A question of definition? Ideology and the Conservative Party, 1997–2001

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In the wake of election defeats in 1970, 1974 and 1979 both the Labour Party and the Conservatives held prolonged inquests into the reasons for their apparent failures in office. These debates – which were often extremely bitter – focused on the underlying principles which had informed the performance of each party. In each case critics claimed that governments had been guilty of ideological betrayal. In 1970 and 1979 Labour's leaders were accused of not being socialist enough; after the fall of the Heath government in 1974 the ex-Prime Minister was attacked for the opposite reason. The 1975 Conservative leadership contest, in which Edward Heath was defeated by Margaret Thatcher, took place against a background of fierce ideological conflict between what came to be known as economic 'wets' and 'dries'.

The 1997 general election produced a more decisive defeat for the Conservatives than any of the three most recent reversals of fortune for either party; and economic policy, the traditional fulcrum of ideological debate, was a key factor for the voters who turned out the Tories after eighteen years of power. Yet after the landslide, under William Hague internal party disagreements about economic policy were confined to skirmishes over the details, notably the extent and timing of tax cuts. Observers of Conservative conferences could be forgiven for thinking that membership of the European single currency had very little to do with economics; but in any case Hague's compromise policy on this issue held up well enough to keep remaining misgivings under control (see Chapter 3). In short, compared to the experience of previous parties after their eviction from office, the post-1997 Conservatives were remarkably united in their approach to economic questions. Those searching for divisions within the party on fundamental principles, concerning human nature and the proper role of government, have to look elsewhere.

It might be argued that commentators on ideology have placed excessive emphasis on economic ideas in the past, and that issues such as law and order and personal morality have always given a more reliable indication of ideological commitment. From a slightly different angle it might be suggested

that Conservative infighting under Hague merely reflected a more general decline of 'traditional' ideological debate throughout the Western world. These points have an important bearing on the argument of the present chapter, but limited space prevents the extended discussion that they deserve. Briefly, the first seems to be answered by the potency of economic arguments in recent elections in Britain and elsewhere (for example, Bill Clinton's 'It's the economy, stupid'). After 1997 the economy remained a vital issue in Britain, and under Hague the Conservatives did try to make electoral capital on familiar ideological grounds, denouncing Labour as a socialist party wedded to 'tax and spend' (a peculiar phrase – is there any contemporary government anywhere in the world which eschews these things?). The fact that the old ideological name-calling failed to convince many voters is not a sign that debate over fundamentals is dead; and it is still impossible to evaluate the principles of any major party without reference to economic ideas. The years 1997 to 2001 were merely part of a period in which there was widespread agreement on these matters, so that governments were judged on their competence more than their convictions.

What is 'conservatism?'

The nature of British conservatism has been vigorously contested for much of the post-war period, and after the electoral meltdown of 1997 it was reasonable to expect a flurry of impassioned speeches and pamphlets setting out rival interpretations. Michael Oakeshott, whose name is invoked with respect by almost everyone who addresses this subject, wrote in 1956 that the conservative disposition 'asserts itself characteristically when there is much to be enjoyed'. In hindsight some Conservative politicians have eulogised the 1950s, when their party was in power for all but twenty-two months. But far from thinking that he was fortunate to be living in a golden age, Oakeshott wrote at the time that the conservative disposition was in danger of becoming 'irrelevant, outmanoeuvred, not on account of any intrinsic demerit but merely by the flow of circumstance'. The election of a Labour government in 1997 – with the largest majority in its history and a Prime Minister seemingly set on a mission to destroy the opposition as a meaningful political force – suggested that British conservatism was more threatened than at any time since the French Revolution. Yet even if Oakeshott was right in thinking that conservatism has never thrived at times of crisis, its greatest champions have usually emerged when all seemed lost. After 1997 the stage was set for a new Edmund Burke, to provide conservatives with an eloquent exposition of their faith; anyone who had missed the clarion call at the time of the election can hardly have done so after Blair attacked the 'forces of conservatism' in 1999.¹

But no one seized Burke's golden trumpet. In fact, the most interesting

contribution on the subject suggests that conservatism is dead, or at least irrelevant to contemporary political discourse. According to John Gray, Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 were anything but 'conservative' in a distinctive ideological sense. Rather, they were driven by a form of 'enlightenment rationalism' – precisely the mode of political thinking denounced by Burke. Gray argues that far from pursuing a conservative policy programme after 1979, a Conservative Party addicted to economic liberalism deliberately 'hollowed out' most of the institutions which conservatives hold dear – even the market itself, which cannot operate without some sense of community and widely shared social values. Thinking in terms of abstract individuals and ignoring the critical social dimension, Conservatives have applauded the corrosive effects of the free market instead of trying to resist them.²

As Gray's argument makes clear, the use of the same word in upper and lower cases respectively to denote a party and an ideology is an important source of confusion where conservatism is concerned. To make matters more complicated for students of this subject, many conservatives claim that ideology is a regrettable affliction which they have fortunately escaped. Oakeshott himself thought that it was worse than futile to seek the 'core principles' of conservatism, and he was particularly unhappy with the veneration of Burke as some kind of founding father. Oakeshott's preference for speaking of a conservative 'disposition', rather than appealing to a list of core beliefs, can lead to some implausible conclusions. On his criteria Charles James Fox and Michael Foot would have to be regarded as far more 'conservative' than Pitt the Younger or Thatcher. In the absence of any clear definitions there has recently been a tendency for commentators to use their own interpretations of conservatism as a means of discrediting their political opponents, or of defending their own allies within the Conservative Party (this trend was at its height during the controversy over Thatcherism).

