From values to policy: the Conservative challenge¹

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In the wake of the 1997 election defeat, very few Conservatives spoke of the fear which gripped them: of a party which splits apart and consequently hands power to Labour for a generation. William Hague was elected leader for his youth and for a fresh start, undoubtedly because he had abundant talent, but not least because he was the candidate with the least number of enemies. This, as we have seen regularly, is the best predictive factor in recent Conservative leadership elections.

Two years later, in the local and European Parliament elections of 1999, the leap into the unknown which the Conservative Party had taken by abandoning all those who had been prominent in its preceding generation, appeared to be justified. In early 1999 a 35 per cent share of the vote in the European election was our target. We hit it. The campaign was fought on European issues. From a critical source of internal division two years before, Europe and the euro in particular, had been turned into a source of apparent electoral advantage. Solid diplomatic effort by Hague, Michael Howard and John Maples, as well as the strategic coup of the euro ballot of party members in 1998, delivered a party willing to see Europe form part of its attack and, given the press sympathy, it acquired resonance. As we have found before and since, if it seems to be working, the 'tea room' pundits keep their alternative 'strategies' to themselves.

So, now fast-forward the tape to mid-2001. The Conservative Party had convinced itself that the previous four years had been wasted. To defend the achievements of the preceding four years was to attract near-pariah status. Yet, two things are clear: first that compared to the threat in 1997, the party had been saved from schism and collapse; secondly, that the promise of 1999 had not been fulfilled. We need to recognise both.

The raw figures of 2001 offer scant comfort: no real increase in our total of seats: barely a percentage increase in our share of the vote. Yet if the parallel case was the Labour Party after 1979, we polled a better share of the vote than Labour did in either 1983 or 1987 and only one percentage point less than Labour polled in 1992. Over the four years, the Conservatives

had won some 3,000 additional local council seats and had doubled their representation in the European Parliament. The kind of swing required to give the Conservative Party a plurality over Labour at the next election is not only possible but far from exceptional. It is, however, the current distribution of votes for seats – which delivers parliamentary seats far more efficiently in relation to votes for Labour than for the Conservatives – that presents the greater technical obstacle.

Will these challenges be met and overcome? The answer lies in whether we suffer the same fate as in the run-up to the 2001 election. It was not a matter of the campaign itself. Even Labour's professional campaigners have recognised that, from where we were in April 2001, we fought the campaign we had to. Issues of tax, law and order, and Europe were the only ones on which we enjoyed a comparative advantage, or nearly so, in relation to Labour. To fight a campaign focused on health and education would have been to fight on ground of Labour's choosing. Election campaigns – the last five weeks at most – can never be more than a contest to win the agenda of debate and, by focusing it on one's strengths, to allow the public's prejudices about the parties (positive or negative) to be activated. In 1992, we activated negative views of Labour on tax to dramatic effect. In 1997, Labour neutralised their negatives and focused the agenda on health and education. By the end of the 2001 campaign, public attention was again on health and negative perceptions of the Conservatives were re-activated. Helpfully, the Tory press and a significant number of prominent Conservatives contributed to the increasingly prevalent view that the only issues which mattered were health and education. Yet one can see that we had campaigned on public services earlier in 2001. Most of our expenditure on posters was on 'You paid the tax, so where are the nurses?' etc. It had no effect then on Labour's lead, nor would it have done during the four weeks of the campaign.

The lesson of this is: by early 2001, we were in no position to win. The issues which were better for us were not the ones which mattered most to voters, and we could not make them so. On the issues which did matter, and where Labour's past strengths had hardly diminished, we were not trusted – and trust is a vital ingredient for electoral success. (I well remember in 1991, how sure we were that Labour were not trusted and the Conservatives still were – pre-Black Wednesday – hence the 'You can't trust Labour' campaign in early 1992.)

It is axiomatic that elections are won in four years, not four weeks. So we proved again between 1997 and 2001 and, despite stabilising a party in decline, we were unable to gain the trust which would have unlocked gains in 2001. Why?

