Book Section:

Constructing a new conservatism? Ideology and values

Richard Hayton

Introduction

Following three severe election defeats, the Conservatives elected David Cameron as leader on an explicitly modernising platform. His agenda for change encompassed revitalising the party image through a concerted effort to rebrand the party, an extensive review of policy, and ideological repositioning towards the centre-ground. While these three strands are of course intertwined this chapter will focus on the latter, namely the attempt to distance the Conservatives from the legacy of Thatcherism and cultivate a new form of conservatism with wider electoral appeal. It argues that despite some rhetorical distancing from the Thatcher era, Cameron largely failed to alter the trajectory of contemporary conservatism, which remains essentially neo-Thatcherite. Ultimately this has undermined the modernisation project that he hoped would define his leadership, limiting the effectiveness of his rebranding strategy and shaping the policy agenda that the Coalition government was able to pursue.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the Thatcherite ideological inheritance that shaped Conservative Party politics following the rout suffered at the 1997 general election. It then focuses on the attempts made by Cameron to reposition the party ideologically as Leader of the Opposition from 2005, and critically appraises the germane academic literature on Conservative modernisation. The chapter then moves on to examine Conservative Party ideology in office since 2010, suggesting that although forming the Coalition provided the Conservative leader with significant freedom of manoeuvre in statecraft terms (Hayton, 2014), conversely it limited Cameron's scope to radically alter

his party's ideological core. Finally, the chapter offers an assessment of some of the contemporary ideological debates within the party, and speculates about the future direction of conservatism in the light of the 2015 election result.

The Thatcherite inheritance

There was a time when it was common to regard the Conservative Party as non-ideological (Hayton, 2012: 7). This pretence was conclusively displaced by the Thatcher era, when the party 'became noted for its attachment to ideology' (Gamble, 1996: 20). By the mid-1990s it was clear that a radical and enduring ideological shift had occurred in the Conservative Party, with Thatcherism assuming a position of hegemonic dominance. The main features of the Thatcherite outlook are well known: a neo-liberal approach to economic issues; a moralistic social authoritarianism; and a commitment to a rather narrow conception of national sovereignty, manifested particularly as Euro-scepticism (Gamble, 1994; Heppell, 2002). Thatcherism was more than an ideological viewpoint however. It was also a successful electoral statecraft strategy (Bulpitt, 1986) and a style of leadership associated closely with Thatcher herself (King, 1985). It was this potent mixture of ideological vigour, formidable leadership and electoral success that, following her eviction from office by the party, fuelled the Thatcher myth and the Conservatives' fixation with Thatcherism. Somewhat ironically, the ascension of Thatcherite thinking within the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) consequently occurred following Thatcher's removal from power, reaching a position of dominance after the 1997 landslide defeat of the Major government. Analysing the PCP towards the end of her tenure Philip Norton found that 'Mrs Thatcher has not crafted a party that is inherently Thatcherite in terms of attitude and composition' (1990: 58). By contrast a study of the 2010 intake of MPs found the party to be predominantly Thatcherite (Heppell, 2013).

Some analysts have argued that the effect of this ideological transformation has been to render the Conservative Party essentially un-conservative. Mark Garnett, for example, has suggested that it has become 'a liberal organisation, with a nationalistic twist' (2003: 112), and more recently that the

Conservative Party 'has been shorn even of residual elements of conservative ideology, as traditionally understood' (2015: 159). The interpretation of Thatcherism as an ideological creed alien to conservatism is characteristic of the One Nation 'Wets' who fought against Thatcher within the party (Hayton, 2012: 27-31). However, as I have discussed elsewhere (2012, 2015) Thatcherism is more accurately conceived as an ideological position that is part of conservatism more broadly understood. The New Right (encompassing Thatcherism) is a school of thought within conservatism, which remains a distinctive ideological family committed to a limited form of politics (O'Sullivan, 2013). As such it is worth noting that the word 'conservatism' is used here primarily in reference to the Conservative Party, but that is not to say that that conservatism is simply shorthand for the positions taken by the party – rather it is to suggest that 'the two are intimately linked' (Norton, 2008: 324). Philip Norton has argued that: 'the Conservative party has a set of beliefs that comprise British Conservatism and those beliefs have been moulded and developed over time by Conservative politicians and thinkers, as well as by some who are not Conservatives' (2008: 324), and the focus of this chapter is on conservatism in this sense.

