

Conservatism is one of the major intellectual and political strains of thought in Western culture over the last two centuries. Originating as something of a 'reaction' to the radical, liberal and, later, socialist movements during the early period of industrialisation in Britain and Europe, conservatism remains a powerful ideological force in Western societies today. We explore conservatism from its intellectual and cultural roots in the eighteenth century to current developments in the early twenty-first century. Considerable attention is given to the historical experiences of conservative parties, especially in Britain, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, experiences that have been at least as significant in the development of conservative ideology as particular individual thinkers.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Why was the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution less structured than that of other ideological and political movements?
- How far have events in the last hundred years tended to support conservative attitudes to human nature, society, the economy, and the importance of law and tradition?
- To what degree has the British Conservative Party reflected the conservative intellectual tradition?
- Is the future of conservatism as an ideology bound up with the future of the nation-state?

Society is indeed a contract . . . but it is not a partnership in things . . . of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection . . . As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership between . . . those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born. (Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790)

Conservatism is less a political doctrine than a habit of mind, a mode of feeling, a way of living. (R. J. White, *The Conservative Tradition*, 1964)

A conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learnt to walk forward. (Franklin D. Roosevelt, radio talk, October 1939)

There are a number of caveats to be made before we explore the nature of conservative thought. In Britain the connection between the Conservative Party and conservative thinkers is tenuous. Edmund Burke, who is generally regarded as the greatest early conservative thinker, was a 'Whig'. Many modern 'conservative' thinkers have little or no connection with the Conservative Party. Moreover, the meaning of 'conservatism' has shifted over time. European or American conservatism is not the same as British. To add to our difficulties, some conservatives have argued that the British Conservative Party has a distinctive way of thought, including its 'common-sense', realist and non-ideological or pragmatic nature. As the former Conservative leader, William Hague, once said in a *Today* (Radio 4) interview: 'We're not claiming to have an ideology; the Conservative Party is not based on ideology, it is based on doing what is best.'

Cynics point to the electoral success of the British Conservative Party during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as evidence that it is simply the political instrument of the 'haves' against the 'have nots', a fact that it has successfully obscured. Or that it simply defends the status quo (whatever that happens to be) against change (whatever that happens to be). This is the sense in which journalists and political commentators often use it. Thus we get the paradoxical situation where in extreme Marxist or Islamic regimes those who oppose 'liberal' reforms are often condemned as 'conservatives'.

Like socialism, and to a lesser extent liberalism, conservative thought comes in many varieties and there is considerable tension between rival schools, and, of course, within contemporary 'conservative' parties. Even if it lacks the universal scope and intellectual coherence of other ideologies, it has characteristic ideas and values. In Britain these ideas and values continue to have an impact on modern conservative thought and the contemporary Conservative Party.

Given the emphasis on tradition and the historical roots of society it is especially important to look at the historical roots of conservative thought.

The historical origins and later evolution of Conservative thought

As with most political philosophies, it is difficult to establish a particular starting point for conservatism. Some commentators look to Plato, others to the Middle Ages, still others, especially in England, pinpoint the seventeenth century. This latter starting point has its merits. The crises that led to the civil wars produced defenders of royal power and of order, such writers as Thomas Hobbes (who is claimed by both liberals and Marxists as one of their ideological forebears) and Sir Robert Filmer (a defender of the traditional rights of kings). The loosely organised political groupings later to be known as the Tories are the direct ancestor of the modern Conservative Party.

However, systematic forms of conservative thought can be attributed to fear of domestic political radicalism, as for instance developed in reaction to the American and French revolutions. The revolutionary consequences to British society (and its later manifestations in Western Europe) of the agricultural and industrial revolutions also called for some sort of conservative analysis of resistance and accommodation.

Conservatism arose and developed as an ideology in response to the claims of other, *radical*, movements: liberalism, at first, then nationalism, socialism, fascism, feminism, environmentalism, all of which sought *change*, massive social 'improvement', reform and the removal of 'old', 'discredited', social orders, institutions and ways of life. Conservatism sought, and still seeks, to resist such change, to retard change, arguing for reflection, reassessment, and a willingness to consider the possibility that reformers might be mistaken. They believe that one should be very cautious about removing or radically changing old and long-lasting institutions and ways of life.

This was the argument of Edmund Burke, especially his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke, almost the 'founding father' of British conservatism, was a distinguished parliamentarian and fully involved in the controversies of his day. He was not a reactionary thinker; for example, he showed considerable sympathy for the American rebels. Burke's ideas fed into existing traditions and political debate, to have a profound and enduring impact.

He realised that the crucial trigger for the revolutionary changes of his own time was the cultural and intellectual movements (known as the 'Enlightenment') which swept Europe and the American colonies in the late eighteenth century and culminated in the French Revolution (1789). Burke's political philosophy was based on a critique of the Enlightenment and its consequences. The intellectual basis of the Enlightenment and subsequent revolutions was the assumption, founded on a particular understanding of Newtonian physics, that human society was like a machine, and that this

machine could be rationally understood. It was composed of discrete elements and could be dismantled, reassembled and radically improved by men in the light of reason.

