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Conservatives in Coalition Government: Principles, Policies and Practice

The Conservatives, the Coalition and welfare reform: attitudes to social policy amongst newly elected MPs

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Abstract:

The 2010 general election, which led to the establishment of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, also saw the largest turnover of MPs since the Second World War, with the election of 227 new MPs, thirty-five per cent of the House of Commons. Focusing primarily on the Conservative Party, although also looking more broadly across the House, this paper examines attitudes to social policy amongst the newly elected MPs. Drawing on interviews with an eventual sample of ten per cent of newly elected MPs, it examines their attitudes towards the role of the state in social policy, and the extent of parliamentary support for reform, within the Conservative Party, their Coalition partners, and across the House of Commons. The paper also draws upon earlier research by the authors, which examined MPs' attitudes to social policy during the 2005-2010 parliament, to provide some comparative data on attitudes in the previous parliament, including, for example, whether there is any significant difference between MPs elected in 2010 and their longer serving colleagues.

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In an article published shortly before the 2010 general election we suggested that in the event of a Conservative victory, a Cameron-led government may have been able to command high levels of support among its MPs, particularly given that a high proportion would have been selected under Cameron's leadership and might to some extent owe their election to him. However, we also highlighted the continued presence within parliament of a group of Thatcherite MPs, and suggested that in the event of a hung parliament or a small majority this could provide considerable pressure for more radical right-wing policies, including significant cuts to public services (Bochel and Defty, 2010). The peculiar nature of the 2010 general election meant that to some extent both of these things happened. The large turnover of MPs saw the election of large number of new MPs from all of the main parties. However, the Conservative's failure to secure a majority meant that, to some extent, newly elected Conservative MPs owed their seats less to Cameron's leadership than to the parliamentary expenses scandal which prompted so many of their predecessors to step down in the run-up to the election. It is not clear whether this large cohort of new MPs embraced the more centrist position with which, in rhetoric at least, Cameron had sought to make the party more electable, or whether they were wedded to approaches which had secured electoral victories in the 1980s. This paper seeks to examine the extent of consensus within the parliamentary Conservative Party, and the coalition and parliament more broadly, by examining the attitudes of newly elected MPs to social policy and welfare reform.

The paper builds upon two earlier pieces of research. The first, undertaken by Bochel and Taylor-Gooby, examined MPs' attitudes to welfare in the mid-1980s and drew on a series of interviews with eighty-one MPs: 43 Conservative, 34 Labour and 4 SDP/Liberal (Taylor-Gooby and Bochel, 1988; Bochel, 1992). The second examined MPs' attitudes to welfare during the 2005-2010 parliament, and involved interviews with seventy-six MPs (Bochel and Defty, 2007a). The sample in that case comprised at least ten per cent of each of the main parties in the House of Commons: 35 Labour; 22 Conservative; 14 Liberal Democrat; 2 SNP; 2 Plaid Cymru and 1 Independent. Both pieces of research attempted some form of cohort or generational analysis. Bochel (1992) examined the differences in responses between those serving MPs elected before or at the time of Thatcher's first election victory in 1979, in what might be termed the pre-Thatcher era, and those elected in or after 1983 when Thatcher had consolidated her position and influence with a second victory. The more recent research compared the responses of MPs elected before Labour's landslide victory in 1997, and those elected at or since the 1997 general election. Whilst the relatively small numbers involved made cohort analysis difficult, the more recent research also drew some conclusions about the attitudes of 122 MPs elected for the first time at the 2005 general election: 40 Labour, 54 Conservative, 20 Liberal Democrat and 8 from other parties. The newly elected MPs comprised nineteen per cent of the then House of Commons, and twenty per cent of the total sample, this was once again balanced to reflect the balance of the parties with no less than ten per cent of each of the main parties new intake being interviewed: 7 Labour, 5 Conservative, and 3 Liberal Democrats.

