

The Future of Conservatism

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Conservatism is a deeply nationalistic political doctrine. It is rooted in national political traditions and has a deep attachment to the nation state. In each country, therefore, the exact form of conservatism will vary, though with common themes with the conservatisms of other countries.¹ Therefore, this paper discusses the future of conservatism in the UK, though more general themes may emerge which are applicable to conservative politics elsewhere.

Conservatism in the UK is, naturally enough, bound up with the politics of the Conservative Party. However, some critics would argue that the Conservative Party is conservative in name only and has failed to conserve very much of value.² Indeed, there have always been Conservative politicians, on the right of the party who see it as their duty to defend what they see as 'true' conservatism from their more pragmatic colleagues who will be all too tempted to compromise in order to win elections. Writing in the 1970s, Lord Coleraine argued that the Conservative Party had failed to conserve anything since the Second World War as it had been dominated by politicians who had been too willing to compromise with the prevailing social democratic (or socialist) consensus. Coleraine longed for a return to what he saw as the more authentic conservative positions of freer markets and more limited welfare.³

Since 1979 with the election of the first Thatcher government, 'true' conservatism has been associated with the economic liberal agenda of Margaret Thatcher. This Thatcherite, economic liberal agenda has maintained a firm grip on the Conservative Party ever since. For many years after her downfall, Thatcherites feared the party was too willing to deviate from this path. John Major, initially seen as the true heir to Thatcherism, was accused of betraying the principles on which he was elected party Leader. Even successive leaders of the opposition such as William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard faced their critics from the right of the party. By the time of the third successive election defeat in 2005, the party accepted that it needed to 'modernise' and embraced a more socially liberal agenda under David Cameron, who combined measures such as same-sex marriage with an essentially economic liberal agenda.

The response of the Thatcherites to Brexit was that departure from the EU was necessary in order to restore national sovereignty so as to be free to implement further economic liberalism. The appeal of Liz Truss in the 2022 leadership contest to party members, even though it should have been clear that she was unfit for the job, was explicitly because she offered a return to the 'golden age' of Thatcherism. More recently, politicians such as Lord Frost have called for a fresh strategy of economic liberalism.⁴

Wiser Conservatives (and conservatives) recognize the perils and limitations of an economic liberal agenda, however. The 2016 Brexit vote was not a call in the so-called 'red wall' areas for more economic liberalism, rather the reverse. These were areas which had faced deindustrialization during the years of Conservative government in the 1980s and 1990s, with traditional skilled manufacturing jobs being replaced by low-skilled service-sector employment and often necessitated large-scale population movements within the UK to more prosperous areas, with consequences for the local demography and for the nuclear and extended family. Further social change then came about as a result of large-scale freedom of movement within the EU. These areas voted Leave in a desire to avoid global free-market economics.

For a while, it seemed as if the Conservative Party understood this. The leaderships of Theresa May and Boris Johnson addressed these concerns. May talked of the need to tackle 'burning injustices' and Johnson offered a 'levelling up' agenda. This seeming change in the political ideology of the Conservative Party was further boosted by the impact of the pandemic, in which the state became more economically interventionist through such things as the furlough scheme and 'eat out to help out', and also the new electoral coalition brought about by the 2019 landslide in which the Conservative Party secured a majority of working-class votes. Class was no longer the main determinant of voting behaviour, but rather age with different social and cultural outlooks among the different age ranges.

However, with the fall of Mrs May's premiership over the intractable problems of Brexit and her poor performance in the 2017 General Election, and Johnson's downfall over his general ineptness and 'partygate' in particular, this interpretation of Conservatism seemingly has no powerful backers at the top of the UK Conservative Party.

Current polling suggests that the Conservative Party is likely to suffer a major defeat at the next General Election, probably in the Autumn of 2024. There is an increasingly narrow path to victory which involves reunifying a divided party, offering credible leadership and hoping for economic recovery. Although Keir Starmer's Labour Party has a strong lead, this support is thin and could well erode. The future direction of the Conservative Party is likely to depend on the scale of the defeat at the next election.

Three dilemmas face the Conservative Party.

The first is Brexit. Although the Conservative Party is less divided over 'Europe' than it once was, there are still important divisions between those wanting a closer economic relationship with the EU, those who support the status quo and those wanting to diverge from it further.

The second dilemma is over economic policy – between those who want to extend economic liberalism in the form of tax and spending cuts, deregulation and marketisation of public services, and those who favour greater levels of state intervention. A second, related, issue here is between those (still the majority) who favour free trade and those who desire a greater element of protectionism. These voices have become stronger in the face of the challenge posed by China.⁵ Another connected issue is how to respond to environmental challenges.

The final dilemma for the Conservative Party is over social and cultural issues, what some would call the 'culture wars'. There are three broad positions here – those who, like Cameron, have a more socially liberal position. There are also those who wish to see a more robust defence of traditional, Christian values and British culture which they see as under threat from institutions such as Universities and the BBC. Finally, there are those who adopt a more pragmatic stance on these issues arguing that each case must be judged on its own merits or that other issues are more important.

In seeking to respond to these dilemmas, three positions can be identified within the Conservative Party over how its ideology should develop. The first is the economic liberals who argue that in order to benefit from Brexit the economy should diverge further from the European model with tax cuts and pro-market reforms. Secondly, the One Nation Conservative position, which embraces a mixed economy. Finally, the traditionalists, who argue for a more robust position on social and cultural issues. In the past, traditionalists aligned themselves with the economic liberals given the circumstances of the 1970s. Interestingly, this time certain key traditionalist MPs are sceptical of free-market and free-trade thinking while advocates of One Nation Conservatism have become more socially conservative, meaning that a new way forward for the Conservative Party is available if only it is willing to grasp it.

¹ N. O'Sullivan, *Conservatism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1976)

² I explore this theme in my book, *Britain's Conservative Right since 1945: Traditional Toryism in a Cold Climate* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2020)

³ Lord Coleraine, *For Conservatives Only* (London: Tom Stacey, 1970)

⁴ D. Frost, 'Boris Johnson was one of the most consequential politicians in decades' *Telegraph*, 10th June 2023, [Boris Johnson was one of the most consequential politicians in decades \(telegraph.co.uk\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/ukpol/boris-johnson-2023/) accessed 19th June 2023

⁵ I. Duncan Smith, 'Britain needs to unwind its dependence on China' *Telegraph*, 9th July 2020 [Britain needs to unwind its dependence on China \(telegraph.co.uk\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/ukpol/duncan-smith-2020/) accessed 19th June 2023