If all definitions of ideology are themselves ideological, it might be argued that discussions of this kind are bound to generate more heat than light: and the present contribution to the debate is particularly vulnerable on this score. Yet when senior politicians are so anxious to 'prove' their own orthodoxy, it would be pusillanimous for commentators merely to provide uncritical reports of the various conflicting claims. Some have tried to resolve the terminological problem by ignoring it, blithely assuming that conservatism is whatever the Conservative Party happens to stand for at any given time. But this seems singularly unprofitable as a tool for those who wish to explore and explain the clear divisions among the various party factions – or, for that matter, among people who call themselves 'conservative' regardless of their partisan allegiance (and Blair's strictures). The same objection applies to the argument that conservatism is multi-faceted. Describing free market enthusiasts like Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph as 'liberal conservatives' is at best

an invitation for others to scrutinise their stated beliefs for evidence of liberalism and conservatism; and this inevitably brings back into play the question of ideological ‘core principles’, which Oakeshott and others have rejected. Talking of ‘traditions’ or ‘doctrines’ rather than ‘ideologies’ seems equally unprofitable; if we want to categorise these beliefs we cannot avoid referring to the central propositions, and occasionally lumping together thinkers and politicians who might have resented being placed in each other’s company. The price of avoiding these pitfalls is the production of work which is equally arid and unenlightening.

The ‘core tenets’

Pace Oakeshott, those wishing to understand conservatism after the 1997 defeat would be served best by examining stated principles, rather than extolling the conservative ‘disposition’. In a recent survey of the party’s prospects after Hague, Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowden have adopted this approach, identifying seven ‘core tenets of British Conservatism’.³ These are ‘a belief in the imperfection of human nature and the limits to the power of reason’; an ‘organic’ theory of society and a desire for ‘orderly’ change; a conviction that liberty must be safeguarded by the rule of law; a desire for a strong but limited state; the maintenance of a prosperous economy; respect for property; and an attachment to the Nation. According to the authors, their list demonstrates that British Conservatism displays ‘both constancy and continuity in a tradition enriched by the contributions of thinkers and politicians over 200 years’.

The list can be taken as representative for the sake of argument: unusually for those who write on this subject, the authors have no obvious axe to grind. The first point of interest is the use of the upper-case ‘C’ for ‘conservatism’. Seldon and Snowden seem to be rejecting any distinction between the ideology and the policies or pronouncements of Conservative Party leaders. This is also suggested by the ordering of the tenets. The first two – on human nature and social change – are actually *three* distinct propositions (which in itself is slightly suspicious, suggestive of a desire on the authors’ part to get them out of the way as quickly as possible). They are frequently advanced by writers on conservative ideology; indeed, they are often cited as the key principles underpinning all the rest. Even Oakeshott, who denies that there is any *necessary* connection between these ideas and a conservative ‘disposition’, accepts that some people have ‘believed their disposition to be in some way confirmed by them’.⁴

In short, by giving top billing to these ‘tenets’ the authors are trying to prove that the ideas of today’s Conservative Party do indeed show ‘constancy and continuity’ with traditional expositions of ‘conservatism’. Yet even those who reject Gray’s analysis would have to admit that a belief in ‘orderly

change' is scarcely characteristic of the contemporary party. Unsurprisingly, instead of listing examples of recent Conservative *practice* to illustrate their argument, Seldon and Snowden fall back on quotations from Burke and T.B. Macaulay – neither of whom could speak with much authority on Kenneth Baker's education reforms or the introduction of an 'internal market' to the National Health Service. No doubt Thatcherites will argue that when the Conservative government came to office in 1979 drastic and wide-ranging reform – amounting to something like a revolution – was urgently required. For example, in his notorious speech to the 1977 party conference, the young William Hague urged that the Conservatives should become the party of 'radicalism'. But while the ensuing changes which affected the trade unions (for example) could be described as 'orderly', this was more the exception than the rule. A more relevant case-study would be Thatcherite policy towards local government, which was driven by ideology and partisan considerations, and culminated in the poll tax fiasco.

On the conservative view of human nature, Oakeshott and Quintin Hogg (later Lord Hailsham) are quoted. In each case the source is around half a century old; and the Oakeshott quotation comes from an essay (discussed earlier) which suggested that conservatism was out of tune even with a relatively peaceful period of modern history. Only in their exposition of the 'organic' view of society do Seldon and Snowden produce examples from more recent writing; but even there they advance no supporting evidence from Conservative Party *practice*. The alarm bells start clanging when one reads in this section that 'Conservatives' are 'Imbued with a sense of historical continuity'. It is difficult to see how a party leader who was determined to reverse what she saw as decades of 'betrayal' could be said to have been so 'imbued'. If Mrs Thatcher and her allies thought about history at all, they hoped for a decisive break with post-war trends and took their inspiration from an anachronistic vision of the Victorian period. And rather than identifying belief in an 'organic society' as a characteristic of the party, the authors could have filled several volumes with recent quotations from Conservative politicians in praise of the abstract individual (like Thatcher's remark that 'there is no such thing as society'). Some Conservative politicians do at least pay lip-service to the notion of an organic society; but as in the case of David Willetts (who is quoted), they produce no concrete evidence to show that such a belief has any relevance to the policies of the contemporary party.⁵

Thus, although the approach taken by Seldon and Snowden suggests a concerted attempt to square recent Conservative Party practice and pronouncements with familiar expositions of conservatism, they are quite unconvincing in their treatment of three central propositions. Their presentation, indeed, inadvertently draws attention to the stark *dis*-continuity between politicians like Burke, Disraeli or Baldwin and today's leadership. This, it must be stressed, is not necessarily a *bad thing* for the Conservative

Party; it may have happened for perfectly respectable reasons. But at any rate the evidence suggests that it has indeed happened.