Whilst that research provided extensive data on MPs' attitudes to welfare in the previous parliament, the large turnover of MPs in the 2010 general election somewhat undermined the continued validity of this data as an indicator of current parliamentary attitudes. The 2010

general election saw the largest turnover of MPs since the Second World War, with the election of 227 new MPs, thirty-five per cent of the House. This comprised 147 Conservative MPs, 63 Labour, 10 Liberal Democrats and 7 from the smaller parties. As a result a significant proportion of those MPs interviewed for the previous research, twenty-nine MPs (forty-two per cent of the sample), were no longer in the House of Commons following the 2010 general election. The current research aims to collect data on attitudes to welfare amongst those MPs newly elected in 2010. As with the 2005 cohort, the intention is to interview at least ten per cent of each of the parties newly elected MPs: 15 Conservative, 6 Labour, 1 Liberal Democrat, and at least 2 representatives of the smaller parties. This will provide data on the attitudes of newly elected MPs on a key area of public policy. It will also allow a number of comparisons to be made, including between attitudes in the current House of Commons, those in the previous parliament, and MPs' attitudes in the 1980s. It will also enable a comparison between the cohort of MPs first elected in 2005 and those first elected in 2010.

The three surveys all sought to identify the range of parliamentary opinion in relation to welfare and focused in particular on the extent of consensus on welfare issues, both within and across parties. The timing of each of the surveys is particularly interesting in this respect. Not only do they reflect attitudes within Parliament with different parties in power: Conservative, Labour and a coalition government but they also to some extent reflect shifts in the perceived consensus on welfare. Bochel and Taylor-Gooby's survey was undertaken at a time of significant retrenchment in spending in a period when the post-war consensus on welfare was widely seen to have broken down (for example, Kavanagh and Morris, 1994). The second survey was also undertaken at a time of significant welfare reform under the Blair government when Labour's attempts to develop a more selective, targeted and 'active' approach to many areas of social policy provision led some scholars to suggest the emergence of a new consensus on welfare (for example, Taylor-Gooby, 2001; Lowe, 2005; Bochel and Defty 2007b). The current survey is taking place at a time when welfare reform is again the subject of considerable public and parliamentary debate, and when cross-party consensus is perhaps less clear than in recent years. Yet the presence of a coalition government in Downing Street suggests that one might expect to find at least some degree of cross-party consensus within Parliament.

In all three cases the survey has taken the form of semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions designed to allow MPs to respond in their own terms to broad questions about the role of the state in welfare provision, and more structured questions which allow for closer comparability of responses on specific issues such as paying for welfare and MPs' priorities for welfare spending. MPs were also asked a series of questions on a number of key policy areas: the NHS, pensions, benefits and income maintenance. In an effort to encourage candour interviews are conducted on a confidential basis, and MPs are encouraged to articulate their personal attitudes and beliefs. At present interviews have been conducted with eleven MPs from the 2010 intake: 5 Conservative, 5 Labour and 1 Liberal Democrat. This comprises around five per cent of the 2010 intake, and does not reflect the balance of parties in the House. This paper therefore represents some early findings about attitudes amongst the 2010 cohort and some reflection on how these may differ from those of earlier cohorts of MPs. Although the research is collecting data from across the House, for the purpose of this paper the focus will be primarily on the attitudes of Conservative MPs, and their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats. Given the small numbers interviewed to date, the findings are clearly tentative.

The coalition government and the politics of welfare

There was considerable potential for cross-party consensus in social policy following the 2010 general election. In government the Labour Party had moved away from statist social policies based on a high level of universal provision. Demographic pressures coupled with global pressure to drive down taxes and regulation had led Labour to adopt a more modest approach to the delivery of support targeted at those who could demonstrate most need. Alongside increased conditionality, Labour emphasised that work was the most effective route out of poverty and supported this through welfare-to-work programmes, the minimum wage and a range of tax credits. Labour also moved away from its traditional reliance on the state as both the principal funder and provider of services. While continuing to rely on state funding Labour encouraged a diverse range of providers in the private and voluntary sectors to take responsibility for the delivery of services, and more controversially used the Private Finance Initiative to encourage the private sector to build schools and hospitals. What had begun as a commitment to stick to Conservative spending plans had, by the time Labour left office, evolved into what some have seen as a new liberal consensus on welfare based on targeted support, mixed provision and incentivising work (Taylor-Gooby, 2001; Prabhakar, 2011).

