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What was Progressive in 'Progressive Conservatism'?

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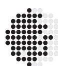
In January 2009 David Cameron announced that the 'underlying philosophy' of his government would be progressive conservatism. Despite the ambiguity about this term, it was generally interpreted as a signal that Cameron was moving his party to the left. To some commentators, Cameron was allying with the progressive 'one nation' strand of conservative thought. To others, particularly in the media, he was drawing on the more immediate influence of Phillip Blond's 'Red Toryism'. However, the focus on the market (as opposed to state or community) found in both Cameron's speech and subsequent policies sits uneasily with both of these interpretations. Cameron's progressive conservatism has more in common with Thatcherism – an earlier conservative modernising project – than it does with centrist forms of conservative progressivism. Cameron's progressive conservatism is progressive, but only in particular, less commonly used, ways – not as a rediscovery of social justice.

Keywords: progressive conservatism; David Cameron; Thatcherism; Red Tory; one nation conservatism

In January 2009 David Cameron announced that the 'underlying philosophy' of his government would be progressive conservatism.[1] This oxymoronic term is an intriguing one. What did Cameron mean by it? Emily Robinson has argued that progressivism is generally distinguished from conservatism in three ways: an optimism that the future will be better than what went before; a desire to break with the past that separates those 'who want the future to be significantly different from the present ... from those who are happy to be in step with history as it unfolds'; and a left or centre-left political orientation (Robinson, 2012, pp. 21–5). These views can be summed up as: progress as optimism; progress as rupture; and progress as social justice. The most common understanding of progressivism is the last: progress is concerned with some form of social justice.

This was how Cameron's speech was generally understood: progressive conservatism was about social justice. This was the philosophy which explained the wider changes that Cameron had made to the Conservative Party, dragging it left and jettisoning aspects of the party's Thatcherite past. An article by Richard Reeves in *The Observer*, for example, was headlined: 'It's hard to believe, but the Tories really are progressives: All the signs suggest David Cameron is sincere about creating a fairer society. But just wait for the squeals from the [Thatcherite] old guard' (Reeves, 2009, p. 23). In this paper I argue that Cameron's progressive conservatism is only superficially similar to the two strands of progressive conservatism with which it is often associated: one nation conservatism and Red Toryism. The reliance on the market and lack of significant support for civil society make comparisons with Thatcherism more fruitful. The paper concludes that Cameron's progressive conservatism is only progressive in particular and limited ways.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Crisis and Change: The Emergence of Cameron's Progressive Conservatism

Cameron's call for progressive conservatism needs to be understood in the context of a crisis that was – and perhaps still is – threatening to destroy the party. He was elected as leader in late 2005, after the party's third successive election loss. The Conservative Party had dominated British politics for much of the twentieth century (Seldon and Ball, 1994). It had suffered severe electoral losses during this time – notably in 1906 and 1945 – but it had always bounced back. Between 1922 and 1997 every Conservative leader had also been Prime Minister. By the time Cameron was elected leader, his three predecessors had all failed to lead the party back into power (Dorey *et al.*, 2011, esp. ch. 1). The Conservatives had become, as one critic put it, 'contaminated' (Stelzer, 2007). Theresa May, now Home Secretary, described them as the 'nasty party' (Wheeler, 2002). In the public's mind, the party was associated with scandal and economic incompetence, it was seen as uncaring about those at the bottom and it was riven with divisions over Europe (Gamble, 2006).

Cameron was elected as leader promising change. Thatcherism, as his four predecessors had found to their cost, was no longer a winning electoral strategy (Bale, 2011, esp. ch. 1). Cameron argued that the Conservative Party 'has got to look and feel and talk and sound like a completely different organisation' (Evans, 2008, p. 293). He was seen as a 'moderniser' who would reform the party. There had been earlier modernisers in the party's recent past – notably Michael Portillo, after something of a reinvention around the turn of the century (Hayton, 2012, esp. ch. 6) – but it was the electoral losses of 1997, 2001 and 2005 that resulted in a moderniser becoming leader. In Andrew Gamble's words, the modernising group realised that the party 'needed to draw on its rich and ambiguous tradition to reinvent itself, by downplaying certain aspects of the party's heritage and accentuating others' (Gamble, 2006, p. 97).