Burke's understanding, and that of later conservative theorists, was based on a quite different analogy. Human society was 'organic'. It was like a living being, highly complex, with a distinctive history and nature. In fact, although all human societies had similarities, their differences were more significant than what they had in common. Thus arbitrary interference in the natural course of social development would be, metaphorically speaking, 'fatal' to that society. Moreover, the intellect of any one man, or even the knowledge of any particular epoch, is inadequate to grasp the complexities of a society. The accumulated wisdom of the centuries (what Burke called 'prejudice'), experience, tradition, custom should be brought to bear and any adjustment should be made with the greatest caution: 'The individual is foolish, the multitude, for the moment, is foolish when they act without deliberation, but the species is wise, and when time is given to it, as a species, it always acts right.' 'Prejudice' in fact was a better guide in human affairs than the short-term intellectual fashions of any particular age. Attempts to base society on abstract principles, such as the French Revolution's 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', were particularly dangerous and would have, as the Revolution clearly demonstrated, calamitous results.

During the nineteenth century, while conservative thinkers in Europe tended to stress monarchy and authoritarian government, bolstered by strong conservative nationalism, British conservatism followed its pragmatic approach to social and political affairs. Sir Robert Peel sought new links between the landed gentry and the rising manufacturing classes around principles of free-market economics, principles of which conservatives were deeply suspicious during the early part of the century. Benjamin Disraeli dealt with the political consequences of the growth of a skilled industrial working class and demands for extension of the franchise to include them. In particular, he stressed in his speeches and, especially, his novels, such as *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, the need for social improvement to integrate the working class into the **one nation** he believed Britain should become.

one-nation conservatism

A strand in conservative thought going back to the nineteenth-century Conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli, which emphasises reform as an instrument of preventing social conflict and uniting the nation.

Popular imperialism was one means of encouraging the working classes to identify with the Conservatives and not be seduced by the appeals of socialism. Conservatives were also committed to educational and social reforms.

Post-1945 Conservative leaders came to terms with the social-democratic welfare state by both accepting and extending it. Harold Macmillan, R. A. Butler and other modernisers within the Conservative Party ensured its post-war

electoral successes. In the 1980s Mrs Thatcher struggled with what she perceived as the hegemony of socialist and social-democratic doctrine permeating all levels of British society. Her conservatism sought to link the prosperous and ambitious sections of the working classes with her ideas of popular capitalism and 'traditional' values. The ideas of 'liberal' thinkers such as Karl Popper and F. A. von Hayek were brought in to provide intellectual weight for her brand of conservatism. These responses to social and political change are typical of the pragmatism that is a special feature of British conservatism.

Major conservative themes

Conservatism adjusted, with some difficulty at times, to two hundred years of unprecedented social and political change. Claims to being 'non-ideological' by some conservatives are, in essence, claims to superiority over the 'nonsense' of other perspectives. The main themes varied in importance at different times, but they had a number of things in common, to create a body of ideas, an ideology, that could be called *conservative*:

- a pessimistic view of human nature;
- an organic view of society;
- a view of politics as a limited activity;
- a belief in patriotism;
- a valuing of tradition;
- a commitment to strong national institutions;
- a high regard for property and the economy;
- an emphasis on law, freedom and authority.

A pessimistic view of human nature

From Burke onwards, conservatives have had a pessimistic view of human nature. For some, this view is rooted in the Christian doctrine of 'the Fall of Man' (or St Augustine's understanding of it). As a consequence of disobedience to divine command, human nature is flawed: greedy, irrational, selfish and power hungry. Improvements to human behaviour and hence to society as a whole require religious references and God's grace rather than philosophy and rational action. Imperfect individuals in imperfect societies produce imperfect human nature, even if some conservatives do not accept the religious basis of the assumption, and this means that radical social improvement is impossible.

Using human virtue, individually and especially collectively, to create a **Utopia** by political action will make things worse, not better. Belief in, and attempts to create, human perfectibility is one of

Utopia

A word that literally means 'Nowhere'. It is an imaginary perfect society and is usually used dismissively by those who disapprove of plans for social improvement. The word derives from the book of the same name by Sir Thomas More.

the great causes of human misery. The best a government can do is to hold society together while awaiting the heavenly Jerusalem'. Indeed, one must see the very severely limited scope of politics in society as far as 'social improvements' are concerned. Any social improvement can come only through morals and faith, not through government or newly invented social institutions. It is not that people are bad. Most people most of the time are kind, considerate and law-abiding and are concerned with the well-being of their neighbours. Nevertheless, flawed human nature needs to be constrained so as not to damage society.

An organic view of society

Society or, perhaps more accurately, the 'nation' is essentially organic in its nature, a kind of living creature, developing according to its own laws and to specific historical and cultural circumstances. Individuals are the 'cells' that make up the nation, each having a vital role to play in its well-being. This analogy of society with a living organism has proved to be of fundamental importance to conservatives. As a living thing has structure and hierarchy, with various parts contributing to the overall functioning and well-being of the whole, so it is with human society. The organism analogy also allows for adaptation and change. This view can, however, lead to a dislike and suspicion of foreigners and immigrants (*xenophobia*) who are seen as 'alien' bodies 'infecting' the national organism and undermining social cohesion and homogeneity. While most conservatives would reject racism they would also reject 'multi-culturalism' as divisive and stress the need for immigrants to 'assimilate' into national culture

It would be a mistake to assume that conservatism implies total opposition to change. Change should be gradual, natural and appropriate – evolutionary, not revolutionary. Social and economic change should be incorporated within the body politic. Disraeli, for example, defended both the Trade Union Act (1871), which gave the unions legal recognition, and the extension of the franchise (1867) in order to accommodate the social realities within the nation and to ensure its long-term survival by making limited compromises with rising political and social forces that might become revolutionary if endlessly frustrated.