In opposition David Cameron had also sought to shift the Conservative Party towards a more centrist position. He sought to broaden the Conservatives electoral appeal beyond their core vote, by emphasising the importance of combating poverty and social exclusion. While continuing to stress the problem of dependency Cameron sought to move Conservative rhetoric from condemnation to support. David Willetts declared that the war on single parents was over, and although Cameron may not have actually uttered the phrase ‘hug a hoodie’, he certainly encouraged the Party to embrace various socially excluded groups (Brighouse and Swift, 2007; Bennett, 2008). Cameron placed particular emphasis on family policies, and while some of these reflected conventional Conservative preoccupations with traditional families and encouraging self-reliance, they also reflected Labour’s active welfare-to-work programmes and an appreciation that policies such as the provision of affordable childcare and the tapering of financial support could enable individuals, and single-parents in particular, to return to work (Bochel, 2011). He also committed a Conservative government to meeting Labour’s target for the elimination of child poverty, and in the run-up to the election the Conservatives were also at pains to make clear that public services, and particularly the NHS, were safe in their hands (Bochel and Defty, 2010).

During Labour’s thirteen years in office, the Liberal Democrats had also shifted to right. While the Liberal Democrats had in recent years presented themselves as close to, or to the Left of the Labour Party, the publication of *The Orange Book* in 2004 marked a shift towards a more market-oriented approach to social policies, including more competition and choice in public services and a social insurance based approach to healthcare.

There was some significant continuity in approaches to welfare between Labour and the incoming coalition government. Several observers pointed to the Coalition Government’s use of advisors who had been involved in welfare reform under Labour as indicative of common ground between the main parties (Prabhakar, 2011; Driver, 2011). The Labour MP Frank Field who had been a Minister for Welfare Reform, and former Labour Ministers John Hutton and Alan Milburn advised the coalition respectively on welfare, pensions and social

mobility. The Conservatives also secured the support, and a seat in the House of Lords for David Freud, who had produced a report on welfare dependency for Labour. Although some Conservative social policies reflected a significant break with Labour, most notably the abolition of Child Trust Funds and the means-testing of Child Benefit, in many other areas the coalition government's approach to social policy represented a change in scale, rather than a change of direction. The principles underpinning Labour policies: incentivising work, increased conditionality for access to benefits and the use of the private and voluntary sector to deliver welfare to work were all reflected in the policies of the coalition government (Driver, 2011). The coalition also embraced Labour's belated replacement of Incapacity Benefit with Employment and Support Allowance, and tagged on to this more rigorous eligibility criteria.

The extent of apparent cross-party consensus on social policy led at least one observer to suggest that the Coalition is likely to find the management of welfare reform 'relatively straightforward' (Driver, 2011: 114). This is in marked contrast to the Labour government which struggled to secure parliamentary support for welfare reform in the face of significant opposition from their own backbenches. However, Driver also suggested that while Cameron is unlikely to face opposition to reform from within the Conservative Party, 'one problem he may face is managing the expectations of some on his backbenches, not least the hardened Thatcherites, who would like nothing better than to slash and burn the welfare state' (Driver 2011: 115).