Cameron set about 're-styling' the party (Bale, 2011, p. 21). He apologised for the early introduction of the poll tax in Scotland, the party's failure to impose sanctions on apartheid South Africa and for rail privatisation. To promote a greener image, he was pictured sledging with huskies on a Norwegian glacier. All this led to severe criticism from some on the right of the party. Norman Tebbit compared Cameron to Pol Pot, intent on purging the memory of Thatcherism (Tebbit, 2006). The journalist Max Hastings noted that 'Plenty of party activists and MPs harbour private misgivings' (BBC, 2007). Yet Cameron's strategy began to pay off and – aside from a brief period when Gordon Brown first became Prime Minister – significant poll leads opened up over Labour (Dorey *et al.*, 2011, ch. 2). Cameron was seen as the 'heir to Blair' – a politician who could drag his party back to the centre to deliver electoral success (see Bale, 2011, chs 6–7; 2012a). It is in this context that Cameron's claim to be a progressive was made.

Cameron's use of the term 'progressive' had some immediate precedent in the Conservative Party. Two 'modernising' MPs, Greg Clark and Jeremy Hunt, published a pamphlet called *Who's Progressive Now?* in December 2007. In it the authors make a case for respecting diversity; concern for the least fortunate; antipathy to unmerited hierarchies; concern for social as well as economic goals; and a sense of responsibility for the future. They also make a case for 'progress' in the first sense set out above: optimism about

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the future. They write that their progressive conservatism is based on 'An idealism that the world can be a better place in the future than it is now, or has been in the past. A belief that the world can become better by advancing, rather than looking backwards to an imagined golden age' (Clark and Hunt, 2007). This is very different to traditional understandings of conservatism, such as that put forward by Friedrich Hayek, which sees the ideology's main role as acting as a brake on change (and as such was the reason that Hayek did not describe himself as a conservative – Hayek, 1960, postscript). The progressive conservatism of Clark and Hunt is more obviously liberal, or neo-liberal, than conservative. The booklet was also specifically designed to fit with Cameron's agenda, with the authors arguing that 'these progressive values are a virtual statement of the values that are driving the Conservative Party under David Cameron'.

In January 2009 Cameron gave a speech in which he described himself as a progressive conservative, arguing that he wanted 'progressive ends delivered through conservative means'. Cameron's progressive ends included helping people out of poverty, equality of opportunity and a greener and safer country. These goals appeared to constitute a move towards a limited form of progressivism understood as social justice. Cameron's speech chimed with the creation of a new think tank, the Centre for Social Justice, set up in 2004 by Iain Duncan Smith – the former party leader who had been brought back into the shadow cabinet by Cameron. When it came to the 'conservative' means Cameron would use to reach his progressive goals, he set out two broad approaches. First, he would decentralise responsibility and power – presumably from the state – and strengthen the institutions of 'civil society', in which he included the voluntary sector and, in particular, the family. Second, Cameron argued that he would focus on economic growth and 'living within our means'. This new rhetoric of progressivism appeared to mark a significant change in the direction of the Conservative Party – a rediscovery of progress as social justice. It also implied a significant break with the party's recent past. As such, Cameron's embrace of the term was progressive in the second sense identified above: progress as rupture with the past. In the following sections, Cameron's progressive conservatism is situated in the wider progressive conservative tradition.

Cameron and the Progressive Conservative Tradition

To be progressive in the Conservative Party traditionally meant some allegiance to centrist, one nation forms of conservatism. For some commentators, Cameron's embrace of progressive conservatism was part of the rediscovery of that tradition. One nation conservatism has come to be associated with a strand of thought that began with Benjamin Disraeli and included, in the post-war period, R. A. Butler and Harold Macmillan, all of whom sought to govern, in Ian Gilmour's phrase, from the 'inside right' (Gilmour, 1978). It was this strand in the Conservative Party that proved a thorn in the side of Margaret Thatcher during her early years in office. In 2006, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that Cameron was 'heir to Disraeli as a One Nation Tory' (Wilson, 2006).

