Whither the Tory left?

The demise of progressive Conservatism

Tracing 60 years of shifting ideological fortunes, **Tim Bale** argues that the left wing of the Conservative party has atrophied and is impotent, posing major challenges to the party's ability both to govern in coalition now and to secure electoral success in the future.

Anyone analysing British politics in depth and over time sooner or later comes to realise that generational differences within parties are almost as important as the ideological differences between them. Appreciating how those two sets of differences interact is the key to understanding both the past and the present, as well as to understanding why David Cameron and the Conservatives, while not necessarily dead men walking, are today in such serious trouble.

MID-CENTURY CENTRISM

Political parties are rarely, if ever, unitary actors – organisations in which everyone involved agrees on a particular direction of travel. Their choices are more contingent, more constrained and more contested than is often apparent. Indeed, they are frequently wracked by tensions – some of them creative, others destructive; some of them embarrassingly evident, others more effectively disguised. It is nevertheless possible at most points in time to identify a party's centre of gravity – a set of propositions that, for a while at least, are regarded as common sense.

When it comes to the Conservative party, and without buying into any simplistic notions of a post-war consensus, there is little doubt that between the early 1950s and early 1970s its centre of gravity was well to the left of where it later moved and remains to this day.

The party under Churchill, Eden and Macmillan had its fair share of right-wingers of course. Some were determined to hang on to Britain's imperial role; others were obsessed with the dangers posed by 'coloured' immigration and European integration. A fair few were hangers and floggers; and probably many more would have been happy to humble the trade unions, and to reduce red tape, taxes and spending – primarily by cutting down on what they saw as the excessive benefits handed out to the undeserving by a semi-socialist state. It is also all too easy to misunderstand the thinking and misconstrue the actions of Conservative MPs – most famously perhaps Iain Macleod in the early 1960s – who called themselves 'One Nation' Tories, all of whom were committed, for example, to increasing means testing in health and welfare.

All this notwithstanding, the 'solid centre' of the parliamentary party, as well as many of its leaders at the time, was pretty much convinced that the only way that the Conservatives would be permitted to govern the country (and thereby prevent it falling into the hands of an incompetent, profligate, pacifist and even socialist Labour party) was by preserving full employment via cheap money and counter-cyclical spending, by keeping the unions sweet, and by maintaining and, where the shoe pinched, even expanding the welfare state. By the late 1950s, as the economy began to run into trouble and the government was humiliated over Suez, there was even a grudging (if heavily qualified) acceptance that Britain should, firstly, think about incorporating the quasi-corporatist techniques that seemed to be serving its continental rivals so well and, secondly, that it should finally face up to the end of empire by getting shot of its remaining colonies, imposing sensible controls on Commonwealth immigration, and admitting that the nation's destiny lay in Europe.

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Pretty much all of this became – perhaps more by default than by design – the credo of the post-war Tory left, although other touchstones were adopted as the '50s turned into the '60s and the '60s into the '70s. For instance, firm control of immigration was to be balanced by anti-discrimination legislation. Likewise, the diehard defence of Britain's divisive secondary school system was to be abandoned in favour of comprehensives, which would give the majority of pupils something approaching the kind of education restricted at the time to those who were either selected at the ridiculously early age of 11 or lucky enough to be among the five to 10 per cent to be educated privately. So-called 'liberal' positions were adopted, too, on penal policy, beginning with legislation passed by Rab Butler – the Tory progressive's Tory progressive – during his swansong as home secretary under Harold Macmillan.

There were of course nuances and differences, not least when it came to the role and limits of the state. Most of those on the left, liberal and progressive wings of the Conservative party (the terms are interchangeable since, to borrow from a classic portrait penned by Richard Rose in the 1960s, they describe a loose tendency rather than a hard-and-fast faction) saw no real alternative to the mixed economy. Yet many of them – particularly as they looked back in opposition at their 13 years in government between 1951 and 1964 – came to believe that the state should be leaner and fitter, and that the trade unions had to be faced down and made subject to legal sanction rather than continually appeased. Elsewhere, views on Europe were also more varied than many now remember.