Comprehending Thatcherism as part of an essentially conservative intellectual tradition is not to deny the profound impact that it has had on the Conservative Party. For the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, 'Thatcherism can be seen as the first attempt to modernise British conservatism, by discarding the Butskellite consensus and acting from a consistent philosophical foundation' (2007: 686). The effect on thinking within the party was thrown into stark relief after the crushing 1997 general election defeat, as the Conservatives struggled to come to terms with either the scale of this loss or the extent of the changes that would be needed to challenge New Labour's capture of the centre-ground of British politics. The grip Thatcherism retained over intraparty deliberations was illustrated by the way in which successive Conservative leaders reverted almost by default to policy positions and electoral tactics designed to appeal to the party's core vote. William Hague (1997-2001), Iain Duncan Smith (2001-3) and Michael Howard (2003-5) all made preliminary and somewhat tentative efforts to renew the ideational basis of contemporary conservatism, but proved unable to formulate a cogent new narrative for their party (Hayton, 2012). A number of factors

contributed to this pattern, including their own unease over the potential costs of a more radical approach, dissent amongst shadow ministers and backbenchers, pressure from party members and parts of the media, and an apparent lack of responsiveness from the electorate. Most importantly however, the essentially Thatcherite outlook that prevailed throughout most of the PCP limited the parameters of debate thereby restricting the party leadership to one tributary of conservative thought. This manifested itself in underdeveloped policy statements that exhibited the main traits of Thatcherite ideology identified above, notably a firmly Euro-sceptic defence of national sovereignty; a traditionalist stance on social policy questions related to welfare, criminal justice, equal rights and marriage; and commitments to tax-cuts and a smaller state. The extent to which the party under David Cameron reappraised these positions is assessed in the following sections.

Transcending Thatcherism? Modernisation and ideological repositioning, 2005-2010

The election of David Cameron in December 2005 was widely greeted as the moment the Conservative Party finally stepped out of the shadow of Thatcherism. As the leader column in one national newspaper noted the day after his election, Cameron's claim that 'there is such a thing as society… crucially and symbolically draws a line between his Toryism and that of Margaret Thatcher' (The Guardian, 2005). Academic analysis of the leadership election suggested that Cameron had transcended ideological divisions to secure support from across the PCP, including from 'wets and dries, Europhiles and Eurosceptics, and social liberals and social conservatives' (Heppell and Hill, 2009: 399). This marked a break from the pattern established in previous leadership elections since Thatcher's departure, in which the PCP had voted more noticeably along ideological lines. Cameron's ability to overcome this trend was attributed by Timothy Heppell and Michael Hill to his personal charisma and perceived 'electability' (ibid.), indicating that Conservative MPs had elevated their desire to win the next general election over their preference for a leader who necessarily reflected their own political beliefs.

While it is undoubtedly the case that Cameron succeeded in cultivating a cross-party appeal, part of his strategy for doing so involved courting the more strongly Thatcherite elements of the PCP by offering them reassurances on a number of key issues. Most notably on the issue of European integration, which remained a touchstone question for many Conservative MPs, Cameron pledged during his leadership election campaign that he would pull his party's MEPs out of the European People's Party (EPP). Many Conservative MPs had voiced unhappiness with the party's affiliation to what they regarded as a federalist grouping, and both Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard had looked to renegotiate the terms of membership during their tenures as party leader. In the 2005 leadership campaign Liam Fox vowed to leave the group if elected, and Cameron moved to match this undertaking, which 'helped him secure sufficient support from the right of the party (e.g. from much of the Cornerstone Group) to see off the challenge of Fox and then David Davis' (Lynch and Whitaker, 2008: 34).

Cameron also moved to offer reassurance to the PCP's traditionalist wing in relation to social morality, through an emphasis on the importance of marriage. Cameron deliberately presented himself as a 'family man' and stressed the value he placed on marriage as a societal institution, and as the most desirable environment for raising children (Hayton, 2010). In one of the few other specific commitments he made during the leadership election campaign, he announced that a future Conservative government under his leadership would introduce a new allowance to recognise marriage in the tax system. This helped bolster his support across the party, and alleviate doubts about Cameron from those who do not share his inclination towards social liberalism.