In the nineteenth century, Disraeli argued that Britain was 'a progressive country' (a line cited by then shadow chancellor, George Osborne, in an August 2009 speech). During the 1870s Disraeli oversaw the introduction of a series of laws on education, public health and the protection of workers. Disraeli's progressive views were continued by the Primrose

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League, which attracted large numbers of working-class voters to the Conservatives before the First World War. The League's handbook opened with a call for a 'democratic and progressive Conservatism'. Half a century later another Conservative prime minister, Harold Macmillan, declared that 'the important thing is to keep the Conservative Party on progressive lines' (Lexden, 2011).

From Disraeli to Gilmour, one nation conservatism tended towards the use of the state to build housing, promote education, provide welfare and health care and take an active role in the economy. However, as even the Blairite commentator Philip Collins (2009) argued, 'pretty much every time that a Conservative Government has left a progressive legacy it has done so by adding to the functions of government rather than by subtracting from them'. One nation conservatism involved a form of progressivism as social justice and, in short, it was firmly wedded to the state to achieve its ends.[2]

An alternative and more immediate influence on Cameron's progressive conservatism was said to be the 'Red Toryism' of Phillip Blond (2009a; 2009b). Although there was some scepticism among senior Conservative circles about Blond's influence, he was soon dubbed by newspapers as Cameron's 'philosopher-king' (e.g., McSmith, 2009). It was at the launch of the 'Progressive Conservatism Project', headed by Blond, and based at the think tank Demos, that Cameron set out his fullest exposition of his own progressive conservative philosophy. The perceived links between the two men created enough interest for Blond to set up his own think tank, ResPublica, in 2009, at the launch of which Cameron also spoke (although tellingly he also left after a few minutes, perhaps signalling a growing recognition of the distance between Blond's views and his own).

Blond presents a critique of social breakdown based on a particular reading of post-war history. It is a deeply pessimistic interpretation. (His book begins with the line: 'Something is seriously wrong with Britain' and expands on this by informing us that 'British culture has collapsed' [Blond, 2009b].) This seemed to fit well with Cameron's own social analysis that Britain was 'broken' (Driver, 2009). The cause of this social decline, Blond argued, was threefold. First, there was the expansion of the welfare state after the Second World War which destroyed the mutualism of working-class communities. Second, the libertarian permissiveness of the 1960s 'destroyed both middle and working class morality', creating a legacy of 'divided families, unparented children and the lazy moral relativism of the liberal professional elite' (Blond, 2009a). Finally, the individualism of the 1960s created the conditions for universal self-interest within a free-market society under Thatcher.

Blond argued that Conservatives should embrace a radical 'organic communitarianism' which focuses on the intermediate organisations of community and civil society – 'the self-organised associations such as unions, churches and activist organisations' (Blond, 2009b, loc. 817) – that were undermined in the post-war period by both the 'authoritarianism of the state and the unrestricted freedom granted to the market' (Blond, 2009b, loc. 817). There are at least superficial similarities between Blond's communitarianism and Cameron's own calls for 'a big society'. Jonathan Raban dismisses the views of both Cameron and Blond as the political philosophy of *The Archers*, the long-running radio soap:

> The rhetoric of both men seems to be shot through with plaintive rural nostalgia for the small, self-contained life of the village; for a world where 'frontline services' are 'delivered'

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> from within the community by the church, the WI and the Over Sixties Club (Raban, 2010).

Yet for Blond, the consequences of his analysis are radical. It would mean 're-localising our banking system, developing local capital, helping normal people gain new assets and breaking up big business monopolies' (Blond, 2009a). These policies are a long way from those that the coalition has pursued in office.