After 1997 we set out to change and renew the Conservative Party. To double our membership, with many more young people, involving the party membership directly in policy through, for example, policy ballots. To 'Listen

to Britain' so we should never be out of touch again; to put public service reform, and health and education in particular, at the forefront of our policy renewal. The *Common Sense Revolution* in October 1999 had flagship policies on education ('free schools' and a Parents' Guarantee) and on health (the Patients' Guarantee). In October 2000, our party conference was introduced by a policy initiative on reform in our cities and a message of tolerance and inclusiveness.

These were right things to do *then*. It is right to be stressing the same policy objectives *now*, but we must not delude ourselves. Look at what happened before. After the party conference in 1999, we made progress in the public's mind for several weeks, then the Section 28 row, Shaun Woodward's defection and the Lord Archer debacle took over and by January 2000 we were worse off than ever. At the 2000 party conference our message of tolerance lasted three days until the row over zero tolerance of cannabis took over and internal division and intolerance was left as the enduring image of the party.

These are painful recollections, but they are necessary. Unity and discipline would have limited these problems, but we have to understand that what they demonstrated was that in a matter of moments, resurrected negative images of our party can undo the work of months of positive policy formulation.

By the time of the election campaign in 2001 we had literally hundreds of policies. The electorate hardly knew any of them. Many of our policy ideas had already been taken by Labour. We called for budget delegation to schools – Labour followed. We called for abandonment of school exclusions targets – Labour followed. We called for Partner Schools with a range of school providers – Labour followed with their City Academies. We called for the Patients' Guarantee – Labour offered the pledged time for cancer referral. We called for stand-alone surgical units – Labour followed. We called for waiting time targets – Labour followed. We called for a cull of health authorities – Labour followed.

It was never true to say that the Conservative Party under William Hague's leadership did not put health and education reform at the fore. We did. But the public believed otherwise, denying us trust and credibility on these issues. Labour could misrepresent us as committed to cuts and privatisation – and the electorate believed it.

In government, you are judged by what you do. In opposition, you are judged for who you are. From here to the next election, we have to tell the public who we are and what we stand for. We have to renew the image of the Conservative Party. We have to articulate consistently the values of Conservatism which reflect and reinforce that image. Then as opportunities arise and with a limited number of carefully chosen policy initiatives, we have to announce policies which consistently reflect and reinforce those values.

Let me start with image. We are like a major brand which has lost the confidence of its customers. Without stretching the analogy too far, perhaps we are like Marks and Spencer before its recent recovery: a declining number of loyal customers, some products seen as worth buying, but overall perceived as out of date, out of touch, and with products which just won't sell. Like Marks and Spencer, we have to win customers back through a new image and improved products. As yet, however, the act of buying into our brand is not seen as a positive, forward-looking, exciting statement of who you are.

New product lines are not the only answer. Quality in product design is necessary, but not sufficient. Renewing the brand's appeal is the only way; bringing the customer through the door is the only way. A brand with values which people identify with. We now have to bring voters through the door of the Conservative Party. We have to make membership of the Conservative Party an exciting option. We have to make being a Conservative a source of interest and respect. We have to make voting Conservative a positive statement of who we are and what we want from our lives.

These are hard truths about where the Conservatives are. We need to recognise our faults so that we can promote real change – that recognition is the prerequisite to a process of change. If we say there is nothing wrong, then each time intolerance emerges in our party it will say we are out of touch. As a key example, recognising our need to change does not diminish us – it says we live in the real world. Recognising the reality of discrimination in British society and in the Conservative Party does not change us – it is the only way to be acknowledged to be living in the real world, to achieve the tolerance and inclusiveness we need so much and which is the mark of democracy. We are fighting for democracy: the treatment of minorities is a mark and test of civilisation and democracy.

The issue of image should not be discussed in terms of personalities within the Conservative Party; the issue is the personality *of* the Conservative Party. So, to start with, when the public see the Conservative Party, they should see people with whom they can identify.

One senior colleague said to me that the need was for the Conservative Party to start liking itself again. Nonsense. We have never suffered from a lack of mutual liking. The issue is that those outside our party need to like us again, and to respect us. Not just the former Conservatives coming back. Our objective must be to reach out by the next election to the twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings who have never voted Conservative, but who – as they acquire interests and responsibilities – are thinking long-term about who represents them.