In spite of these carefully crafted signals during the leadership election, the central message of Cameron's campaign was that his candidature represented change, and that the Conservative Party must change to win. He explicitly embraced the notion of modernisation, and in doing so advocated making a break with the past. In ideological terms this meant detaching himself from the legacy of Thatcherism, which his predecessors had all been unable to do. As Stuart McAnulla has argued, Cameron 'sought to distance himself from the perceived excessive individualism of Thatcherism,

through stressing repeatedly that "there is such a thing as society"… [and] he also drew upon the "one nation" theme within conservatism that Thatcher had arguably eschewed' (McAnulla, 2012: 168). Cameron pursued this strategy of rhetorical distancing consistently and effectively, and academic interpretations of the early years of his leadership in particular consequently emphasised the degree to which he had apparently repositioned the Conservatives ideologically. Kieron O'Hara (2007: 315) for example, saw the Cameron project as 'a leftward move to the post-Blair centre'. Peter Dorey, whilst cautioning that the Conservative leader would face an uphill battle with the right of his party to accomplish his modernisation agenda in full and meet the expectations it had raised about 'a new mode of conservatism for the early 21st century' (2007: 164), observed that:

> David Cameron has toiled tirelessly during his first year as Conservative leader to reposition the Party ideologically, and revive the 'one nation' strand which atrophied during the 1980s and 1990s. In so doing, he has explicitly eschewed Thatcherism, and effectively apologized for many aspects of it, while explicitly abandoning many of the policies implemented during the Thatcher-Major premierships. (Dorey, 2007: 162)

Cameron's basic strategy when he assumed the party leadership was, as Heppell (2014: 138) noted, 'to make the Conservatives appear more centrist and position them close to the location of the median voter'. However, whether this strategic relocation was underpinned by a fundamental ideological shift is more questionable. Downplaying certain issues, for instance, does not necessitate any modification of the underlying position, even though it may help create the impression that it has changed, or at least that those issues are no longer regarded as so important to the party's identity. So Cameron's plan to 'move away from prioritizing the issues associated with Thatcherism – that is taxation, immigration and Euroscepticism' (Heppell, 2014: 139) in fact emulated that which Iain Duncan Smith had attempted to pursue (albeit without a great deal of success) four years earlier (Hayton and Heppell, 2010: 430). Similarly, changing the way in which certain issues are discussed, for example through the moderation of language and tone, does not require policy positions to be greatly revised. One case in point is immigration, which had been the centrepiece of some sustained negative

campaigning by the Conservatives at the 2005 election. Cameron chose instead to speak positively about the benefits immigration can bring, but did not noticeably shift Conservative policy in practice, which remained to substantially reduce net inward migration (Hayton, 2012: 99).

Relatedly, spending more time talking about issues not closely associated with your party might help to broaden its electoral appeal and improve its image, but may not require a change of ideological approach – even if one is implied. According to Neil Carter, Cameron's embrace of the environment as his 'signature issue' was primarily a tactical manoeuvre, but also one of 'great symbolic importance' that suggested the party 'would not (always) prioritise business interests over the wider public good' (Carter, 2009: 233-4). Climate change became a particular focus of attention and in 2006 Cameron made a highly publicised visit to a Norwegian glacier to observe the effects of global warming, resulting in a memorable photo opportunity with a pack of huskies. However, as Ben Glasson (2012) has argued, the notion of ecological modernisation adopted by Cameron and others: 'transforms the threat of climate change into an opportunity, a new motor of neoliberal legitimacy' and professes 'no contradiction between sustainability and the present socioeconomic order'. As such, although the 'vote blue, go green' agenda was not one universally welcomed in Conservative circles it has not (in the way Cameron has pursued it) represented a threat to the party's core ideological positions.