Blond's eclectic account is hard to categorise in contemporary terms, although it bears a resemblance to the early twentieth-century work of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, whose Distributist League called for an anti-capitalist and anti-socialist vision of a good life, based around property, virtue and community (Raban, 2010). A feature of Red Toryism is its concern with promoting a form of social justice (through 'recapitalising the poor'), which is a characteristic of the common understanding of progressivism. Yet in the quite literal sense (the first usage set out in the introductory section), Blond is not a progressive at all: there is little optimism about the future. Indeed, much of his work seems to be a lament for a lost past. This marks a significant difference with the progressive conservatism of Clark and Hunt, for example, which was explicitly forward looking. Indeed, there is a strongly conservative element to Blond's analysis. He is highly sceptical about liberalism, as he understands it, in both its social and economic guises. He argues for a 'rejection of social mobility, meritocracy and the statist and neoliberal language of opportunity, education and choice', which he argues have undermined community and created false aspirations (Blond, 2009a). This kind of statement is striking in its distance from contemporary debate, though common enough among certain conservatives (such as Roger Scruton, 2006). This ambivalence towards elements of progressivism – optimism about the future, liberalism and meritocracy, for example – might explain Blond's shift from labelling himself a 'progressive conservative' to a 'Red Tory'.

Progressivism in Power?

Before the 2010 general election, Andrew Gamble commented that 'the real nature of Cameron's Conservatism is unlikely to emerge until he is forced to define it by the nature of the choices he makes in office' (Gamble, 2009, p. 136). Thatcherism, for example, did not develop during her period in opposition; it took the anti-union legislation, the privatisations of the early 1980s and the Falklands War, among other things, for it to emerge as a 'public philosophy'. In which case, how do the policies pursued by the coalition government since 2010 shed light upon Cameron's argument for progressive conservatism?

In answering this question, a proviso needs to be made. This paper covers both ideology and the policies pursued, but there is no straightforward relationship between the two. Ideas shape policy, but they do so only as part of a mix of other factors, including deals struck with vested interests, 'events', electoral politics and – in this case – the compromises of coalition. Policies are the reflection of ideas seen through a glass darkly, and there are many distorting factors. Yet the importance of political ideas or 'underlying philosophies' as a guide to policy formation should not be neglected. Political ideas are crucial in the formation of policy: among other things, they provide a framework within which policy is developed (Prabhakar, 2009).

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What is noticeable about Cameron's government is its underlying lack of faith in the ability of the state to achieve social ends and the expansion of the market into areas previously occupied by the state (Griffiths, 2011a). At one level this is seen in the coalition's stance on fiscal policy. The cuts in government expenditure are severe. Robert Chote noted that the government's response to the economic crisis meant that the UK would undergo 'the longest, deepest and most sustained period of cuts in public services spending at least since the Second World War' (Chote, 2010). Peter Taylor-Gooby and Gerry Stoker have pointed out that 'On current projections public expenditure in the United Kingdom appears likely to fall below that in the United States by 2014 or 2015. This is simply unprecedented and, if fully implemented, indicates a radical new departure in British policy directions' (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011, p. 6). George Osborne described the June 2010 emergency budget, which set out many of the cuts to public spending, as 'fair and progressive'. However, Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis argued that it was 'clearly regressive' because the poorest families will see their incomes fall by an average of 5.2 per cent while the richest will lose just 1.1 per cent (IFS, 2010). The IFS analysis links to the use of the term 'progressive taxation' – a tax that falls disproportionately on those who earn most – but it also gives support to a critique of the budget that relates to the third, and most common, sense of the term: the budget was not progressive because it hit the poorest hardest and was therefore socially unjust.