By the same token, one could not simply read off an individual politician's attitudes on one question from his or her attitudes on another: for instance, not everyone who was comfortable with, say, the idea that the market would inevitably fail to play more than a marginal role in health and education supported, say, more legislation to combat discrimination and more liberal policies on sex, immigration and law and order. Ted Heath, the first Conservative leader ever to be elected rather than mysteriously 'emerge', led a party which was largely (though never completely) in the

hands of so-called progressive, One Nation Tories. Yet he came into government promising to strengthen Britain's borders, re-establish its military presence 'east of Suez', and above all to implement what he and his colleagues – some with eager anticipation, some more nervously – clearly regarded as a radical, even revolutionary programme which would shrink the state and succeed where Labour had failed in taming the unions.

When it came to the crunch, however, as it did again and again in the four years that followed Heath's stunning victory at the 1970 general election, the leadership cut short its flirtation with free market capitalism and reneged on its pledges to put an end to large-scale immigration and re-fly the flag in far-flung corners. Excepting its unusually prickly relationship with Washington, the Heath government essentially reverted to Macmillanite type: 'lame duck' companies were rescued with public subsidies; incomes policies were reintroduced; recalcitrant unions, far from being brought legally to heel, were bought off with inflation-busting pay rises; spending and interest rates were manipulated to bring down an alarming increase in joblessness; tens of thousands of Ugandan Asians were given sanctuary at a stroke; and no more was said about 'east of Suez' as the UK at last managed to persuade the EEC to allow it to join the club.

'SHAMEFUL SURRENDER'

The reasons why so many U-turns took place between 1970 and 1974 are not hard to fathom. What Macmillan himself famously referred to as 'events, my dear boy, events' were clearly crucial, whether economic (the collapse of the Bretton Woods system) or diplomatic (an unhinged African dictator deciding to expel people to whom Britain had effectively guaranteed passports). Just as important, however, was the fact that the Conservative party was led and, at least in parliament, largely populated by people who had joined men from all classes in fighting in one or even two world wars, who were scarred by the landslide defeat inflicted by Labour in 1945, and who were acutely conscious that, for more than a decade, the UK had been lagging behind other European countries which practised a more coordinated form of capitalism. As a result, they could not ultimately accept the price of a return to a more 'orthodox', laissez-faire economy, namely prioritising the battle against inflation (and the unions) above everything else and, as a consequence, allowing unemployment to rise to levels that had not been seen since the 1930s and which many regarded as both electorally unfeasible and morally indefensible.

In and of themselves, the Heath government's U-turns might not have proved fatal to the Tory left. That they did so was down to the fact that – especially when it came to the economy – they made things worse rather than better. Unemployment, it is true, was brought back below what was widely considered the electorally fatal 1 million mark. But this came only at the cost of creating an unsustainable boom which, especially as oil and property prices went through the roof, had to be stopped in its inflationary tracks by a combination of spending cuts and an incomes policy that all but invited a challenge from strategically placed trade unions like the National Union of Mineworkers.

Yet it might not have been 'game over' had Heath not dithered over calling his 'Who Governs' election and thereby won it as he was widely expected to do. Even after that failure, Tory progressives might have retained control of the party if, between February and October 1974 (when the second of that year's two general elections was held), they had resisted siren calls for an appeal to the country based on a vaguely cross-party 'Government of National Unity'. They might still have stood a chance if, after that appeal had failed to prevent Harold Wilson winning a narrow majority, they had then insisted that Heath fall immediately on his sword in favour of the patrician's patrician, Willie Whitelaw.

'GNU', as it inevitably came to be called, was – not unreasonably – seen by the solid centre as little short of shameful surrender, especially after it failed to deliver the goods. Heath's determination to cling on to the leadership, and the unwillingness of his overly loyal lieutenants to give him the push, was the last straw. By no means every Tory MP who voted for Margaret Thatcher when she was brave enough to challenge Heath for the leadership believed in the alternative she was offering – but at least she *was* offering an alternative, and an opportunity for the party to regain its dignity and distinctiveness.

THE EXTINCTION-LEVEL EVENT

Thatcher's victory in the leadership contest was a stunning surprise for the Tory left but it was not initially recognised as the devastating blow it eventually became. Many, maybe even most, of her erstwhile cabinet colleagues convinced themselves that Thatcher would prove merely a flash in the pan or at the very least would be tamed by a combination of the British electorate's centrism and the prosaic realities of power.