This brings us to the heart of the Conservative Party's ideology in terms of its commitment to a neo-liberal political economy and a limited state. At no point during his tenure as Leader of the Opposition did Cameron seek to loosen the hold of the neo-Thatcherite perspective on the party's approach to economic questions, with Conservative hostility to Labour's neo-Keynesian response to the global financial crisis soon being made explicit as events unfolded (Hayton, 2012: 119-135). Martin Smith (2010: 818) has argued that the crisis laid bare the 'fundamental differences between the parties over the role of the state and the relationship between the state and the market', with the Conservatives promulgating the idea of the 'big society' as an alternative to the public sector. Prior to the financial crisis the Conservatives had pledged to match Labour's spending plans in an effort to persuade voters

they could be trusted with the public services, particularly the NHS (Smith, 2010: 827). Cameron had also been seen to shift his party's position on the issue of poverty, moving to accept that it could not simply be defined in absolute terms, but that relative measures (as preferred by New Labour) were necessary (Heppell, 2014: 141). For Hickson (2009: 360) this shift on inequality suggested something of a revival of the one nation tradition, but still one tempered by 'a strong anti-state attitude'.

Taken together, this apparent change of stance on poverty and the promise to protect the public services could have been seen as evidence that Cameron was returning to a form of one nation conservatism, which appreciated the positive role the state could play in society. Whatever the motivation, wooing public sector workers and their families certainly seemed like an astute electoral strategy, given that in 2005 this group represented 'over 40 percent of the electorate' and a key segment for the Conservatives to target (Sanders, 2006: 172). The plan to shield the public services was discarded however in the light of the financial crash, which the Conservatives presented as a debt crisis with 'big government' the primary culprit (Conservative Party, 2010: vii). This line of reasoning suggested that the solution lay in a dose of fiscal conservatism and a Thatcherite retrenchment of the state. As Peter Dorey discusses at length in the following chapter, in the run-up to the general election Cameron attempted to present this as a reimagining of the relationship between the state, society and individuals, rather than a crude austerity-driven onslaught on the public sector. The 'big society' narrative consequently became central to the Conservatives' electoral strategy and was presented as something of an ideological middle way between Thatcherism and New Labour, and envisaged a flourishing of non-state actors (see Chapter 5).

The notion of the big society has proved to be flimsy at best, and vulnerable to the charge that it is a Trojan horse for cuts to public services (Kisby, 2010: 490). However, it is worth briefly reflecting on the development of the concept here as it is indicative of the debate about the ideological direction of conservatism after Thatcher. Dorey and Garnett (2012) trace the intellectual roots of the big society narrative to the work of a number of Conservative figures in the 1990s and 2000s, notably Douglas Hurd, David Willetts, Ferdinand Mount, Damian Green, Oliver Letwin, Iain Duncan Smith, and Philip

Blond. Kevin Hickson (2010) also identified Duncan Smith, Willetts, Letwin, and Blond as key influences on conservatism under Cameron. What links these individuals is their concern with re-engaging conservatism with civil society and overcoming the perception that the party has little to say or offer beyond a commitment to individualism and free markets. The neo-Thatcherite position adopted by Cameron essentially echoes that outlined by Willetts in his work on civic conservatism in the early-1990s (Hayton, 2012: 31-5). It does not entail a rejection of Thatcherism, but emphasises that 'there is more to conservatism than the free market' (Willetts, 1994: 9), even if a particular stress on the latter was a necessary response to the problems faced by the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. For Willetts, markets and communities should not be seen as incompatible, but post-Thatcher the Conservatives needed to find new language to explain how they can support each other (ibid.).

This contrasts somewhat with the 'Red Toryism' of Phillip Blond, which offered a more radical critique of what another prominent proponent of the big society, Jesse Norman, called 'the market fundamentalism of the last three decades' (Norman, quoted in Dorey and Garnett, 2012: 290). Blond's target is modern liberalism as a whole, which he blames for producing 'both state authoritarianism and atomised individualism' in the post-war era (Blond, 2009). In Cameron's advocacy of a big society Blond detected the potential for a socially conservative 'new communitarian Tory settlement' built on a radical localism, involving much greater community ownership of assets (ibid.). As discussed in what follows on the big society in the next section, Blond (2012) has since lambasted Cameron for failing to pursue the red Tory agenda in office. However, it was a hopeless misreading of Cameron's positioning as leader of the opposition to ever think he would embark on an anti-liberal crusade in government. In promising to be 'as radical a social reformer as Mrs Thatcher was an economic reformer' David Cameron (quoted in Jones, 2008: 315) was never suggesting undoing the Thatcherite economic reform programme. Rather, his position was premised on the notion that with the advent of New Labour the Conservatives had essentially won the argument on the economy, so needed to find a new way to define themselves on social issues (Hayton, 2012: 102-3).