Structure implies order, direction and hierarchy. Conservatives may vary on the precise nature of this order, and how a hierarchy develops and is sustained, but all are agreed on their necessity. Conservatives stress their importance to ensure the maintenance of a sound and well-governed society. Authority derives from tradition and the legitimacy that attaches to those individuals who hold positions in the nation's institutions. Hierarchy, both within national institutions and in society, is vital for the well-organised society, for the

instilling of habits of social discipline, obedience and obligation. Conservatives see nothing wrong in a hierarchy based on birth, wealth, authority, so long as that hierarchy and its authority are founded on tradition and the rule of law. Indeed, some conservatives have been suspicious of meritocracy as the basis for social hierarchy as it creates stresses and competition in society that put its harmony at risk.

Conservatives see, therefore, a natural inequality among people in society, caused by the wide and unequal distribution of talents among people. Elites are the foundation for successful organisation, for the development of higher elements of culture and for the establishment and defence of property. These factors benefit everyone in society, and not just the elite, so long as the elite recognises and carries out its social obligations to lead. Attempts to create egalitarian societies fail, but they create misery and oppression, often death and destruction, before they are abandoned.

The basic and most important institution in society is the *family*. It educates children into the values of the nation and binds them into a set of strong social ties. Strong families create strong societies and family breakdown weakens the bedrock on which society and the nation are built. Family life is not just a private matter. Government should pursue policies that encourage successful family life.

A view of politics as a limited activity

Conservatives claim that politics is a limited activity. As Lord Hailsham observed in *The Case for Conservatism* (1947): 'Conservatives do not believe that the political struggle is the most important thing in life . . . The simplest of them prefer foxhunting.' Belief in the limitation, the *desirable* limitation, of state power is a recurrent conservative theme from Burke to Thatcher's 'rolling back' the frontiers of the state and contemporary conservatives looking to the voluntary sector to redress society's ills. Politics is a *practical* pursuit, not a *theoretical* or *technical* one. Living society cannot be deliberately planned, organised or controlled according to some technical blueprint, some master plan. If politicians fail to recognise this, then they will attempt to force society and people to conform to theory with resulting misery and, ultimately, failure.

The main object of politics is the survival of the nation, even, if necessary, at the expense of individuals. Some twentieth-century conservatives, such as the poet T. S. Eliot, have maintained a religious element in their resistance to an over-optimistic view of the effectiveness of politics in bringing happiness, while others, like the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, have dispensed with the religious underpinning to a conservative society. The latter argued that simply observing the catastrophes arising from attempts to construct new societies, such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, provides evidence

enough of man's imperfectibility and the dangers of attempting to create a 'perfect' society.

Conservatism raises questions as to how 'democratic' it is, or should be. Early conservatives, like Burke, rejected the notion outright. (He famously called the voters of Bristol 'The swinish multitude'.) Democracy would rapidly degenerate into mob rule, violence and, ultimately, dictatorship and the end of liberty. Later conservatives sought to hold democratic pressures in check by emphasising hierarchy (based on an aristocracy, property ownership or merit). Traditional constitutional barriers to democracy are often emphasised, such as, in Britain, the monarchy, and the (unreformed, now partially reformed) House of Lords. The rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and constitutional checks and balances are also emphasised by conservatives.

Indeed, it is the erosion of constitutional balances that many conservatives see as the basis of the Britain's **elected dictatorship**, the government's domination over parliament. Conservatives have not, however, been keen to support the idea of a written constitution. This is presumably because it would lead to a Bill of Rights, itself the product of that whole line of reasoning about 'natural rights' which Burke, among others, deplored as being both nonsense and a stimulus to revolution.

elected dictatorship

A term used to describe the British system of government by the Conservative politician Lord Hailsham. It implies that, except at elections, the executive has almost total domination over the legislature and society in general.

Conservatism, unlike some ideologies, does not place politics at the centre of human concerns. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, for example, once famously advised those who needed to find meaning in their lives to look to the bishops rather than to politicians. In terms of party politics, this has meant an emphasis on self-help, and on private education, private property, privacy, and the family. Politicians, it is assumed, can do much evil, but little good.

A belief in patriotism

Conservatives stress their love of country, implying that they are more patriotic than their opponents. The nation, with its distinctive culture, history and identity, is second only to the family as the natural unit of human society and having a similar emotional tie, can demand huge sacrifice from its members. Often, explicitly or not, conservatives doubt the patriotism of their opponents and deride the 'foreignness' of their ideas.