MPs' attitudes: The role of the state in welfare provision

On the broad question of the role of the state, research from the 2005 parliament did find some evidence of cross-party consensus in relation to welfare, particularly when compared with MPs' attitudes in the 1980s. In the 2005 parliament, although MPs continued to be divided broadly on party lines, with Conservative MPs favouring a more minimal role for the state with a strong emphasis on private provision, while Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs tended towards a more collectivist approach, there was evidence of a marked shift towards the centre on the part of some MPs from the three main parties. Fewer Labour MPs expressed support for a high national minimum level of provision or a redistributive role for the state than in the 1980s, and a significant minority of Labour MPs (forty-three per cent) supported a more active role for the state in propelling individuals quickly back into work. This characterisation of the welfare state as an 'enabling mechanism' featured strongly in Labour MPs' responses in the last Parliament but not in the 1980s. A similar, and perhaps more significant shift, was also evident in the attitudes of Conservative MPs, in this case away from minimal provision towards a more active role for the state. Only one in three Conservative MPs interviewed in the 2005 parliament expressed the view that the government should provide a safety-net only for those in most need, compared with seventy per cent of Conservative MPs who expressed this view in the 1980s. There was also evidence of a movement away from support for the extension of private provision in favour of a role for the state in working with other providers, such as charities and the third sector, as a means of addressing challenges such as child and pensioner poverty. As a result more Conservative MPs supported a more active role for the state than those advocating a basic safety-net. This group of MPs, which included former Ministers from the Thatcher and Major governments, and MPs who have gone on to become Ministers under Cameron, spoke about the role of government in building communities and improving life chances. Several went out of their way to dissociate themselves from Thatcherite philosophies, for example by explicitly

declaring, 'there is such a thing as society' and that 'people are social animals, not atomised individuals'.

However, whilst research on the previous Parliament did conclude that there was evidence for some movement towards the centre ground on the part of MPs from each of the main parties, it was not clear how firm this centre ground was. Moreover, analysis suggested that the attitudes of more recently elected MPs were somewhat more polarised than those of their more established colleagues. When comparing the attitudes of MPs first elected prior to the 1997 general election, with those elected in or since 1997, there was greater support for a more selective targeted approach to provision amongst Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs elected since 1997 than in the earlier cohort. The shift was most marked among Liberal Democrat MPs, among whom the more selective approach was not mentioned by any of the cohort elected prior to 1997, while none of the later cohort referred to a role for the state in redistributing wealth. To some extent this movement towards the centre on the part of the more recent cohort of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs, reflected the policies of those parties at the time. In contrast, the proportion of Conservative MPs who advocated a smaller role for the state and a minimal safety-net was much larger in the later cohort (almost half, compared to less than one third of the earlier cohort), suggesting the potential for more fundamental divisions within the Conservative Party, or, if the trend was to continue, increasing polarisation between the parties.

Evidence for growing polarisation between the parties was more pronounced in the attitudes of MPs elected for the first time in 2005. Among that cohort there was more support for positions which reflected the opposing poles represented by the minimal safety-net and a redistributive role for the state. There was significant dissent from party policy on the part of newly elected Labour MPs, with strong support for redistribution, a position adopted by only one in five Labour MPs in the sample as a whole. There was less support for a range of service providers than in the sample as a whole, with particular concern about Labour's attempts to involve the private sector through schemes such as PFI. Four in seven newly elected Labour MPs expressed opposition to private sector involvement in the delivery of public services.

This apparent support for core party values was even more evident among the 2005 Conservative intake whose views were closer to those of Conservative MPs interviewed by Taylor-Gooby and Bochel in the 1980s, than other Conservatives interviewed in the 2005 parliament. Three of the five Conservative MPs interviewed from the 2005 cohort described the role of the state as no more than a minimal safety-net, a proportion almost double that which expressed this view in the sample as a whole. Moreover, these MPs were particularly forthright in expressing their belief that the state should offer only minimal support for those in need, 'to ensure that no-one ends up in abject poverty', or 'to make sure that people are not starving.' Each of them also identified growing dependence on the state as the main challenge facing the welfare state today, to the exclusion of all other challenges. They were particularly critical of the benefits system for allowing people to be 'too comfortable', and for expanding the number of people entitled to claim. Moreover, whilst Margaret Thatcher remains a talismanic influence for many Conservative MPs, those Conservative MPs elected in 2005 referred to her as an influence much more often than earlier cohorts, including those who had served in the Thatcher governments.