In summary, in the 2005 to 2010 period in ideological terms the Conservatives under Cameron did not transcend Thatcherism in a significant way. A number of steps were taken to signal change and to rhetorically distance the party from the Thatcher era, including moving onto territory associated with New Labour and downplaying traditional Thatcherite themes. However, the ideological parameters of conservatism remained essentially Thatcherite and were not fundamentally challenged, and consequently reasserted themselves in the light of the economic downturn from 2008 onwards.

Liberal conservatism and the politics of Coalition, 2010-15

If Cameron's modernisation project had only been partially delivered in opposition, some of its proponents hoped that the formation of the Coalition with the Liberal Democrats would facilitate its completion in office, with one MP – Nick Boles – quickly proposing the two parties adopt an electoral pact in 2015 (Hayton, 2014: 10). He later explained that: 'I believed that if we could get the Liberal Democrats to yoke themselves to us for a full two terms in government, we would in time be able to persuade most of them to merge their party into a truly liberal Conservative Party' (Boles, 2013). For Boles and other 'Cameroons', modernising the Conservative Party was therefore essentially about shifting its ideological core firmly in a liberal direction. Such a strategy, they believed, would widen the party's electoral appeal by capturing more centrist voters.

As I have noted elsewhere (Hayton, 2014: 11), a number of analysts have highlighted the presence of ideological common ground between the two Coalition parties, and this certainly appears to have been a factor in the successful conclusion of the coalition negotiations following the general election (Beech, 2011; McAnulla, 2012). This convergence reflected movement not only by Cameron and the Conservative leadership in a socially liberal direction, but also amongst key Liberal Democrats towards a firmer economic liberalism. In their foreword to the Coalition Agreement, the new Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister felt able to declare that: 'We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralization and top-down control have proved a failure' (quoted in Beech, 2011: 267). Writing soon after its formation, Matt Beech suggested that 'the shared outlook

and values' of the Cameron-Clegg Coalition were 'neoliberal political economy and an attitude of social liberalism' while the 'common enemies' were 'economic egalitarians and social conservatives' (2011: 270).

Shortly after the general election the new Prime Minister outlined this 'liberal conservatism' in a television interview with the BBC journalist Andrew Marr. He said: 'I've always described myself as a Liberal Conservative. I'm Liberal because I believe in freedom and human rights, but Conservative - I'm sceptical of great schemes to remake the world.' In the same interview he went on to describe the Coalition as a 'progressive alliance' (BBC, 2010). In opposition and in office Cameron consistently linked his 'liberal conservative' outlook to the notions of progress and modernity, juxtaposing it against reactionary and traditionalist viewpoints. Nonetheless to interpret this as a wholesale abandonment of conservatism, as some observers such as Garnett (2015) have done, would be mistaken. Cameron elucidated his philosophy at greater length in a 2007 speech, and was keen to underline that it drew mutually from both the ideological traditions of its moniker. He stated that he was a liberal as he is 'sceptical of the state' and trusts 'in the freedom of individuals to pursue their own happiness, with the minimum of interference from government'; but also a Conservative as he believes 'that there is a historical understanding between past, present and future generations, and that we have a social responsibility to play an active part in the community we live in' (quoted in Beech, 2011: 269).

This equation of conservatism with social responsibility implies a critique of Thatcherism for not delivering sufficiently on the latter, suggesting that the social authoritarianism of the Thatcher era had failed in its objectives and is incompatible with a liberally-inclined twenty-first century society. To the extent that liberal conservatism contains a critique of Thatcherism it is in relation to these themes, although its intensity is checked by the fact that it is framed against what many Conservatives would regard as a 'crass caricature' (McAnulla, 2012: 167) of Thatcherism. In a 2006 speech to Demos, David Cameron had in fact argued that Thatcher had 'increasingly worried that the new, open economy was not tackling problems of family breakdown, crime, poor schooling, drug dependency

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and the decline of respect in parts of our inner cities', and that she 'made a famous speech invoking religion as a means of enriching our sense of social obligation' (2006). The parallels with the rhetoric of the big society and the stated need to 'mend our broken society' (Conservative Party, 2010: iii) are obvious. As such, it is clear that Cameron regarded his liberal conservatism as consistent with the Conservative Party's ideological inheritance from Thatcher, even if the specific policies required had evolved with time.