They will be like Chris and Debbie, the characters in the Conservative party political broadcasts before the 1999 European election – young, aspirational, interested in issues (but not much in politics), concerned, socially liberal, caring about schools, transport and local health services, but also

sceptical about bureaucracy (especially European bureaucracy), and conscious of how much tax they pay and what it buys for them.

It means younger members speaking for the Conservative Party in public and in the media. The party should bring forward those in local government, including younger people, women and those from ethnic minorities who are better represented there than in Parliament. It means giving leadership to councillors who are tackling real-life issues; rebuilding our city organisations.

It means a new system for the selection of parliamentary candidates so that the Conservative parliamentary party after the next election has a large number of women MPs and a substantial number drawn from the ethnic minority communities. It means adopting equal opportunities policies inside the Conservative Party and in each Association. It means building a younger party and enabling networks of members to grow and recruit others. It means recreating the NHS Task Force and, with an education equivalent, creating networks of committed professionals who speak with credibility from a Conservative viewpoint.

But it means more than these important organisational changes. It means a break with the past. We don't have to denigrate past achievements in order to recognise that elections are fought about the future, not about the past. I detect that, even if our party resents any repudiation of the past, it is well recognised from the top-down that we have to live in the future and leave behind the past, including all its internal divisions.

For Labour, the break with the past was symbolically achieved through the abandonment of Clause IV. A new leader for Labour brought forward in Tony Blair someone who was, to all intents and purposes, a blank sheet of paper on which they could write. Labour's project was clear: new image, new values, then *some* new policies.

Of course, it is right to say that the Conservative Party shouldn't try to ape Labour. Our task is more complex. Conservatism has brand values which we should not abandon. We have to retain the positive values of our brand while creating a new perception of the party and its future.

One helpful way of thinking about who we are and our values is to approach it from the public's point of view. What do they want from a political party? In varying degrees, the public want three things: opportunity, security and hope in the future. We have to show how *our* values will offer these directly.

Conservatism is an organic political philosophy; it grows and changes. It has appeared in the recent past to be dominated by economic liberalism. That is not enough. We are also a party of social progress; of recognition of our responsibilities to others. We are the party of the British constitution, favouring pragmatic, tested and incremental change. The Conservatives are the party of freedom and the rule of law, seeing liberty as an ideal but recognising the need to constrain abuses to liberty. None of these are

principles we need to abandon. However, these are all part of the philosophy of Conservatism that needs to be translated into values with which people can identify.

So let us be clear about those simple values: of freedom, of community, of security, of opportunity and of respect.

Freedom because it is at the heart of the Conservative Party's distinctive appeal, and setting people free is a value to which young people can respond. Freedom is the incentive; *community* the mechanism, distinct from the state and bureaucracy; *security* the result of offering protection to those most vulnerable in our community; *opportunity* our means of identifying with aspirational young people; and *respect* our means of showing that we are open to the cultures and lifestyle differences which are so much a part of our life in Britain today.

It is important to speak of our values consistently; not to chop and change. The mission of the Conservative Party is not changed annually. Our task in giving the people of Britain new opportunity, security and hope in the future is enduring and has to be restated, continually and consistently. Restating Conservative values implies structuring the continuing review of policy explicitly around these values:

For freedom, it means a policy of tax simplification and of the transfer of funding and control out of the state bureaucracy and into the hands of individuals and their families. It means challenging the growth of state bureaucracy and of 'political correctness' (which is not about respecting differences, but about patronising control of language and attitudes).

Community means the dismantling of central government control and direction and creating local agreements between local government, business organisations, community bodies, voluntary groups, charities, faith communities, committed to joint working and agreed local service design, including the diverse local design of how traditional central government services (such as benefit systems, health and education) are provided.

For security, it means big increases in local policing and commitments to health service standards. This is not just about choice but also about equity in health, so that there is no 'two nations' in health care. It also means effective welfare, through community institutions, for vulnerable people.

Opportunity means commitment to standards in education and to a focus on skills. It also means the opportunity for participation in further and higher education. This may mean, for example, recognising that if families or individuals meet their costs of maintenance in higher education, then the costs of tuition should be met by the taxpayer. Opportunity means providing real and substantial help to parents in looking after children, making real their choice of whether to look after young children at home or to go out to work.

