

Cameron's pragmatic responses to the politics of the last year shows that despite his progressive agenda, he is well within the mainstream of Conservative traditions

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While the Liberal Democrats suffered heavy losses in last week's council elections, the Conservatives have emerged relatively unscathed, and in some cases made gains. Is it possible that the Tories have moved more towards the centre ground? [Peter King](#) investigates 'progressive Conservatism', and finds that it is the party's pragmatism in being in coalition with the Liberal Democrats that has steered it away from its more traditional policies.



One of the innovations of David Cameron's leadership of the Conservative party is the attempt to claim the mantle of progress. The Conservatives wish to be seen as the party of social justice, of social mobility and not as the [party of the rich and privileged](#). Cameron has stated his priority is the NHS and the Conservatives have taken up the issue of climate change and sought to place wellbeing on the same level as economic growth.

This has led the Conservatives to claim they have created a new politics that goes beyond the traditional attitudes that are often associated with the party. It is not just the same old Tories, but a new brand of politics forged out of a recognition that Britain has changed. So, is it possible to be both a Conservative and a progressive?

Of course, what helps the Conservatives in their attempt to claim a new politics is that they are in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. They can claim they have transcended the narrow factionalism of politics and created a broad based government capable of meeting the challenges of a financial crisis and an unsustainable public deficit.

But, just how new is this? Conservatism is not an ideology that is based on a tight set of prescriptions. There is no canonical text or set of enduring dogmas. Conservatives do not start with a set of prescriptions about how the world should be, but rather they like to think that they react to how things actually appear to be. There are no hidden structures, no false consciousness and secret hegemonic forces; merely a particular set of circumstances which face us and which we have to try to comprehend. What matters is where we are and how we got here. Conservatives will therefore tend to look to the past and see society as a unified whole brought together by a sense of the common good. Conservatives do not rely on theory but on their understanding of human nature. They react to circumstance and put pragmatism before preconceived ideas.

Clearly, we can examine whether this is actually how the Conservatives do operate, and the Thatcher period gives sufficient grounds to suggest that there is a strong ideological element that comes to the fore from time to time. But if we accept this characterisation of Conservatives on face value, might we not see Cameron as the quintessential Conservative? He was faced with a particular set of circumstances and reacted to them. The result of the 2010 election presented the Conservatives with two options: to try to form a minority government or to seek an alliance with the Liberal Democrats. Neither were ideal, but the Conservatives sought the latter option and formed a [formal coalition](#) and sought to make a virtue out of the hand they were dealt by the electorate.

The result of this coalition is a government that has a comfortable majority and which has been able to put forward an ambitious agenda with reforms proposed to [welfare](#), education, [universities](#), health, defence as well as attempts to reform the Constitution. We might suggest, therefore, that the support of the Liberal Democrats has allowed the Cameron to be put forward much of his progressive agenda and to downplay other more traditional Tory concerns such as immigration, Europe and tax.

But what has allowed Cameron to pursue his progressive agenda was his very lack of success before the electorate. The Conservatives did not win an outright majority and so they find themselves in a coalition with a party that lost seats. So we have a progressive Conservative agenda as a result of a lacklustre campaign in which the Conservatives were unable to convince the electorate to support that agenda. This suggests that there is no real enthusiasm for the agenda, and it is certainly one that is treated sceptically by many Conservative MPs, party members and the party's supporters in the media.

But perhaps, more fundamentally, what the last 12 months shows is that the Conservatives have not really changed that much at all: they are still the same old Tories. However, by this we should not suggest that they are Thatcherite ideologues with an explicit agenda to reduce the size of the state. Rather what makes them the same old Tories is their pragmatic response to politics and their preparedness to react to circumstance. Cameron, even if he and his advisors might not wish to admit it, is thoroughly in the mainstream of the Conservative tradition.

Peter King will be launching his new book, [The New Politics: Liberal Conservatism or the Same Old Tories?](#), at two events: at the [IEA on 11 May](#) (with [Tim Bale](#)) and the [jppr on 18 May](#).