Conservative politicians are often strident about promoting the 'national interest', the touchstone of right action in foreign and defence policy. Much is made of national institutions: flag, armed forces and the constitution. The Conservative Party identified itself closely with the empire and the UK state. Patriotism, however, has caused problems for British conservatism. The

empire has gone and, with Welsh and Scottish devolution, the new administration in Northern Ireland, and the advance of European integration, the UK is not what it was. Immigration, especially from the 'New Commonwealth', has raised difficult questions of national identity. The Conservative Party has many internal tensions over its policy towards the European Union.

British 'Euro-sceptics' regularly make references to Britain's glorious and independent past and the dangers of becoming subject to 'Europe', 'Brussels', or, even, the Germans. A senior Conservative minister once described the EU as 'a German racket'. A Tory backbencher once summed up the danger to British sovereignty from the EU:

Here is a country that has defended its sovereignty for a thousand years against Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV of France, Napoleon, Kaiser Bill and Adolf Hitler. It is now expected to give up its sovereignty to Jacques Delors [the then EU president] with the squiggle of a pen.

Also troublesome is the question of the object of one's patriotism. In multinational states, or states with ethnic and linguistic diversity, a problem arises for conservative patriots. For example, are Conservatives patriotic to Britain as a whole or, – as the party's support in Wales and Scotland weakened in the 1990s – specifically, England? Is *English* nationalism emerging as the hallmark of modern *British* conservatism? Time will tell.

A valuing of tradition

Tradition is very important to conservatives. Tradition, that collection of values, myths, attitudes of mind and beliefs that make up the common 'mental baggage', is what gives a nation its 'character', its resources to act in the face of adversity, its courage to face and shape the future. Past glories, great military victories and even defeats, heroes and villains all play their part. Tradition binds the people together creating that sense of an organic identity linking individuals to the nation. Where ancient traditions do not exist, conservatives will invent them and invest them with archaic language, ceremony and architecture so that the nation will readily accept them.

Conservatives' reverence for tradition is not to be interpreted as slavish adherence to the notions, values and institutions of the past but as the bringing to bear on contemporary problems the accumulated wisdom of the past, especially the national past. This wisdom is a better guide to policy than the fickle fashions of the present. National history, particularly its more glorious moments, is therefore rightly venerated, as are the institutions, customs and values associated with it. Tradition also places the individual in a wider context than his own selfish and limited perspective. It gives meaning and dignity to all members of society, however humble, and binds the society together in a shared community of experience. By extension, 'tradition' may

even include the seemingly trivial, with imperial weights and measures being British as against the foreign metric ones, Sterling against the Euro, British English spelling against American English.

A commitment to strong national institutions

Conservatives lay great stress on the institutions that embody the nation and unite it. Indeed, ancient institutions, with the blood of tradition pumping through their veins, play a vital role in the organic notion of the nation. Monarchy, the constitution, churches, ancient universities, old regiments, all have or claim to have ancient roots that ensure, as Burke said, that the national contact between generations long gone, those alive today and generations yet to be born is constantly renewed. The revolutionary overthrow of ancient institutions and their traditions is disastrous to the psychological as well as the physical well-being of the nation and its people.

A high regard for property and the economy

Property, to conservatives, has particular significance. The ownership of property gives independence and dignity to the individual, relieving him of complete dependence on the state. It also acts as another 'check and balance' in society on the power of the state. The desire to acquire property encourages initiative and a constant replenishing of social elites. Inheritance and the passing on of wealth link both individuals and societies with their past and future, underpin order and emphasise the continuity of society. Most conservatives emphasise the 'sanctity of property', but this is not necessarily incompatible with a degree of redistribution if that is what is needed to ensure social stability. It is, however, incompatible with state ownership except for the most cautious, modest and pragmatic of measures.

One of the fundamental bases of law and liberty in conservatism is the right to private property, a right guaranteed by the law, traditions and values of a nation. Conservatives nevertheless believe that great wealth and ownership of property, whether inherited or the result of hard work and enterprise, carries obligations towards those less fortunate. The wealthy and powerful have a duty to lead society, provide models of high standards of personal behaviour, and take action to alleviate the sufferings of the poor (although not necessarily by governmental action).

Conservative attachment to private property raises the issue of the link between conservative thought and the market economy. Since the late nineteenth century, the British Conservative Party, for example, has drawn support from 'big business'. It generally opposed the extension of public ownership in the 1950s and 1970s and, under Thatcher's governments of the 1980s, privatised huge swathes of state-owned industry. Nevertheless, the

party's position on untrammelled free enterprise has been more complex than that of uncritical enthusiasm.

The principle of **free trade**, for example, has had varying fortunes among British Conservatives. In the nineteenth century they were usually opposed to it. By the end of the century substantial sections of the party supported protection or **imperial preference**. Now they are generally strongly in favour of it. The Conservatives tolerated state ownership of substantial sections of industry in the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1970s the Heath Government imposed state controls on prices and incomes in the face of serious inflation problems, and nationalised Rolls Royce. Even at the height of the commitment to privatisation and a liberal-economic ideology during the 1980s there were Conservative politicians like Ian Gilmour and conservative philosophers like Roger Scruton who challenged the idea that all could be reduced to the market.

free trade

Trade within and between nations with little or no restraints imposed by the state, particularly tariffs on imported goods.

imperial preference

The practice of allowing goods to be imported into Britain from the empire without being subject to the same duty as that imposed on goods from outside the empire.