There is also evidence in the interviews with the 2010 intake for growing polarisation between the parties. Three out of the five Conservative MPs interviewed expressed the view that the role of the state should be to provide a safety-net only for those in most need, while the same proportion of Labour MPs felt that the state should provide a national floor above the minimum level in a range of areas, and one said the role of the state should be the redistribution of wealth. Several Conservative MPs referred to the need to ‘get back’ to the idea of a safety-net, to encourage self-reliance and to avoid dependency. They were critical of the benefits system for being ‘too generous’ and claimed that too many people were entitled to claim benefits. There was, however, a difference of opinion between Conservative MPs about what the safety-net should entail. Some referred to ‘minimal’ or ‘adequate’ support for those who needed it, with one Conservative MP asserting, ‘you won’t eradicate poverty by making it too pleasant to live on modest incomes.’ Others argued for more generous support for those in genuine need, whilst restricting entitlements for others. For these MPs welfare reform would not necessarily save money, but would rebalance the welfare state to provide more support for deserving groups.

As this suggests, and perhaps not surprisingly there was much more emphasis on the need for cuts amongst the 2010 cohort. All of the interviews with MPs in the 2005 parliament took place before the onset of the global financial crisis which emerged in late 2008. In contrast to the Thatcher years, the Conservative Party in opposition was at pains to avoid the impression that they would introduce significant cuts to public services, to the extent that the Conservative MP, Howard Flight (now Lord Flight), was deselected for comments made in a private speech prior to the 2005 election in which he advocated the kind of spending cuts which the coalition government has openly endorsed since the 2010 election. Even in confidential interviews few Conservative MPs in the 2005 parliament advocated substantive cuts to taxes or spending. Nevertheless, there were some forthright comments from a small number of Conservative MPs, including from the 2005 cohort, about the need to rein in spending on benefits, and the possibility of increased charging for some services within the NHS such as GP visits. One Conservative MP from the 2005 cohort even advocated the abolition of the NHS, something which was not recommended by any of the MPs interviewed in the 1980s.

The need to reduce spending has, not surprisingly, been a frequent refrain amongst Conservative MPs interviewed from the 2010 cohort. Cost was identified as the main challenge facing the welfare state by four out of the five Conservative MPs from the 2010 cohort, compared to one in four Conservatives interviewed in the 2005 parliament. There was strong support for cutting the welfare bill by reducing entitlements and introducing a benefits cap, and for reducing the cost of the NHS by ending state funding for procedures such as cosmetic surgery and IVF.

The re-emergence of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor

In seeking to define the parameters of state provision, Conservative MPs elected in 2010 frequently made a distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups. This had also featured strongly in Conservative responses in the 1980s, when for many only a very small section of the population was defined as the ‘deserving poor’ who should receive support from the state, primarily disabled and older people. This distinction was, however, less evident in the 2005 parliament. Although MPs from all parties identified some groups as particularly deserving of support, frequently children, old people and disabled people, the

identification of priorities for welfare spending were varied and arguably closely reflected perceived needs in particular sectors, or even constituencies, such as housing, childcare and support for carers, rather than fixed ideas about which groups were more deserving of support. Moreover, whilst Labour MPs in the 2005 parliament talked a great deal about the importance of targeting benefits at those in most need, a number of Conservative MPs were critical of targeting and expressed their support for universal provision. One went so far as to refer to a 'Conservative shift to universality'.