Ryan Shorthouse, director of the Bright Blue think-tank which has been a vocal supporter of Cameron's modernisation agenda, has sought to highlight the intellectual roots of liberal conservatism. Shorthouse (2013) rejects the charge that liberal conservatism is 'simply political triangulation' driven by electoral expediency. For him, it is a liberal philosophy with a positive view of human nature: a belief that 'people are fundamentally good'. It is also a progressive one that holds 'that the future will be better than the past'. Nonetheless, it draws on 'rich Conservative traditions' and retains a 'Burkean' scepticism that is wary of 'definitive dogmatism'. The timing of Shorthouse's intervention, in February 2013, is significant. At that point in time the Coalition's public standing was at a low ebb as the economy remained in the doldrums and George Osborne's programme of fiscal austerity was increasingly being blamed for exacerbating rather than solving the deficit problem, while other aspects of the government's agenda associated with modernisation (such as equal marriage for gay couples) were proving unpopular with more traditionalist Conservative members and supporters, some of whom were turning towards the UK Independence Party. Shorthouse therefore sought to argue that liberal conservatism (and by implication modernisation) had an enduring relevance that has survived the economic crash and the onset of the politics of austerity.

The austerity agenda was driven as much by politics as by economic considerations. As Andrew Gamble (2015: 42) has argued, austerity was a key feature of the Conservative Party's statecraft after the 2010 general election, and was used to 'redefine the terms of the debate on economic policy, enabling the Coalition to blame the recession on Labour and to create a new narrative to bolster its claim to economic competence'. In some ways this proved to be an astute political strategy which co-

opted the Liberal Democrats in the Conservative agenda, created a dividing line with the opposition, and provided an over-arching framework within which many other policy debates could be framed (Hayton, 2014). However, by exposing the Conservatives' attachment to neo-liberal political economy to full view it brought into question the sincerity of their commitment to modernisation and liberal conservatism. With deficit reduction through fiscal retrenchment established as the number one priority for the Coalition, perhaps inevitably the language adopted by Conservative politicians become rather more hard-edged than during the earlier years of the Cameron leadership, emphasising the 'tough choices' the government had to make. On welfare policy for instance, which had been identified by the Chancellor of the Exchequer as an area that could be targeted for significant spending cuts (ostensibly to help protect spending in other areas), Osborne and other Coalition ministers deployed rhetoric redolent of the Thatcher era. As an example, framing the issue in terms of 'workers versus shirkers' and 'strivers versus skivers' was an attempt to inflame a sense of perceived injustice or even outrage about benefit claimants, in contrast to the more understanding and moderate language the party had used in opposition (Hayton and McEnhill, 2014: 107).

In the chapter that follows Peter Dorey argues that the policy agenda pursued by the Conservatives in Coalition – not only in relation to welfare, but also notably in terms of economic management and public sector reform – represents a reversion to Thatcherite type, and that this amounts to an 'abandonment' (Chapter 5, pp. ???) of the modernisation strategy Cameron had earlier pursued. While I do not diverge from the thrust of his assessment of the Conservative policy programme in office, which carries a number of clear Thatcherite hallmarks, the case advanced here is that this does not mark a deep rupture with the notion of modernisation the Conservative leadership promulgated in opposition, particularly if this is conceived in terms of its ideological underpinnings, namely liberal conservatism. Returning to O'Sullivan's (2013) definition of conservatism as a limited form of politics, we can locate Cameron's ideology within this designation, at the same time as acknowledging (as the Conservative leader has) the considerable influence of liberal ideas on his outlook. Some aspects of the modernisation strategy have been undermined by the politics of austerity, notably the effort to re-brand the party as concerned with more than economics and to

rhetorically distance it from Thatcherism. However, there is no fundamental inconsistency in ideological terms between the liberal conservatism of the Coalition and that pursued by Cameron in office. The core Conservative commitment to a neo-liberal political economy was never challenged in opposition (Hayton, 2012), so it's reassertion following an economic downturn was to be fully expected. Given the Conservatives' success in dominating the Coalition's statecraft (Hayton, 2014) we can view it's ideology as derived essentially from conservative ideas (Lakin, 2013: 476).