Continental parties generally regarded as conservative, such as the German Christian Democrats, found themselves theoretically and practically at odds with the British Conservative Party because of the former's commitment to the 'social market'. This term describes a basically market economy, substantially complemented by detailed regulation by the state and generous social welfare provision.

Wholehearted conservative commitment to the free market has been evident only since 1979, with the phenomenon known as 'Thatcherism', the intellectual foundation of which was laid by reference to philosophers such as Hayek, economists like Milton Friedman, social commentators such as Charles Murray and politicians such as Sir Keith Joseph.

The essence of their message was the economic and social excellence of the free market. For Hayek, it was the indispensable prerequisite of the free society. For Milton Friedman even such modest state intervention as advocated by Keynes (and practised by all Western governments since the 1940s) was ultimately futile in reducing unemployment; it produced inflation, undermined competitiveness and ultimately corrupted the economic order. Murray argued that a large welfare state actually exacerbated social problems by creating a socially irresponsible and dependent underclass.

Some philosophers, such as Michael Oakeshott, and politicians such as Enoch Powell sought to reconcile traditional conservative values with a vigorous championing of the free market. Others, mainly on the left of the party, have been very unhappy at the way some neo-liberal enthusiasts have tried to apply

the free market to social as well as economic issues, for example by advocating a free market in hard drugs. Critics have raised doubts as to whether such 'libertarianism' is really conservative at all.

An emphasis on law, freedom and authority

Their opponents accuse Conservatives of favouring a highly controlled society, one with human rights and freedoms drastically curtailed. It is a charge they vehemently rebut. Actually, contemporary conservatives have tended to support economic liberalism and the free market precisely because economic freedom is an essential prerequisite for other freedoms. For conservatives, freedom is both possible and desirable, but only 'under the law'. As Lord Hailsham said in 1975:

I believe there is a golden thread which alone gives meaning to the political history of the West, from Marathon to Alamein, from Solon to Winston Churchill and after. This I dare to call the doctrine of liberty under the law.²

Law, the rule of law, and its effective enforcement are key elements in establishing and maintaining order and, thereby, freedom. In their absence anarchy would reign: only the strong would be free (and then only so long as they remained strong) and the majority would be terrorised and oppressed. Thomas Hobbes made clear the consequences of weak government and a breakdown of law and order:

In such a condition, there is no place for industry; . . . no culture of the earth; no navigation, . . . no commodious building; . . . no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.³

Human rights are less the inherent properties of human beings than the result of a particular social and historical context. Much conservative unease with the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into British, and especially English, law in 2000 sprang from this view. The ECHR is seen by many conservatives in Britain as undermining English common law and parliamentary sovereignty by importing European legal systems and principles from the European Union or, as in the case of the ECHR, from other European organisations.

Law presupposes an authoritative legislature. Historically, in Britain this has been the 'sovereign in Parliament' (often designated as 'parliamentary sovereignty') – the single source of legislative power in the United Kingdom. Conservatives tend to venerate the British Constitution, a constitution that still exists in the twenty-first century after centuries of steady evolutionary development, gradually adapting to massive social change. This veneration underlay the strong conservative opposition to Labour's proposed constitutional changes

after 1997, especially devolution and the reform (albeit partial) of the House of Lords.

Conservatives profess devotion to freedom and a commitment to law and order. However, this may give rise to practical and philosophical contradictions. One strand, the *libertarian*, emphasises freedom as the highest social and political good (the Federation of Conservative Students in the 1980s, for example, caused embarrassment to the government by proposing the legalisation of hard drugs and abortion on demand). The other strand, the *authoritarian* (sometimes described as the ‘New Right’), on the other hand, places emphasis on order and the institutions and values associated with order: the moral pluralism of contending ethical positions, which liberals applaud, is viewed with intense suspicion as a threat to order.

British Conservatism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: adaptation to change

British conservatives stress constitutional limits on government, pragmatism, scepticism and flexibility. They, more than their European and American counterparts, are very suspicious of ‘grand plans’ for social reform, emphasising the importance of social organisations outside the state. Indeed, British conservatives have absorbed liberalism’s belief in minimal state involvement in health, education and welfare. Nevertheless, pragmatism has enabled the Conservative Party to adapt successfully to change and remain a major force in politics – almost the ‘natural party of government’. It is worth considering the career of Europe’s most successful conservative political movement.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

The early emphasis on Burke’s ideas and theories, which can be discerned running through conservative thought, obscures the factors that have enabled conservatism to sustain itself and even thrive through the cataclysmic changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are a number of reasons for this. Conservatism adjusted to new social realities and brought new classes and groups within the Conservative ‘broad church’ and garnered support for Tory policies. Conservative beliefs were able to adapt to some of the intellectual current of the last two centuries. Finally, in their vigorous desire to take and keep power, they moderated their ideological stance to gain electoral support.

These factors are apparent throughout the period. The early nineteenth century was rocked by the French Revolution, war and the agricultural and industrial revolutions and their consequences. The Conservative prime minister, Robert Peel, tried to reconcile the party to the 1832 extension of the franchise to the new manufacturing classes. This involved the attempted but

abortive conversion of the party to free trade and the scrapping of the Corn Laws (1846) that, to some extent, damaged landed interests and so split the party. It was around this time that the term 'Conservative Party' began to be generally used.