Cameron's economic strategy has little in common with other forms of progressive conservatism. It is difficult to know what a Red Tory macroeconomic response to the economic downturn would be, but it would likely include the break-up – and perhaps mutualisation – of large banks and tighter financial regulation. This is not a route Cameron has pursued. While post-war one nation progressives in the Conservative Party largely accepted Keynesian policies to boost demand during an economic downturn, Cameron rejected this approach. At times Cameron's analysis of the economic crisis, set out in his 2009 progressive conservatism speech, reads as if it was written in the late 1970s. The problem, he implied, is a corpulent state that is crushing civil society and squeezing out entrepreneurship. As such, there is more similarity with Thatcherism than with progressive forms of conservatism. Indeed, Richard Hayton argues that on economic policy 'the modernisers themselves subscribed to a neo-Thatcherite outlook', rather than to either of the progressive traditions outlined above (Hayton, 2012, p. 140).

At another level, the retreat from the state involves a rethinking of the role it plays in promoting social ends in favour of the use of markets or quasi-markets (Griffiths, 2011a). Of course, many of these changes continue a trend begun by earlier Conservative and (New) Labour administrations. Under Cameron, however, it is not just the extent of the cuts in public services that was unexpected, but the radicalism of the pro-market reforms. To Taylor-Gooby and Stoker the 'reforms also include a far-reaching restructuring of state services involving significant transfers of responsibility from the state to the private sector and to the citizen' (2011, p. 4). In public services, for example, a pro-market approach, anathema to both one nation and red conservatism, has dominated. The Health White Paper, subtitled *Liberating the NHS* (presumably from the state), sets out plans to give patients 'choice of any provider, choice of consultant-led team, choice of GP practice and choice of treatment' (Department of Health, 2010; see also Page, 2011). In higher

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education, too, the government has pursued a marketising approach, reprioritising the sector around student choice supplemented by diversification of supply, and largely funded by the student as consumer (Griffiths, 2011b, pp. 80–7; Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2012). The White Paper, *Open Public Services*, takes market involvement in the provision of public services even further (Cabinet Office, 2011). Trailing the paper, Cameron argued that 'the grip of state control will be released and public services would be open to a range of providers: the state will have to justify why it should ever operate a monopoly' (Cameron, 2011).

Again, Cameron's progressive conservatism in office looks very different to other forms of progressive conservatism. (There are exceptions to this pro-market approach, such as immigration policy, where the government uses a significant degree of state control.) In general, however, Cameron's government has moved away from the assumption that the state has direct responsibility to increase public welfare towards a marketised system. This is in stark contrast to one nation conservatism, which viewed the state as the main means of achieving progressive goals. Cameron's progressive conservatism does not challenge the wider decline of the Tory left in the post-Thatcher period (discussed in Bale, 2012b, and elsewhere). While in opposition, there were at least rhetorical similarities to Blond's Red Toryism. Part of Cameron's attraction to Blond was a shared scepticism about the 'big state' and a belief in the 'big society'. In office, however, the devolution Cameron called for in his progressive conservatism speech has been to individual consumers within a market or quasi-market system, rather than to civil society groups – indeed there have been significant cuts to community organisations since 2010 (Hetherington, 2013). By contrast, Blond urged radical action to prevent untrammelled individualism and to curtail the market if either undermined communal values. In short, Cameron's progressive conservatism bears little ideational or policy similarity to the one nation or Red Tory strands within the party.

'Thatcher's Boy'? Progressive in a Particular Sense

In many ways the point of Cameron's dalliance with progressive conservatism was to distance himself from less electorally appetising aspects of the party's past. It seems odd then, on the face of it, to draw similarities between Cameron's progressive conservatism and Thatcherism.[3] Indeed, there appear to be significant differences between the two philosophies. Cameron's argument for the 'big society' was an explicit rejection of Thatcher's comment that 'there was no such thing'. As he noted upon election as leader, 'There is such a thing as society, it's just not the same thing as the state' (BBC, 2005). However, Cameron's claim marked a rhetorical rather than a substantial distancing. Thatcher's phrase was certainly picked up by her enemies as an explanation for the damaging social effects of many of her government's policies. Yet as the Bishop of London argued at her funeral, the comment was not a fair reflection of her views, but referred 'in her mind to some impersonal entity to which we are tempted to surrender our independence' (Chartres, 2013). Thatcher, like Cameron, accepted the importance of institutions between market and state – church, family, philanthropic organisations and so on – but believed that the growth of the state forced charity and civil society out.

