stable societies based upon traditional values and institutions. Traditional institutions, such as government and religion, along with traditional values are to be respected. Consequently, conservatism is suspicious of change, and if change is required, it seeks an evolutionary approach rather than a revolutionary approach. Classical conservatism does not reject changes, but insists that changes be organic, rather than revolutionary.

**Definitions:**

Conservatism generally refers to right-wing politics which advocate the preservation of personal wealth and private ownership (capitalism) and emphasize self-reliance and individualism.

1. As **O’Sullivan** (1976) puts it in his introduction to the ‘Philosophy of Imperfection’ that, *“Conservatism as an ideology, then, is characterized in the first instance, by opposition to the idea of total or radical change, and not by the absurd idea of opposition to change as such, or by any commitment to preserving all existing institutions*”.
2. According to **Friedrich August Von** **Hayek,** *“conservatism proper is a legitimate, probably necessary, and certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change*”.

Thus, conservatism not a clear cut philosophy but a set of beliefs which, in general, tend to support (1) free enterprise capitalism, (2) continuation of traditions, (3) minimal government intervention in economy, (4) strict law and order enforcement, and (5) gradual change as opposed to radical reform.

**Important characteristics:**

The key principle of conservatism is its desire to conserve rather than a drastic change. It has the following important characteristics:

1. The conservatives emphasize the idea of traditions. It refers to people are what they have inherited the skills, manners, morality, and other cultural resources of their ancestors.
2. Accordingly, conservatives look to traditional political and cultural institutions to curb humans’ base and destructive instincts.
3. Conservatives have distrust for human reason and untested innovations. It has faith on historical continuity and in the traditional frameworks for conducting human affairs.
4. Conservative believes governmental power should be reduced and individual should make their own way in the world. But willingness to limit freedom to maintain traditional values.
5. According to conservatism government power should be used to support traditional moral standards.
6. Anti-egalitarianism-distrust for human nature.
7. Conservatives favour institutions and practices that have evolved gradually and are manifestations of continuity and stability.
8. Conservatives reject the optimistic view that human beings can morally be improved through political and social change.
9. Conservatives tend to assume that human beings are driven by their passions and desires are naturally prone to selfishness, anarchy, irrationality, and violence. Families, churches, and schools must teach the value of self-discipline, and those who fail to learn this lesson must have discipline imposed upon them by government and law.
10. Conservatism has often been associated with traditional and established forms of religion. In the period of Holy War, both, Christians and Muslims advocated for religious conservatism for mobilization of societies in favor of the wars.

**Limitations (criticism) of Conservatism:**

1. According to critics, conservatism constitutes instead an attitude of mere reaction, procrastination and nostalgia.
2. Conservatism is understood as the ideological articulation of a reactionary tendency to defend establishment and social privilege.
3. According to Honderich (1990), the conservative is ultimately lacking in morality on account of utter selfishness, and alleged that conservatives favour a society in which certain inequalities are preserved.
4. Conservatism has been portrayed as a negative philosophy. It simply aims at to preach resistance to or at least suspicion of change.
5. Conservatism often preferred to describe its belief as an ‘attitude of mind’ or ‘common sense’ as opposed to an ‘ism’ or ideology.
6. It emphasis on history and experience and its distaste for any rational thought.
7. Conservative ideas increasingly came under attack from the 70s onwards as a result of the emergence of the New Right.
8. Conservatism is anti-revolutionaries andoppose to the idea of total or radical change.

**Conclusion**

Thought the conservatism has some drawbacks yet as an ideology it has some importance to the study of political theory. It holds up the political and social history of a state as a role model, striving to preserve the continuity of the people’s national and cultural roots. The past is viewed by all denominations of conservatism as a positive phenomenon. Not everything in the past is perceived as positive, but a consistent conservative will never deliberately tarnish any period in the history of his people and state.