Later in the century Disraeli was to attempt to adjust the party to new realities once more, notably the 1867 Reform Act, which enfranchised some of the skilled working class, the continued growth of industry and towns, and the emergence of trade unionism. At the practical level Disraeli sought to construct an alliance of the old ruling class, the new middle classes and the emerging skilled working class (the 'respectable working class') for the Conservative Party. At the intellectual level he sought to construct 'one nation' in which the upper classes, animated by a sense of social obligation, would pursue a paternalistic approach towards the needy and try to incorporate the authentic interests of the trade unions into the body politic.

Disraeli, in his novels *Coningsby* (1845) and *Sybil* (1844), identified the emergence of 'Two Nations – the Rich and the Poor', an idea much more dramatic in theory than in practice. There were some practical reforms in the legalisation of trade unions, and in health and housing. Most significantly, Disraeli envisaged a more routine role for public institutions, notably at local level in the field of health and social welfare. These ideas were taken up in the 1890s by figures such as Joseph Chamberlain, who tried to convert the party to 'fair trade' (as opposed to 'free trade' espoused by Peel). This involved a tariff on imports, the proceeds of which would be used by the state to fund social-welfare benefits such as old-age pensions. Chamberlain failed to carry the party with him. Notions of tariffs and state welfare only became orthodox Conservative doctrine after the First World War.

By the end of the nineteenth century the Conservative Party was increasingly identified with business interests in resisting organised labour, while its support for farming interests was reduced but not eliminated. At the same time the party was very successful in mobilising working class support. This was particularly so under 'one-nation conservatism', attracting a third of the working-class vote, and ensuring long periods in power during the twentieth century.

Conservatism in the inter-war years

Once again British conservatism had to redefine itself in reaction to events. Near full democracy arrived in 1918 with the extension of the franchise to virtually all men over 21 and all women over 30. (Women finally got the vote on the same age basis as men in 1928 – under a Conservative Government.) The 'threat' from socialism grew with the Russian Revolution in 1917, and, more immediately, the rise of the Labour Party which formed its first (minority) government in 1924.

Conservatism adapted to new conditions. A prime minister could no longer sit in the House of Lords (as had often been the case until Lord Salisbury left office in 1902). Conservative leaders had to project an image of being 'one of the people'. High levels of unemployment, upheavals like the General Strike (1926) and the perceived threat from international communism pushed the party into emphasising law and order, but also social reform (albeit very limited and of no threat to the established order).

During the 1930s the rise of the fascist and Nazi threat led conservatives to emphasise traditional national institutions, such as the monarchy and the empire, and the politics of moderation. Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative leader who dominated the inter-war years, was no intellectual. Within the party there was little attempt to underpin Conservative policy by ideological means. There were, however, *some* contributions. Harold Macmillan, in *The Middle Way* (1938), advocated mixed state/private ownership and 'planned capitalism'. In 1936 he claimed: 'Toryism has always been a form of paternal socialism.' This approach looked back to Disraeli and the combination of a hierarchical social structure with state intervention to benefit the under-privileged and also to preserve the social order. Not all conservatives were as accommodating towards the lower orders. T. S. Eliot, for example, defended conservatism as a bulwark against the barbarism of mass democracy.

Conservatism after 1945

After the Second World War the Conservative Party was once again confronted by major changes in society, and once again it chose the path of accommodation. Some conservatives condemned its new policies as 'domestic appeasement' of the working classes, just as it was associated with 'international appeasement' of the fascist dictators – with similar potential for disaster. But most supported them as a necessary adjustment to new realities.

The Labour landslide victory in 1945 led to the acceptance of a consensus in British politics by most Conservatives. The consensus included the creation of the modern welfare state, a mixed economy and a commitment to full employment, all of which involved a substantial role for the state in society. The end of empire and the Cold War struggle with the USSR also involved a commitment to a strong state. The victory in the world war apparently vindicated such a strong state. This capitulation to the spirit of the times could be justified ideologically by politicians, such as Iain Macleod and R. A. Butler, as being in substantial harmony with 'one-nation' conservatism and the tradition of Conservative **paternalism** traceable back to the nineteenth century.

paternalism

A mode of conservative thought in which the relationship of governors to the governed is compared to that of father and children. The governors provide the needs of the governed but maintain their authority and superiority.

The adaptation to new realities proved politically astute. The Conservatives won a succession of elections in the 1950s. In many ways conservatism at the time resembled the 'revisionist' socialism of leading contemporary Labour figures such as Anthony Crosland and Hugh Gaitskell. From the outset, however, Conservatives had their own particular understanding of 'consensus', an understanding which held that it was fully in harmony with traditional conservative beliefs; for example, the belief in the merits of private property (an emphasis that was very apparent in the ideas of a 'property-owning democracy' in the 1980s).

From their inception consensus policies had their critics from within and outside the party. Pressure groups and think tanks, such as the Institute for Economic Affairs and Aims of Industry, and politicians such as Enoch Powell from the late 1950s and Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s, began to question the intellectual bases of the post-war consensus and whether conservatives should share it. Drawing on the works of philosophers such as Hayek and Oakeshott they emphasised free-market economics as being more economically viable, more socially effective and morally preferable to the semi-socialism of welfare-statism.