Dorey (Chapter 5) also suggests that the ideological make-up of the PCP was a key factor influencing the policy positions of the Cameron-Clegg government. As noted earlier, research has demonstrated that the 2010 intake of Conservative MPs was largely Thatcherite (Heppell, 2013) and some of the most intellectually active elements of the PCP have been characterised as forming a 'new New Right' movement (Lakin, 2014). The 2010 parliament has also witnessed unprecedented levels of backbench dissent, with the fact that the government is a Coalition seemingly been taken by some MPs as a licence to rebel frequently (Cowley and Stuart, 2012). The Conservative leadership therefore has appeared mindful of 'the perceived need to pacify the party's more right-wing MPs, members and supporters, particularly in the light of a noteworthy rise in support for the UK Independence Party' on their right flank (Hayton, 2014: 16). This factor has consequently limited Cameron's scope to radically alter his party's ideological core and embark on a genuinely far-reaching modernisation of conservatism. While significant political capital was expended on the totemic issue of equal marriage for gay couples, few other issues have pushed the boundaries of conservatism beyond its Thatcherite comfort zone. The analysis offered here of Cameron's liberal conservatism indicates that this was never his intention, premised as it was on building on, rather than critiquing, the Thatcherite legacy.

Conclusion: twenty-first century conservatism

This chapter has made a number of key claims. The first is that Thatcherism is best understood as part of the conservative tradition of limited politics, so while radical and transformative in a number of important ways it remains part of the intellectual family of conservatism. The second is that the

ideological legacy of Thatcherism has continued to animate and define the Conservative Party's ideational debates since the 1990s, including in the period from 2005 onwards that has been the focus of this chapter. As such, the principal claim of the chapter is that the liberal conservatism advanced by David Cameron remains essentially neo-Thatcherite, and that the modernisation agenda pursued since 2005 has not pushed contemporary conservatism beyond these parameters. The novel element in neo-Thatcherism is its recognition of the need for the Conservative Party to stress the fact that it has concerns beyond the economic sphere and the deployment of a more civic-orientated language to express these. However, this has not involved challenging the core tenets of the Thatcherite ideological inheritance, and arguably helps justify and buttress the continued primacy of neo-liberalism. In this sense the modernisation of the party is incomplete, if modernisation is understood to include a reorientation of ideological outlook. While in opposition (and to a lesser extent in office) Cameron engaged in rhetorical distancing from Thatcherism, notably consistently declining to describe himself as a Thatcherite, this has not amounted to ideological repositioning. It was largely premised on the claim that Thatcherism was right for its time, but that circumstances have moved on and created new demands for the Conservatives to respond to.

The core facets of Thatcherism were identified at the outset as a neo-liberal approach to economic issues; a moralistic social authoritarianism; and a commitment to a rather narrow conception of national sovereignty, manifested particularly as Euro-scepticism. Each of these elements remains clearly visible in the Conservative Party after a term of Coalition government. The reassertion of a neo-liberal political economy has been discussed above in relation to the politics of austerity. The hold Euro-scepticism retains over the PCP has been illustrated both by Cameron's veto of a putative EU treaty at the European Council of December 2011, and by the pledge to renegotiate UK membership of the European Union and hold an in-out referendum in 2017 (Goes, 2014). And while in some ways the authoritarianism of Thatcherism appears to have been abandoned in the face of new social norms (for example in relation to equal rights for gay people) a moralistic tone is still very much a feature of Conservative rhetoric on issues such as welfare and marriage. In short, after almost

a decade of Cameronite leadership the construction of a coherent and qualitatively new conservatism remains largely unfulfilled.

This chapter consequently rejects the thesis advanced by Beech (2015: 3) that 'Cameron's political thought is essentially a form of liberalism albeit communicated to the electorate as liberal Conservatism'. Rather, Cameron's liberal conservatism, like Thatcherism, should be located within the conservative ideological tradition of a limited form of politics. In contrast Beech (2015: 4) argues that: 'While Cameron's Conservatives exhibit some traditional conservative attitudes, compared in relation to a sizable portion of the Parliamentary Conservative Party, and many grassroots activists, they are consistently liberal… The politics of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition is essentially a right-wing liberalism' (Beech, 2015: 4). This view contains echoes of the One Nation critique of the Thatcher era, which identified an un-conservative (neo)-liberal ideology and coterie as somehow capturing the Conservative Party so that it was no longer the vehicle for conservatism, as they saw it. The irony of course is that the 'conservative' parliamentarians and activists that Cameron's liberal project is contrasted with by Beech are, by and large, traditionalist Thatcherites – the group being defined as un-conservative by One Nation Tories a generation earlier.