For the next four points on the list, the authors' task of linking ideas to practice is more straightforward. In the way that they are presented, at least, all of these 'tenets' are characteristic of nineteenth-century liberalism rather than conservatism. It might be thought that no serious political thinker actively opposes prosperity; but nineteenth-century conservatives like Samuel Taylor Coleridge acknowledged the possibility that this could be maintained at too high a cost to society. Coleridge's concerns arose from the industrial revolution which was an unequivocal boon to liberals; unlike Burke (who is quoted by Seldon and Snowden to suggest that support for economic liberalism has always been a conservative tenet) he belonged to the first generation to be confronted with the social damage caused by unrestrained industrial capitalism. On liberty, too, conservatives since Burke have differed from liberals in their emphasis on the context, rather than upholding freedom as an abstract idea. The same contrast between liberals and conservatives applies on the question of property; while the former uphold the right of possessors to do what they will with their own, the latter have stressed the obligations of property-holding, regarding ownership as a trust.

This leaves us with the 'nation'. As Seldon and Snowden concede, patriotism 'is upheld to varying degrees across the British political tradition'. But they argue that 'the most passionate defence of national identity and sovereign nationhood' has come from Conservatives. Equally, of course, some members of the Conservative Party have argued that sovereignty can be shared; and even die-hard opponents of the European Union have been happy for the USA to dictate British policy on defence and international relations.⁶

If we accept that 'defence of national identity and sovereign nationhood' really is a long-established 'core tenet' of conservatism, that still leaves us with only one out of the eight items which might indicate some sort of 'continuity' between the tradition of conservative thought and recent Conservative practice. The contemporary party is at best indifferent to three of the key propositions of traditional conservatism; but it broadly upholds four other tenets which have a much more intimate association with liberalism. Seldon and Snowden argue that conservatism has been 'embellished by the absorption of *periphery* values and concepts' with a 'distinctly liberal and libertarian flavour'. Yet on their own showing, these 'distinctly liberal' values have become the predominate 'core tenets' of what they choose to call 'Conservatism'; they are scarcely 'peripheral'. The only realistic conclusion is that today's Conservative Party is a liberal organisation, with a nationalistic twist.⁷

Some might think that this is merely a semantic point, but it helps to clarify some key developments in twentieth-century British politics, and provides the proper context for understanding Conservative Party ideology

in the Hague years. In *The Case for Conservatism*, Hogg defended his party against the charge of inconsistency. There was nothing odd, he thought, in the fact that Conservatives were currently engaged 'in fighting the battle of Liberalism against the Socialists who attack *laissez faire* from almost exactly the same angle as [did] the Conservatives in 1948'.⁸ Hogg felt that his party should always oppose prevailing political trends. This tactical outlook has been endorsed by several thinkers normally described as conservatives, notably the seventeenth-century Marquess of Halifax. Evidently Hogg believed that his party could remain distinctively conservative while performing this new version of its old balancing act; and, if circumstances changed, it would be free to resume the attack on abstract individualism. In other words, even if the party talked for a while as if liberalism provided it with its 'core tenets', it would only be borrowing them to meet a temporary challenge.

But Hogg had overlooked two crucial dangers. First, if the Conservative Party took the liberal side against 'the Socialists' in a tactical battle of ideas, was there not a chance that its members – particularly younger ones with little interest in the party's traditions, like the then Margaret Roberts – would absorb the tenets of *laissez-faire* as if these represented 'true' conservatism? *The Responsible Society*, a pamphlet published by the One Nation Group in 1959, gives a contrary impression; eight years after the defeat of the Attlee government some of the party's brightest young thinkers felt able to distance themselves equally from *laissez-faire* and socialism, and deployed Hogg's balancing-act argument to support their 'middle way'.⁹ Yet at least one of the authors, Sir Keith Joseph, was later to repent of his moderation in those halcyon days.

Second, the eclipse of the Liberal Party as an electoral force had already deprived ambitious liberals of their natural home. Even before 1900 Joseph Chamberlain's supporters had defected to the Conservatives over Home Rule; and the reforms under Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Herbert Asquith, which offended against the principles of *laissez-faire*, provided an additional spur. Keeping faith with the declining Liberal Party, or trying to change the Conservatives from within, could be seen by believers in *laissez-faire* as a mirror image of the 'progressive' choice which David Marquand has analysed – a 'Regressive Dilemma', as it were.¹⁰ Once they had taken the more promising option of infiltrating the Conservatives, there was every chance that Hogg's tactical switch would be institutionalised.