In 1970 the Conservative victory of Edward Heath suggested that a commitment to a more robust free market would be more evident in government. Two years earlier he had made a number of speeches at the Selsdon Hotel in London, proposing a reversal of British economic decline by a vigorous promotion of private business, a reduction of trade-union power and a major rethinking about the welfare state. However, domestic problems such as industrial unrest, rising unemployment and high inflation led to a reversal of such policies in 1972; massive oil price rises in 1973–74 and their impact on the weakening British economy also contributed to a return to the consensus within the Conservative Party.

This, however, proved to be a brief aberration. The two humiliating Conservative election defeats in 1974 and Labour's seemingly inexorable march to the left, as well as the continuing failures of the consensus to stop Britain's decline as an economic power, rising unemployment and near hyper-inflation, encouraged a movement in the Conservative Party towards those who challenged the consensus. Although not clearly offering a reversal of such policies at the time, the political beneficiary of these crises was Margaret Thatcher, who was elected Tory leader in 1975. It soon became apparent that she was determined to follow a different political course from her post-war Conservative predecessors.

Thatcherism

'Thatcherism', as the constellation of attitudes identified with Margaret Thatcher (Conservative prime minister 1979–90) came to be called, was a

reaction against the collectivist drift of post-war Britain and the crisis of the 1970s. This drift, in her view, had led to economic failure, social problems, national decline, moral decay and a general undermining of freedom and individual self-respect. Conservative Party leaders had shamefully colluded in this consensus.

Herself no intellectual, Margaret Thatcher nevertheless had an ability to take the ideas of others and was adept at combining them with populist attitudes into a formidable political project. Mrs Thatcher's political astuteness, personal charisma, toughness of character and luck in the weakness of her opponents both within and outside the party produced a period of radical transformation of the British political and ideological landscape in favour of 'New Right' or 'neo-liberal' ideas with her electoral successes in 1979, 1983 and 1987.

Thatcherism involved a wholehearted commitment to the market economy. This was combined with a drastic reduction in state economic management, 'monetarist' policies to tackle inflation by control of the money supply, an attack on economic vested interests, an extension of property ownership and the privatisation of state assets, including even utilities such as electricity, gas and water. There was a rhetorical commitment to cutting taxation, although, in practice, taxes tended to rise during the 1980s.

There was to be a reduced role for the 'nanny' state in providing welfare, in line with liberal elements of Thatcherism. This would be associated with a move towards private provision of healthcare, education and pensions. The aim of these policies was both to reduce the tax burden on society and to encourage greater self-reliance in individuals and their families.

Paradoxically, although the functions of the state were to be reduced, its strength was to be increased in areas of social control and governance, in line with authoritarian elements of Thatcherism. The police acquired both higher pay and greater powers. There was a corresponding reduction in the power of those viewed with suspicion, notably the trade unions. The end of the miners' strike (1984–85) finally dispelled any doubts as to the ability of British governments to govern, a common theme of the 1970s.

Conservative themes such as patriotism, freedom under the law, order, hierarchy, discipline, inequality and traditional institutions were emphasised. The final element of this ragbag of liberal and conservative ideas was a moral crusade that emphasised individualism rather than collectivism and self-reliance rather than state support.

The practical outcomes of these positions, notably the huge increase in unemployment, an increase in the gap between rich and poor and a general sense of deepening social division, caused great unease among 'one-nation'

Conservatives. Indeed, for some, at least, the question was raised as to whether Thatcherism was an authentic expression of Conservatism (and conservatism) at all, or some form of neo-liberalism.

There was also an inherent problem that only fully emerged under Thatcher's successors, John Major and William Hague. How far was an emphasis on a rapidly changing competitive society, the minimal state and the central value of economic freedom, compatible with other conservative values, such as the organic community, the obligations of the privileged towards the needy and the value of hallowed institutions, customs and values?

Post-Thatcher conservatism

John Major's values, in rhetoric at least, were far less ideological in character than those of his predecessor. As prime minister (1990–97), however, he continued with privatisation. Coal and the railways were moved into private ownership. His commitment to the creation of a 'classless society' proved on closer examination to be a commitment to 'equality of opportunity', a belief quite compatible with Thatcherism. A public image of a more humane and compassionate conservatism was promoted, 'Thatcherism with a human face', but this had little of intellectual or practical substance. Some attempt was made to extend market economics into public services. The 'Citizen's Charter', which set down standards for the services to meet, redefined citizenship in consumer terms, placing the citizen's relationship to the public services on a footing somewhat akin to the same person's relationship with private businesses.

Major's disinclination to develop a distinctive intellectual contribution to conservatism lay with his own pragmatic personality, and with the government's political difficulties caused by its small and ever-shrinking parliamentary majority (only twenty-one in 1992). Its internal divisions over Europe, and the growth of a much more right-wing and ideologically motivated body of MPs and party members, also contributed to party difficulties and the subsequent crushing defeat of the Conservatives in 1997. There was, however, another factor. Conservatism had historically defined itself as being 'against' something, such as the French Revolution, early manufacturing, the rise of socialism, the labour movement, communism. Now there was little left to be against. Internationally, the Soviet Empire and the communist threat had collapsed. Domestically, the Labour Party had adopted the quasi-Conservative economic and social policies, as the whole area of political discourse in Britain had moved from left of centre to right of centre.