Like Cameron's progressive conservatism, Thatcherism was also described in oxymoronic terms. Stuart Hall defined Thatcherism as a project of 'regressive modernisation' – a

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project that is 'simultaneously, regressive and progressive' (Hall, 1988, p. 164). To Hall, Thatcherism was regressive

> because, in certain crucial respects, it takes us backwards. You couldn't be going anywhere else but backwards to hold up before the British people, at the end of the twentieth century, the idea that the best the future holds is for them to become, for a second time, 'Eminent Victorians' (Hall, 1988, p. 164).

Certainly, Thatcherism included a patriotic mission to restore British greatness, lost with the dismantling of empire, and a moral mission to reassert Victorian values, challenged by the permissiveness of the 1960s.

Yet for Hall, Thatcher's project was also 'modernising' and forward looking because it attempted to wrest Britain into an era of modern bourgeois civilisation. Britain, according to Hall, had never institutionalised the civilisation and structures of advanced capitalism. Thatcherism, with its concentration on markets, deregulation and enterprise, sought to do just that. As such, Thatcherism was also a particular kind of modernising project. As Hall noted, 'Mrs Thatcher knows, as the left does not, that there is no serious political project which is not also about constructing a politics and an image of what *modernity* would be like for our people (Hall, 1988, p. 164, emphasis in original). Like other accounts, Hall's interpretation of Thatcherism – as both forward and backward looking – captures the countervailing pressures within the project between strong government and traditional values, on the one hand, and the free market and modernity, on the other (see, for example, Gamble, 1988).

Thatcherism was progressive, therefore, only in the less used senses that its modernising side included both 'optimism about the future' and 'rupture with the past'. This interpretation pits the moderate, one nation conservatives, who were largely happy with the post-war consensus, against a progressive Thatcherite right, who sought to remake Britain. Yet the idea of Thatcherism as progressive is counter-intuitive. It conflicts with common associations of the term with social justice. As Robinson notes, 'The counter-intuitive nature of any definition which places Thatcher on the side of progressivism indicates the extent to which ... any "improvement" and any forward movement should be judged according to left or centre-left standards' (Robinson, 2012, p. 28).

Like Thatcherism, Cameron's progressive conservatism is also a modernising project. Progressivism, for Cameron and those close to him, equates modernity with marketisation. For Clark and Hunt (2007), for example, Gordon Brown could not be a progressive because of his 'increasingly outdated faith in the effectiveness of central state control' and his 'timidity in challenging the demands of traditional stakeholders' – a term that presumably refers to producer groups (such as teachers, doctors and nurses) and trade unions (though not to business). Similarly, in his January 2009 progressive conservatism speech Cameron argued: 'when a new problem arises ... I want to make sure the system doesn't automatically reach for the levers of top-down central control'. Instead Cameron stated that he would ask his ministers three markedly anti-statist questions: 'How can we solve this problem through individual and community initiative? How can we avoid setting up an extra centralised government response? How can we improve things by spending as little taxpayers' money as necessary?' The presumption against the state is in

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stark contrast to older understandings of progressivism within the Conservative Party. In government, policies on the economy, health, higher education and welfare have followed the belief that progress, marketisation and modernisation are equated, while the use of the state to achieve social ends belongs to an earlier era. Cameron's progressive conservatism, like Thatcherism, therefore, is only progressive in the less used senses that its modernising side includes both 'optimism about the future' and 'rupture with the past'.