The analysis of 'core tenets' provided by Seldon and Snowden suggests that this process has occurred. Until 1975 Conservative Party leaders continued to prefer Disraeli to Samuel Smiles, but on this interpretation it can be argued that a fundamental change of direction was always inevitable once the party hit serious trouble; and after the leadership had been taken by a convinced liberal for the first time, conservatives would have found it difficult to regain control whether or not developments in the global economy had

added practical force to their arguments. Hogg himself remained a Cabinet minister until 1987; but throughout the Thatcher years he was preoccupied with the defence of at least one traditional institution, the British legal system. However, in 1977 his pupil and friend Ian Gilmour repeated his warnings against doctrinaire politics, with particular reference to *laissez-faire*; unlike Hogg he persisted in his public protests, and was one of the first ministers to be sacked by Thatcher on ideological grounds.

Despite all the competing arguments and methodological objections, the most telling evidence of ideological allegiance within a political party seems to be the vision of state and society which is either made explicit in political rhetoric, or implied by the tendency of policy pronouncements. Even the most scrupulous self-denying commentators seem fated to fall back on some 'core tenets' when discussing different ideological traditions. As a general rule, however, the broader the definition the less useful it is as an analytical tool; and economic ideas still seem to be the most fruitful focus for investigation, given their obvious dependence upon conceptions of the individual, society and the state. Thus the dispute between 'wets' like Gilmour and the Thatcherite 'dries' during the 1970s and 1980s was an unmistakable symptom of ideological division. The foregoing discussion has necessarily involved much corner-cutting; but if the outlines are accepted it would follow that any ideological friction within the Conservative Party between 1997 and 2001 could only be interpreted as family disputes, among liberals rather than 'conservatives'. The ironic conclusion is that the party won elections when it was ideologically riven, and lost disastrously when the dispute had been settled in favour of the liberal 'dries'. This line seems worth pursuing, to see if it adds to our understanding of Hague's party and the prospects for the immediate future.

The legacy of Thatcherism

It has been argued here that whatever the ideological nature of the Conservative leadership up to 1975, it was unquestionably liberal after Thatcher succeeded Heath in that year. While it is obviously a mistake to assume that a party automatically follows the ideological preferences of any leader, we have also suggested why the Conservative Party was likely to swing behind Thatcher, even if at first she lacked much support among senior colleagues. On this view, Thatcher was not an alien intruder who hijacked the party; rather, she brought an end to an increasingly awkward period in which a series of 'pragmatic' politicians had risen to the head of a strongly ideological body. On paper, her enforced departure in November 1990 opened the possibility of a new 'Hoggite' tactical switch; after all, the poll tax which helped to topple Thatcher was a remarkable product of liberal rationalism, and there was powerful evidence that the popularity of the ex-premier's ideas

had been gradually eroded since her first election victory in 1979.¹¹ But although he was certainly no radical, John Major was unwilling to challenge the new orthodoxy, to which the Conservative Party had wedded itself for better and for worse. The editors of a recent book on the party plausibly claim that in practice Major proved more Thatcherite than Thatcher herself, pushing privatisation into areas which his predecessor had left untouched.¹²

Until the ERM fiasco of September 1992 threw them a convenient concrete objection, in Thatcherite eyes Major's problem was not his record but his rhetoric. For them his visions of a 'classless society' and a country 'at ease with itself' were dismal departures from the ideological edge which Thatcher gave to almost everything she said (at least after her promise to replace 'discord' with 'harmony' when she first entered 10 Downing Street). Major's later attempt to sound like Baldwin (invoking the supposedly more relaxed society of the 1950s) was ridiculed, and his 'Back to Basics' speech of 1993 can also be seen as an ill-fated appeal to residual conservatism within his party. Given the true nature of his audience (whether in the hall or watching on television) his words could only be misinterpreted. As Andrew Gamble has suggested, Major's 'Citizen's Charter' initiative could also be seen as part of a search for some stability; but this fared no better.¹³ When Hague took the leadership he seemed well placed to overcome Major's difficulties. In *The Times* Peter Riddell claimed that with his victory 'the Thatcherites have taken charge'.¹⁴ Hague was obviously a product of the Thatcher years, and unlike both of his predecessors he was a natural orator. Under his leadership, it seemed, style and substance would be reunited; and there would be none of the bickering of the 1970s and 1980s in a fully 'Thatcherised' party.

Against this background the speech delivered by Hague's policy chief, Peter Lilley, at the Carlton Club in April 1999, was an unpleasant shock to many loyal Thatcherites. There could not have been a more fitting venue for conservatism's final fling; but Lilley was a most unlikely champion. As he remarked in the speech, he had been one of the party's foremost advocates of free market thinking, even before it became fashionable. But now he felt that, 'Conservatives seem to be on the intellectual back foot.' They had to remind the electorate that, 'Belief in the free market has only ever been a part of Conservatism.' In particular, while many people assumed that the party's ultimate goal was the privatisation of the health service, Lilley argued that 'the free market has only a limited role' in that sphere.