Cameron's liberal ideology, Beech contends, has three main strands: economic liberalism, social liberalism, and liberal interventionism (in foreign policy). As such he accepts that Thatcherism forms the central basis of the Cameronite approach to economic issues, suggesting that the Coalition has 'arguably gone further in rolling-back Britain's welfare capitalism' (Beech, 2015: 5) but – following the One Nation interpretation – for him this reinforces its liberal, rather than conservative, basis. The central thrust of Beech's argument rests, however, on the divide between modernisers and traditionalists on social and moral issues, where notable divisions in the PCP (and wider party) have been apparent for quite some time (Hayton, 2010). The particular focus of his attention here is the issue of equal marriage for same-sex couples, for which he can ascertain no 'reason to embark upon such a divisive, controversial and un-conservative policy' apart from a desire 'to change a key aspect of British society – the definition of marriage – in line with their liberal ideology' (Beech, 2015: 9).

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As such this view gives no credence to the justification offered by Cameron himself, namely that he believed that Conservatives should seek to strengthen the institution of marriage, and that equalising the rights of same-sex couples would have that effect (for an extended discussion of this issue, see Hayton and McEnhill, 2015: 136-9). Moreover, a wider assessment of the Coalition's social policies, for example in relation to welfare, makes it difficult to sustain the case that the approach was not strongly informed by conservative ideas (McEnhill, 2015).

What then, can we say about the future trajectory of conservatism in the UK, in the light of the 2015 general election result? Winning the election with an overall majority was a triumph of Conservative Party statecraft – the acme of the successful exploitation of the Liberal Democrats as a junior governing partner. Not only was this a vindication of David Cameron and George Osborne personally, but also of the liberal conservatism they promulgated, which proved to me more electorally resilient in the face of the rise of UKIP than many on the right of their party had feared. Yet, an assessment of the fate of Cameron's modernisation strategy cannot but conclude that across a range of defining policy areas it was either abandoned or significantly curtailed (Kerr and Hayton, 2015; Dorey, Chapter 5). As Steve Buckler and David Dolowitz (2012) have explored, ideological repositioning does not take place in a vacuum but is a highly contextualised process, dependent upon interpretations and calculations by political actors who find themselves in ever-evolving circumstances. As discussed above, Conservative modernisation did not fundamentally challenge the ideological legacy of Thatcherism within the party, so in the context of the financial crisis, fiscal retrenchment, and the demands of party management as part of a coalition government, its failure to secure far-reaching change is unsurprising (Dommett, 2015). What remains is a liberal conservatism in which the liberal element is derived from Thatcherite individualism, underscoring the importance of individual self-reliance across both economic and social policy spheres.

The election of the first majority Conservative government since 1992 provides David Cameron with the opportunity to define his liberal conservatism free of the constraints of Coalition. He may well find, however, that the challenge of governing with a small parliamentary majority is as much of a

restraint on his freedom of action as the need to compromise with the Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015. The commitments the Conservative Party made during the general election campaign to hold a referendum on membership of the European Union, scrap the Human Rights Act, reduce net migration to the tens of thousands, cut a further £12 billion per annum from the working-age welfare bill, extend the 'right to buy' to housing association tenants, and reduce income tax whilst also not increasing other taxes such as VAT, hardly suggested a party leadership beholden to liberal, rather than conservative, ideals. To the extent that the Conservative election campaign contained a positive message, this focused on individual aspiration, for example in relation to home ownership; and families, for example in relation to childcare provision, rather than grander visions about society as a whole. The brief section of the manifesto that discussed the 'big society' concentrated on volunteering by individuals and the offer to give teenagers a chance to improve their skills by undertaking 'National Citizen Service' (Conservative Party, 2015: 45). The conservatism advanced by the party over the coming years will therefore be one that is a broadly consistent with the Thatcherite legacy on which it rests. At heart, rather unsurprisingly, the Conservative Party remains a conservative one.

Acknowledgements

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