Respect means not being colour-blind, but aware and active in designing

services and policies in response to cultural differences, faith communities and lifestyle choices. It means stopping the gratuitous offence of treating gay couples as if theirs is a 'pretended' family relationship. It means reaching out to support development internationally and promoting an environmental agenda domestically and internationally.

All of these policy changes mean that we, like a modern newspaper, can continue to be Conservative at the front of the book, but we must have our own lifestyle sections – issues without politics: talking about real health and schooling issues, responding to the experiences of individuals in their own terms, open to change and new ideas.

We are as yet in the early stages of this Parliament. Indicative electoral movements have yet to come. As in 1999, they may flatter to deceive. Mid-term results, especially on a poor turnout, are generally an opportunity to register a protest against the government. These are not an accurate prediction for the outcome of a subsequent general election. Of greater significance are the 'foundation' measures, which indicate a change in image: for example, the extent to which a party is seen as trustworthy, in touch, to be trusted on the issues, and able to offer leadership.

It is always true that in the early stages of a Parliament, the opposition gets much less attention than towards an election so it is more difficult to secure the share of voice necessary to control the agenda. It is even more difficult both to use the media opportunities available to attack the government, whilst also ensuring that the positive definition of a changed party is heard and understood.

The necessity of repetition when in opposition is often ignored. The Conservative Party leadership since 2001 has not done so. It has understood that for the party's values to be understood, powerful 'counter-scheduling' is needed; that is, to behave in ways which are opposed to one's perceived image, thus attracting strong attention. The Conservative focus on the needs of the vulnerable in society are just such examples. They need to be reinforced and repeated. The changes in candidate selection, and extending the reach of the party, geographically and demographically, have to be seen through to truly substantive effect. Those in the Conservative Party, those who represent us, those who speak for us, must all be different and tell the story of change in our party. That story should be driven home by the party's specific positions on emblematic issues.

All of this has to happen by the middle of 2004. By that time, four things will have happened: first, the mid-term election results will create a higher level of election anticipation, raising the pace of the partisan contest, which will mean that Conservatives will increasingly be defined as 'not Labour'. Secondly, the space in which to establish a reformed Conservative image and values will be largely used up. Thirdly, the Conservative Party will have to have policies. They will succeed or fail not because of their intellectual rigour,

still less on grounds of originality, but far more to the extent to which they are consistent with the Conservative message and a reformed image of who Conservatives are; and therefore carry credibility. But if the image and message has not been established, the policies will not succeed. Fourthly, the Conservatives will have to know whether or not they can seek to drive the election agenda towards public services, or tax, or law and order or even – if the euro referendum remains a ‘will he, won’t he?’ mirage – towards European issues.

Time is our most precious asset. It should not be wasted. The reason to have a protracted policy review is not principally for fear of having policies which are ill-thought through or stolen by Labour, but to *use* that time, to achieve the reform of values and image which must precede policy presentation.

In the first year after the 2001 general election, the sense of disillusionment with Labour’s lack of policy delivery strengthened greatly. The risks to Labour of economic reversal, higher taxes and rising interest rates mean the ‘sheet anchor’ of Labour performance could fail; and the disquiet at Labour’s ‘spin’ has undermined the values on which its initial electoral appeal was based.

If this creates a decline in Labour support and, in particular, in trust in Tony Blair, then the opportunity is obvious for the Conservative Party. But it is there for the Liberal Democrats too. It is only if the Conservative Party, ‘unspun’, honest and trustworthy, reformed, representative and united, can articulate its distinctive values of freedom and respect, consistently expressed through policies which offer realistic prospects of successful delivery, that those opportunities can be realised in election success.

I heartily hope we will succeed in this. Labour’s ‘project’ has failed to deliver – other than to give them access to power. It has not delivered for the British people and has left a public cynical and disillusioned about politics and politicians. Conservatives have to be as ruthless as Labour were in understanding the processes by which elections are won, but we must be wholly different from them in our approach to government. Extending freedom, in the context of a society which recognises the role of community, of interdependence, and of respect for diversity, is the centre right philosophy which is winning through in elections across the world – the Conservative Party can win too.

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on ‘Image, values and policy – from here to the next election’, a speech to the Bow Group, Blackpool, 9 October 2001, published as a Bow Group Policy Brief, www.bowgroup.org/pub/lansley.pdf.