Some phrases in Lilley's speech echoed Burke, and thus evoked the 'historical continuity' claimed by Seldon and Snowden. For example, Lilley asserted that: 'We have an obligation to transmit to the next generation the heritage of learning and culture which we have inherited and developed.' He also claimed that: 'The Conservative tradition of pragmatism means that we believe in judging by results.' There was even a complaint about the intrusion

of business language into inappropriate areas, and an emphasis on obligations to others rather than individual rights. In short, like Seldon and Snowden Lilley was drawing on the tradition of *conservative thought* to support propositions about the *Conservative Party*. Yet even in this context he was anxious to retain his liberal credentials, and not just in the economic sphere. 'Freedom is good in itself', he argued, 'it encourages personal responsibility and it promotes prosperity more effectively than any other system known to mankind.'¹⁵

To some extent, at least, it seems that Lilley immediately fell victim to some hostile 'spinning' by members of Hague's entourage. Yet the angry reaction to his speech was genuine for the most part. His offence was to confront unquestioning believers with concrete evidence that, despite all their efforts, the Thatcher and Major governments had failed to make Britain into a free market Utopia. While Lilley tried to make a virtue of this failure – notably by applauding the fact that the Conservative governments had never matched their harsh rhetoric on public spending – a party which was obsessed with the idea of differentiating itself from Labour could now only seek 'clear blue water' by embracing ever-more extreme forms of economic liberalism. In short, although his leader had endorsed the speech in advance, Lilley had no powerful allies within the party to protect him from the backlash. It was not just that there were no conservatives left within the Conservative Party; there were not even many *moderate* economic liberals. As one might have expected in these circumstances, despite the temporary storm aroused by Lilley's speech the main ideological split in the party concerned not economic policy, but competing approaches to social questions.

However, a speech by one leading Conservative politician during the Hague years apparently contradicts this argument. In July 1998 Iain Duncan Smith angrily denied that New Labour was 'conservative', as Tony Blair had implied with his 'One Nation' rhetoric. Rather, he argued, 'They can't see a British institution without reaching for the drawing board.' Blair was accused of ignoring 'the organic nature of society and British institutions'. Duncan Smith had obviously been reading Burke, whom he quoted against Blair. But whether or not Burke's assault on French Revolutionary principles as, 'This barbarous philosophy ... the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings' could have much relevance to New Labour as Duncan Smith assumed, he seemed wholly unaware that (on Burke's premises, at least) it was a reasonable description of the abstract ideas purveyed by the New Right since the 1970s. If Britain really had survived the upheavals of the Thatcher years as a society that could still be described as 'organic', it would surely prove robust enough to see off the Blair offensive – which at worst could be seen as 'more of the same'.¹⁶

There were only two possible explanations for Duncan Smith's speech. Either his own prosperous background had blinded him to the real social

effects of Conservative government since 1979 – or his appeal to Burke's social ideas had been entirely cynical. Whatever the explanation, in the Shadow Cabinet after Lilley's speech Duncan Smith was reported to have joined Michael Howard and Ann Widdecombe in leading the attack, even asking for a face-to-face meeting with Lilley to spell out his objections. Whether or not Lilley fought back with talk of 'cold hearts and muddy understandings' is not recorded. Now that the party had rejected the possibility of a 'Hoggite' switch back to something which even vaguely resembled traditional conservatism, the real faction fights could begin.¹⁷

'Mods' and 'rockers'

Duncan Smith, Howard and Widdecombe were later identified as leading figures in the new Tory split. After the party conference of October 2000, commentators began to refer to the factions as 'mods' and 'rockers'. The 'mods', exemplified by Michael Portillo, wanted to transform the image of the party by reaching out to social groups which had previously regarded the Conservative Party as deeply intolerant. The 'rockers', by contrast, upheld 'traditional' social institutions and practices, exemplified by their tough policy ideas on law and order.

Andrew Gamble, Stuart Hall and others have drawn attention to the apparent contradiction in Thatcher's combination of economic individualism with social authoritarianism. It might be argued that the uneasy mixture proves the continuing relevance of conservatism under Thatcher: on this view, even if she was a liberal in economics, she remained deeply conservative in her approach to social questions.

It is certainly the case that Thatcherism, as generally understood, was an incoherent (if not self-contradictory) set of ideas. Yet the identification of *conservatism* with hard-line policies on law and order deserves closer examination. Certainly conservative scepticism about human nature indicates the permanent necessity of a strong police force, and deep suspicion of those who claim that offenders can be reformed. But liberals have always been quick to defend life and property; to suggest otherwise is to confuse liberalism with anarchism. In fact, during the regular crime 'scares' of the Thatcher years the Prime Minister and her ideological soul mates usually responded by asserting individual responsibility, in approved liberal fashion. By contrast, after the inner-city rioting of 1981 her sceptical Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, included references to social conditions when denouncing the offenders. From this perspective Whitelaw contrived to prevent some of the wilder ideas emanating from Downing Street, such as the introduction of an updated Riot Act. Whitelaw and other traditional conservatives in the first Thatcher cabinet were regarded as hopelessly 'wet' on crime as well as on economics; the activists who regularly bellowed for the return of capital

punishment at Conservative Party conferences also tended to be 'hawkish' in their attitude to the welfare state and government intervention in general. With hindsight, the ready identification of hard-line views on law and order with conservatism seems to have no sounder basis than the traditional anxiety of the left to lump all the attitudes they dislike into this much-abused and misunderstood category.