How does Cameron's progressive conservatism compare with the 'regressive' elements of Thatcherism? Here there is some distance between the two. Cameron has not explicitly sought to re-moralise public discourse through a return to Victorian values as Thatcher had done or by going 'back to basics' as John Major had attempted. (This must partly be because of the trouble that Major got into when a call to go 'back to basics' shone unwanted light on the personal lives of several Cabinet members.) Cameron's progressive conservatism is generally more socially liberal than Thatcher's regressive modernisation. His support for gay marriage is often cited as an example of this (Daniel, 2011, pp. 197–214). It has become a totemic issue for progressive conservatives – one that differentiates Cameron as a progressive from his regressive 'Thatcherite' backbenchers (Hayton, 2012, pp. 117–8). (Partly this is no more than the product of changing social attitudes – outside the Conservative back benches, legal discrimination is not as acceptable on grounds of sexuality as it was a generation ago.)

Cameron is more comfortable with modern society than many Conservatives; however, he is not entirely relaxed. His support for marriage to be incentivised through the tax system pushes particular 'traditional' values (Daniel, 2011, pp. 212–4). Similarly, his claim that Britain is 'broken' involves a regressive element to his conservatism (Bochel, 2011, p. 15) – implying that there was a time in the past when it was not – as does the language of 'moral collapse' that Cameron used after the 2011 riots. Cameron's conservatism is not a regressive project in the strong sense that Thatcherism was, but there are obvious conservative elements to it.

Both Thatcher's 'regressive modernisation' and Cameron's 'progressive conservatism' are 'pushmi-pullyu' beasts. For Thatcher the countervailing pressures were balanced between modernity and regression; for Cameron progressive conservatism does not pull backwards quite as hard. Both Cameron and Thatcher should be viewed as progressives in limited ways: their projects included a modernising 'optimism about the future' and a 'rupture with the past'. However, neither Cameron nor Thatcher convincingly, in theory or practice, supported 'progress as social justice', and the assumptions of both have prioritised the market over state or civil society, in contrast to the means of achieving that goal advanced by one nation or Red Tories, respectively.

Conclusions

Cameron was elected Conservative leader in late 2005, arguing that the party 'has got to look and feel and talk and sound like a completely different organisation' (Evans, 2008, p. 293). It could no longer be a Thatcherite party. The early moves Cameron made convinced many commentators that this was the case. What this statement implied, but does not say, is that there needed to be some substantive change. As such, when Cameron used the phrase 'progressive conservatism' many assumed that it implied that he was

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moving the party to the centre and would promote some form of social justice above other ends. After his progressive conservative speech in 2009, many commentators assumed that Cameron had rediscovered the party's one nation roots; for others, after the dalliance with Phillip Blond and the focus on the 'big society', Cameron was a civic conservative who would promote community above state and market.

Cameron's progressive conservatism is outside both of these alternative progressive traditions: it is closer to Thatcher than to Macmillan or Blond. Like Thatcherism, progressive conservatism is progressive only in the limited senses that it is forward looking and marks a break with the past. Both Thatcherism and Cameron promote a particular view of modernity, which is sceptical about the state, individualist and pro-market; and neither use the traditional means of conservative progressives (the state or civil society) to promote social justice. Cameron's account of progressive conservatism was part of a change of image, not substantively of policy or ideology: as such, it is firmly on the right of British politics.

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Notes

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1 References to speeches are not routinely provided in this paper, but their approximate date is given and they can be easily found at: http://www.conservatives.com/

2 David Seawright has pointed out that the One Nation group within the Conservative Party has always 'exhibited the full range of the Conservative ideological continuum' – Ian Gilmour and Keith Joseph, for example, were both members (Seawright, 2010, p. 8, p. 9). However, just as the Fabian Society has included politicians as diverse as Tony Blair, Anthony Crosland and Sidney Webb, the one nation tradition in conservative politics and the Fabian tradition in Labour politics have become shorthand for rather more specific ideas.

3 The subtitle is a reference to Stephen Evans' (2010) article, ' "Mother's Boy": David Cameron and Margaret Thatcher', which explores the similarities between the two figures. (For a good overview of the different interpretations of Cameron's government, see Heppell and Seawright, 2012, conclusion and esp. pp. 236–8.)

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