The dilemma of what to react to was even more acute under Major's successor, William Hague (party leader 1997–2001). His initial thinking was to see the problem as one of adaptation. As previous leaders had adapted the party to new social and economic circumstances, so Hague would adapt to new

realities. The new realities he at first confronted were changing patterns of sexual morality, a decline in marriage, more single parents, a growing acceptance of homosexuality. Here, a morally neutral position was advanced, emphasising 'tolerance' and 'compassion'. Michael Portillo, a leading shadow cabinet member, admitted to homosexual behaviour in his youth and received support from Hague for his honesty. A general policy of 'inclusion' of groups not historically associated with the Conservative Party, such as ethnic minorities, was announced. A more relaxed attitude to the new moral climate, especially among younger voters, had emerged and had to be responded to by the party.

This libertarian strand of conservatism was, however, soon abandoned. Ordinary party members rejected this shift to permissiveness as Hague adopted a strategy of 'listening' to the party. Even Hague's choice of Steven Norris as Conservative candidate for Mayor of London provoked grass-roots unease because of Norris's social liberalism and his reputation as a womaniser. However, Hague later appointed him as the party's vice-chairman. As Conservative Party membership shrank it became increasingly elderly, right-wing, 'Euro-phobic' and intolerant of social permissiveness among some of its leaders. Indeed, Tory MPs were, as their numbers dwindled after the 1997 electoral debacle, more ideologically right-wing, more 'Thatcherite' as a body, than ever before.

This reaction, and the internal party realities, soon led to a change of direction. A party document, *The Commonsense Revolution*, reaffirmed 'traditional' Conservative positions, 'traditional' now meaning much more right-wing than previously. By 1999 the Conservatives were loudly denouncing the repeal of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act that forbade the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools. At the 2000 Party Conference Ann Widdecombe, the shadow home secretary, proclaimed a policy of instant fines for the possession of cannabis. This was soon abandoned when a number of shadow cabinet members admitted to trying cannabis when young. Increasingly, the party sought to align itself with the churches and a (presumed) religious right. By 2001 the party was advocating the delivery of some social welfare services by the churches and other religious organisations.

The British Conservative Party suffered a repeat defeat at the 2001 general election. William Hague resigned as leader and was succeeded by Iain Duncan Smith. Party membership continued to shrink and to become more elderly and right-wing, more ideological and intolerant. It seemed that the Conservatives were doomed to be out of government for a long time. The relatively weak upturn in the Conservative position in the May 2002 local government elections, at a time of growing popular disenchantment with the Labour Government, seemed to offer little hope of a renaissance in Conservative political fortunes.

Conservatism has been successful because of its willingness to adapt to social change – and even initiate it. Its pragmatism, lack of ideological constraints and an ability to tap into deep-seated strains of popular emotion and beliefs have ensured its importance in Western democracies as a major political force. British conservatism has been the most successful of the species, both in terms of mobilising support for electoral victories and adapting to social and political realities, even over the last century and a quarter of mass democracy. It is unlikely, whatever problems face British Toryism at the start of the twenty-first century, that it will disappear.

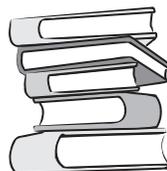
Nevertheless a Labour Party that has successfully positioned itself as the ‘caring conservative’ party, adopting many of the elements of traditional conservatism into its policies, leaves the Conservative Party with a major problem. It needs to offer an alternative programme to the Labour Party, but that might involve becoming more ideological and right-wing and less likely to get elected.

Summary

Conservatism cannot be simply identified with the Conservative Party in Britain (or elsewhere). Moreover, although conservatism is less universal in scope or intellectually coherent than other political theories, there are nonetheless clearly defined conservative attitudes, values and assumptions. Conservatism, for our purposes, may be traced back to a reaction to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Although there are different nuances within conservatism some broad themes are common to all. These are a pessimistic view of human nature; a reverence for each society as organic and unique; a belief that politics is of limited relevance to human affairs; a high value on patriotism, tradition, strong national institutions; a belief in private property, authority and liberty under the law. British conservatism has essentially been the adaptation of these values and beliefs to the realities of the nineteenth, twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Different strands of conservative thought have been stressed at different times – for example, under Thatcher there was greater emphasis on the market economy. Although in the 1997 and 2001 general elections the British Conservative Party did badly, conservatism as a philosophy has proved adaptable and resilient and a revival in Britain is by no means impossible.

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SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1 'Conservatism is anything that enables the ruling class to carry on ruling.' Do you agree?
- 2 Is conservatism anything more than a 'rag-bag of prejudices'?
- 3 To what extent does conservatism go with the grain of human nature?
- 4 Are the views of the 'New Right' a repudiation of traditional conservatism?
- 5 Why has the Conservative Party been so spectacularly successful in winning political power in Britain during most of the time since a mass democracy has existed?