In short, it seems unnecessary to attribute Thatcher's apparent inconsistency to an inner conflict between liberalism and conservatism. While sceptics predicted that her economic policies would inevitably increase social conflict, leading (for example) to more crime and marriage breakdowns, the Prime Minister herself genuinely seemed to think that social malaise was actually a product of well-meaning but misguided policies, which had been generally accepted both by Labour and by One Nation Conservatives since the time of the Churchill coalition. She apparently thought that once individuals were liberated from the 'dependency culture' they would be trained by the discipline of the market place; afterwards they would covet their neighbours' goods, but only to the extent of hoping to emulate their hard-earned affluence. Obviously there would still be some crime; but once the 'do-gooders' had been banished, offenders would be made to face up to their individual responsibilities.

Widdecombe, the rocker-in-chief, fully shares Thatcher's outlook. She was taught by her father that there was a 'very stark choice' in politics. 'You could not be a mix of both. I believed that individuals had to be free to grow economically, to make the most of their talents ... and that the state should interfere minimally.' 'The individual must, as far as possible, take responsibility for himself', she argues.¹⁸ Her well-publicised views on drugs are fully compatible with this general approach. Even if addiction does not lead directly to crime, in her view it diminishes individual responsibility. Contrary to her retributivist caricature, after Widdecombe's exposure to conditions within Britain's jails she became a strong advocate of rehabilitation. If she had ever become Home Secretary her policies might have increased the prison population, but she believes that the experience should be 'constructive' for individual inmates.

In short, Widdecombe is a liberal. Her differences with Portillo and co. arise from their conflicting assessments of the effects of certain practices – their different applications of John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle'. On subjects such as drugs and homosexuality, the 'mods' are obviously not conservatives in the traditional mould; they are *libertarian*. Equally, the fact that Widdecombe applies her liberal principles across a narrower range of practices probably reflects her strong religious convictions; but it does not make her a conservative. Unfortunately for the Conservative Party – and for Widdecombe herself – she chose to underline her rejection of libertarianism at the 2000 party conference, at precisely the time when the 'Portillistas' were

booting up their attempts to show a more 'caring' (or rather, tolerant) image. The resulting argument might have sounded like a clash between conflicting ideologies – and the media might have presented it in that way – but it was a family quarrel about the proper limits of liberalism, accentuated by competing political ambitions and personality clashes.

This does not belittle the importance of the dispute – after all, family quarrels often end in something worse than tears, dragging in distant relatives as well as the main protagonists. And the fiasco over drugs in October 2000 was not the end of the story. Two months later Hague stumbled into the debate between the 'mods' and the 'rockers'. In November 2000 Britain was shocked by the murder of Damilola Taylor. Hague decided to turn the tragedy to partisan advantage, by alleging that the Macpherson Report was hampering the police. In a speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, he claimed that 'the liberal elite have seized on the report as a stick with which to beat the police'. At first Hague consulted only Widdecombe, his Home Affairs spokesperson, about this form of words. But when Michael Portillo was asked for his views he expressed dissent, jesting that he was a member of the 'liberal elite' himself. According to Simon Walters, 'Hague replied instantly: "Well I'm not a liberal, nor am I a member of any elite".'¹⁹

In Walters' book this anecdote is related at Portillo's expense. But in the British context, at least, there is something unsettling about the argument on both sides. Presumably Hague thinks that a Yorkshire birthplace automatically rules out membership of 'any elite'; otherwise he would not have tried to play up his self-image as an 'outsider' in his response to Blair's 'forces of conservatism' speech. Others will take a different view of Oxford graduates (not to mention the serving leaders of any major political party). But Hague's obvious confidence that 'liberal elite' would be a damaging label to stick on the government was, ironically, itself a clear sign that he was accustomed to speaking in terms that would cause serious confusion outside the increasingly narrow confines of the political 'elite'. The British public might have been more responsive had Hague spoken of 'socialism', which has a far longer history of misrepresentation in Britain. Most British voters have yet to follow the US Republicans – and Conservative members of the 'Westminster village' – in responding like Pavlov's dog to the word 'liberal'. Hague had obviously been misled by his exposure to the US political scene (at this time, of course, George W. Bush's Presidential campaign was providing the British Conservatives with a misleading source of optimism). Yet instead of pointing out Hague's glaring category mistake, Portillo apparently responded as if he were a proud US Democrat. The whole incident might as well have been a conversation between spin-doctors in Washington. The contagion seems to have spread to the author of *Tory Wars*, who does not remark on the transatlantic flavour of the conversation (and generally follows the US model, by 'reconstructing' the private conversations of senior politicians and their advisers).

Judging ideological traditions from the very different British perspective, for all the abuse heaped on 'liberals', both of the main US political parties are members of that family. Whatever they might call him in the USA, Hague is himself a liberal – indeed, compared to Widdecombe, at least, he should be classed as a member of the libertarian wing of his party. But by the autumn of 2000 he felt outflanked by the 'Portillistas', and he was already tempted to throw in his lot with the 'rockers' to shore up his position. It might be too fanciful to claim that Hague spent the months leading up to the 2001 general election fighting the wrong battle, and trying both in public and in private to distance himself from people who would be denounced as 'liberals' in the USA. But certainly that was one way of uniting in his own mind his twin enemies – Portillo and Blair. Hague hoped to portray himself as a plucky outsider, the champion of the 'little man'; but in the absence of clear ideological distinctions in Britain, he could only adopt the vocabulary and mind-set of a Republican candidate, attacking the Washington elite. Thus Hague's attack on the 'liberal elite' was a red herring, but no less fascinating for that. Two decades after the party went to war with itself over the meaning of 'conservatism', it was now riven by a dispute over rival definitions of liberalism. The only constant factor was that the battle-cries and slogans of the competing camps still made life very difficult for students of ideology trying to get a fix on what was really going on.