However, among the 2010 intake there is a clear resurgence in Conservative concerns with 'deserving' and particularly 'undeserving' groups. Conservative MPs who characterised the welfare state as a safety-net often qualified this by identifying who should be captured in it. These generally fell into clear categories described variously as, 'the young, the sick and the old', 'the most vulnerable, those with physical or mental disabilities', 'those who can't work because of a disability, and those too young or too old to work.' Old people appear to be viewed by Conservative MPs as the most deserving group. When asked to identify their priorities for welfare spending, three out of five Conservative MPs identified pensions and old people as a priority, while two identified support for disabled people. This was in marked contrast to the priorities identified by Labour MPs, none of whom identified spending on old people as a priority, whilst four out of five said that the government should spend more getting people back into work, something which was identified as a priority by only one Conservative MP.

Even within those groups viewed by Conservative MPs as deserving of support there was some distinction between those who were viewed as more or less deserving. This is particularly the case with disabled people, a group about whom MPs were unequivocal in their support in the 1980s. There was some evidence for a decline in support for people with disabilities amongst MPs interviewed in the 2005 parliament. This appeared to derive from concerns, expressed by MPs from all parties, about the large number of individuals claiming Incapacity Benefit. As a result it is apparent that many MPs now make a distinction between the 'deserving disabled', those with severe physical and mental conditions who cannot reasonably be expected to work, and those with some long-term chronic conditions whom many MPs feel could be economically active to some degree. This was also reflected in responses from the 2010 intake of Conservative MPs. One made a distinction between those with disabilities 'through no fault of their own', and others whose conditions may be attributed to lifestyle choices, such as those with Type 2 diabetes, who were less deserving of support. Another criticised Labour for 'lowering the bar on incapacity' and argued that 'the medical profession should not have sovereignty over decisions about individuals ability to work'. Interestingly, while Labour MPs had spoken strongly about the need to reform Incapacity Benefit in interviews during the 2005 parliament, in interviews with the 2010 intake several Labour MPs were critical of its replacement, Employment and Support Allowance, and in particular the medical assessments used to determine claimants ability to work, many of which, they argued, have been overturned on appeal.

Indeed, what has perhaps been more striking than the clear identification of those groups which deserve state support, has been the willingness on the part of Conservative MPs to identify those whom they deem to be undeserving. While MPs from all parties referred to the need to avoid encouraging dependency, some Conservative MPs used particularly strong language in relation to those claiming benefits, referring to some of those on benefits as 'workshy', and stating that 'too many people see it as a way of life'. To some extent this

appears to reflect the Conservative rhetoric of the 1980s, although one Conservative MP conceded that it was 'hard to say these things publicly'. One Conservative MP singled-out 'serial family-makers' as a particular problem, individuals who have children with several different partners. This was not, this MP asserted, a return to the Conservative preoccupation with single parents, but he did add that this was largely because that argument had been won, asserting that it was now widely accepted that 'in poorer communities it was a rational way out... benefits had a direct incentive effect on the behaviour of people choosing to become single parents.'

Conclusions

Although the numbers are clearly small and things may become clearer as more interviews are completed, there is some evidence that the attitudes to social policy of MPs' elected in 2010 are different to those expressed by MPs in the 2005 parliament. In particular there is less evidence of cross-party consensus than in the 2005 parliament, and some strong evidence for more polarisation between the parties. The attitudes of the 2010 intake of Conservative MPs in particular appear to be much closer to those of Conservative MPs interviewed in the 1980s, than those interviewed in the 2005 parliament, with a strong emphasis on a minimal safety-net approach to welfare, and a re-emergence of preoccupations with the deserving and undeserving poor. What is not clear is whether this polarisation is creating fault-lines within the main parties or whether it represents a more fundamental shift of attitudes within the parties as a whole.

The fact that attitudes of MPs from different parties were more polarised in both the 2005 and 2010 cohorts, than in the 2005 sample as a whole might suggest that there is a trend towards greater polarisation. However, an alternative explanation may be that more recently elected MPs are more likely to express views which reflect the core values, or grass roots, views of party members, and that over time they become socialised or simply more pragmatic and gravitate towards the centre ground.

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