The Conservative Party and the 2001 general election

It is often said that by accepting so much of Conservative policy after 1994, Tony Blair stole his opponents' clothes and restricted their room for manoeuvre in any future elections. This is undoubtedly true. But the Conservative Party conspired with Labour by boxing themselves in. In 1996 Andrew Gamble rightly characterised them as 'an ideological party'. The change in the nature of the party since Thatcher's term of office is best gauged by comparing its situation after the 1997 general election with previous periods of opposition. In 1950, 1951, 1966, 1970, October 1974 and even 1979, it could persuasively pose as a pragmatic alternative to Labour. From this position it was a relatively straight-forward task to stigmatise the government's mistakes, whether or not the voting public took the hint. Policy differences could easily be highlighted by reference to 'socialism'. Only in 1979 was Labour faced by a doctrinaire Conservative leader, and on that first outing it was possible for campaign managers to disguise Thatcher's true nature.

But the fact that the Conservative Party was seen as 'ideological' after 1979 meant that all of its mishaps could be interpreted from this perspective. During Thatcher's first two terms the public seemed unwilling to adopt this viewpoint; hence the consternation of Labour activists when she was

re-elected, and their depression when the emollient image of Major temporarily staved off the inevitable reckoning in 1992. But by 1997 the chapter of ideological accidents was too bulky to ignore, and the right-wing press might have been forced to switch sides even without the Blair factor. The slump of the early 1990s was a fitting nemesis for a party which had boasted that its free market reforms had produced an 'economic miracle'. The poll tax, too, was rightly seen as a product of ideology; and financial 'sleaze' could easily be traced to Thatcherite presuppositions about acquisitive human nature. The botched privatisation of the railways would have been unthinkable under a 'pragmatic' government. In this context, it was inevitable that commentators should see other problems, like the split over Europe, as ideological conflicts whereas in reality they were conducted in terms which showed that all of the antagonists were working from distinctively liberal premises. So by 1997 the general post-war pattern had been reversed; a newly 'pragmatic' Labour Party was always likely to improve on its previous performances, but its prospects were vastly improved by the fact that it was attacking an 'ideological' government. In 2001 its task was even more straightforward; a tactfully reticent Thatcher might have won in the unusual circumstances of 1979, but Foot's fate four years later is far more typical of British opposition leaders whose parties are perceived to be strongly ideological, all other things being as equal as they can be in an uncertain world.

If the Conservative Party had really been the adaptive organisation of old, capable of following the advice of Hogg and Halifax 'the Trimmer', it would have stopped bragging about its 'victory' in the 'battle of ideas' shortly after the destruction of the Berlin Wall. The fact that global conditions clearly favoured economic liberalism would have been taken into account; but on the same principle which had led it to oppose 'socialism' in its post-war heyday the Conservative Party would at least have posed as the champion of the insecure voter against the unsettling effects of the market. The fact that it did no such thing is further evidence of its distance from one aspect of the conservative tradition. But the *reason* for its failure to change is even more telling. The Conservatives had adopted a dogmatic mind-set – the very trait which their leaders still persisted in denouncing in 'socialists'. The truth is that after Thatcher, a retreat from hard-line economic liberalism, however limited, would have deprived the party of its *raison d'être*.

If Major can be forgiven for his failure to stem the Thatcherite tide after 1990, his successor as leader had no such excuse. The ill-starred Lilley initiative was an attempt to slay the ideological dragon, allowing the Conservative Party to return to its habitual post-war pose of a pragmatic government in waiting. At best, the crushing defeat of 1997 could be taken as evidence that the British people had learned to live with economic liberalism, but preferred to take mild doses disguised by a generous coating

of Blairite sugar. But people in the advanced stages of ideological addiction are doomed to deny any evidence which disturbs their view of the world – a malady aptly described in a recent paper by Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski as ‘selective perception’.²⁰ As one Shadow Minister put it after the Lilley speech, ‘One of the few things that held us together was the belief in Thatcherism, yet he appeared to be throwing that out too.’ In these circumstances it seemed much safer to throw out Lilley instead; at the same time, though, any chance of a vigorous Tory fightback was extinguished.²¹

When the Conservative Party subsequently published its draft manifesto, *Believing in Britain*, its ideological albatross loomed over almost every page. Hague’s foreword contained one shock admission. Instead of claiming that all Britain’s troubles stemmed from the previous four years, he wrote that: ‘We could have greater stability and stronger communities than for many years past’. But this diagnosis prescribed the kind of radical shift from Thatcherite individualism which had been ruled out. So in his closing remarks Hague explained the problem in terms that were impeccably liberal, and quite irrelevant: ‘Our sense of community is threatened by increased centralisation and the increasing size of government’. The main text urged that: ‘The key to a strong and stable society is to trust local communities and institutions.’ Burke would have agreed with that. But the document continues: ‘We have to resist those who respond to every problem with another scheme for central government intervention and another excuse for political interference’. In substance this would have committed Hague’s party to all-out opposition against the Thatcher and Major governments, which for narrow partisan reasons had interfered in local government far more than any of their predecessors. But instead of admitting that the party had a great deal to live down in these areas, strategists thought that they could erase the past by dressing up the complaint in hard-line liberal language. There can hardly be a better illustration of ‘selective perception’ in (futile) action.

In the run-up to June 2001 Hague promised faithful Tories that: ‘Labour’s high taxes and broken promises will be at the centre of the Conservative election campaign.’ But even ideologues have to recognise the power of opinion polls, and on these subjects the party had made no progress since 1997. Hague’s only hope was the final item of the Seldon and Snowden list – the nation. This, after all, had arguably been Thatcher’s most effective weapon, which had secured her easy re-election in 1983. Even here, of course, the Conservative Party ought to have had mixed feelings. Officially at least, the ‘nation’ in question was Britain; but Conservative governments after 1979 had neglected the ‘Celtic fringe’ to the extent that the party had been wiped out outside England. Devolution was the inevitable consequence, once the Tories had lost power in 1997. Thus when Hague toured the country in a last-ditch attempt to save the ‘nation’ of Britain, he was battling on behalf of an abstraction that his own party had hollowed out.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the Conservative Party does seem to be addressing its past, even if a 'Hoggite' shift is now out of the question. On economics, Willetts has repeated (almost verbatim) Peter Lilley's attempt to draw a line under Thatcherism, without being sacked. This time there was no ill-intentioned intervention by the spin doctors; it was obvious that Willetts was only offering the token reassurance which had failed to register with the public between 1997 and 2001. Meanwhile, almost as soon as the polls had closed, social libertarians like Alan Duncan seized the initiative; and although Duncan Smith is the archetypal 'rocker' he seems to have accepted the 'mod' case that the intolerant image was a vote-loser for the party.

Conservative Party practice after 1979 supports the view that electoral recovery need not bear any relation to ideological clarity, or even unity. Yet the Conservatives have been an 'ideological party' for so long that they may feel queasy at recent developments. Under Thatcher they were taught to admire extreme economic liberalism, but to distrust libertarianism. Now, it appears, they are being advised to reverse this balance. If the present line lasts longer than the Lilley initiative, it will certainly provide a stern test of grass-roots loyalty.

There is, though, one idea which might keep the activists entertained while the party re-positions itself. In more than one interview conducted for this chapter, Conservative MPs wondered aloud about the current purpose of their party. These doubts could be erased by the explicit adoption of English nationalism as the rallying cry. Devolution, and developments within the European Union, could easily permit the Conservative Party to exchange their hollowed-out abstraction for something which – superficially, at least – can be made to look like a living reality. Advocates of English nationalism, like Simon Heffer and Teresa Gorman, might not have thought through the economic implications of their idea. But it seems that, if the unsavoury choice were presented, they would prefer flinty independence to prosperity. The possible ramifications are intriguing; for example, under conditions of autarchy, economic liberalism would have to go at last. The only certainty, as members of the party face yet another period in which there is 'little to be enjoyed', is that realistic lists of 'Conservative principles' will have the 'nation' in its proper place – at the top.

Notes

- 1 M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London, Methuen, 1962), pp. 169, 174, 175, 178.
- 2 See, for example, J. Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London, Routledge, 1995), pp. 87–119.

- 3 A. Seldon and P. Snowden, *A New Conservative Century?* (London, Centre for Policy Studies, 2001), pp. 18–25.
- 4 Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 183.
- 5 See D. Willetts, *Modern Conservatism* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992) for an account which carefully avoids any discussion of the real social impact of Thatcherism.
- 6 Seldon and Snowden, *A New Conservative Century?*, p. 25.
- 7 Seldon and Snowden, *A New Conservative Century?*, p. 18.
- 8 Q. Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1947), p. 53.
- 9 One Nation Group, *The Responsible Society* (London, Conservative Political Centre, 1959), pp. 7–8.
- 10 D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma* (London, Heinemann, 1992).
- 11 I. Crewe, 'Values: the crusade that failed', in D. Kavanagh and A. Seldon (eds), *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 239–50, remains the best exposition of this view.
- 12 See S. Ludlam and M. J. Smith (eds), *Contemporary British Conservatism* (London, Macmillan, 1996), Ch. 14.
- 13 A. Gamble, 'An ideological party', in Ludlam and Smith (eds), *Contemporary British Conservatism*, p. 32.
- 14 P. Riddell, 'King William inaugurates the Thatcherite Restoration', *The Times*, 21 June 1997.
- 15 P. Lilley, 'Butler Memorial Lecture', the Carlton Club, 20 April 1999, www.peterlilley.co.uk/speeches.phtml?action=show&id=16.
- 16 I. Duncan Smith, speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, London, 28 July 1998.
- 17 P. Riddell, 'Welcome to the collapse of the Conservative Party', *The Times*, 21 April 1999.
- 18 Quoted in N. Kochan, *Ann Widdecombe: Right from the Beginning* (London, Politico's, 2000), pp. 237 and 240.
- 19 S. Walters, *Tory Wars: Conservatives in Crisis* (London, Politico's, 2001), pp. 106–7.
- 20 P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, 'The Iceberg and the Titanic: electoral defeat, policy moods and party change', paper presented at the EPOP annual conference, University of Sussex, 15 September 2001.
- 21 Walters, *Tory Wars*, p. 118.