They also believed that her right-wing radicalism didn't really run particularly deep. Given her fairly unremarkable record as Heath's education secretary, this was not necessarily an unreasonable assumption to make. However, it failed to take full account of the fact that Thatcher not only lacked the direct experience of war that was the wellspring of many a progressive's sense of consensual noblesse oblige but (perhaps because, unlike so many of them, she was a product of the provincial grammar-school-going and shop-keeping classes) fully shared the anti-union, anti-collectivist, and anti-inflationary prejudices of many ordinary members of her party. Her opponents also underestimated her determination, demonstrated long before she made it into Number 10, to hand over key policy portfolios to fellow 'true believers' and the rapidity and ruthlessness with which she shunted those she saw as irredeemable patricians to the sidelines.

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What happened to the Tory left after 1974, then, was akin to what many now believed happened to the dinosaurs that once dominated the planet. Rather than losing out to slow-acting evolutionary supersession by necessarily better-adapted competitors, they were hit with the political equivalent of a meteorite strike. Some survived the immediate impact, but in most cases not for very long. After 1979, a combination of Thatcher's electoral success and generational replacement within the parliamentary

party – plus the increasingly poisonous politics of Europe – meant that even those progressives whose talent made them individually indispensable (Ken Clarke being the paradigmatic example, Malcolm Rifkind another) quickly found themselves fewer and farther between.

A DANGEROUS SENSE OF UNITY

The Conservative party may have dumped Thatcher in 1990 but it did not dump Thatcherism. Indeed, by 1992 it was well on the way to being the almost fully Thatcherite entity it is today. There are of course shades of grey, but the main point of ideological contention is clearly between, on the one hand, a substantial minority (possibly bigger in the party in the country than in the party in parliament) who would like to see the Tories adopt a stronger 'faith, flag and family' stance and, on the other, those who consider themselves social liberals – more because they grew up in a multi-ethnic country in the wake of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s than because of any nostalgic affinity with what, at the time, was the Conservative party's progressive avant-garde.

Inasmuch as a Tory left can currently be said to exist – beyond, that is, the odd marginal minister and senior backbencher, a few defunct or one-man-and-a-dog ginger groups, a tiny bunch of bloggers and a sprinkling of self-styled thinktanks – it is hardly surprising that it focuses its attention on these 'post-materialist' issues. Locked out of any real influence on the economy, public services, immigration and Europe, what remains of non-Thatcherite 'progressive' Conservatism consoles itself by pushing 'social' causes, such as sexual and racial equality, and by drumming up enthusiasm for 'the big society'. Perhaps they conveniently forget that Thatcher herself, for all her support for law and order and immigration control, was never censorious about sex and would have had no trouble whatsoever buying into the idea that as the state is rolled back, individuals, families and volunteers will not only fill the vacuum but fill it better.

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To many on the Tory right, the near disappearance of the Tory left is a cause for celebration. To them (as to Thatcher and her John the Baptist, Keith Joseph), the party's post-war progressives presided over decades of 'fudge and mudge' during which time the Conservatives did themselves and the country no favours at all by allowing Labour to determine the limits of the politically possible. Their passing – and their failure to pass on any but the weakest of torches to anyone coming after – signals the triumph of home-truth Toryism.

As a result, it is argued, Conservatives can at last unite in insisting, without fear of internal contradiction, that economic salvation can only come about when compromise is cast aside and tough choices actually made rather than endlessly postponed. National sovereignty, the party can now proclaim with a single voice, can never be strengthened by being pooled with other European countries but must be defended and, where previously ceded, snatched back. It can finally unite around the certainty that what wins elections – and wins them outright with a decent overall majority – is having the guts and the gumption to present the country with a clear 'common-sense' alternative to the kind of mealy-mouthed

platitudes which blur the essential and enduring differences between left and right.

Arguably, however, the paucity of progressives in today's Conservative party is a source of weakness rather than strength. Back at the end of the 18th century, Edmund Burke reminded reactionaries that: 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.' The same goes for a political party. Without a genuine balance of forces that ensures the presence of people prepared to challenge the prevailing wisdom, a damaging groupthink can develop, blinkering the accepting majority into believing that there is no alternative even when, objectively speaking, the course they are following is taking them nowhere.

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This, after all, was the situation in which the Conservative party found itself by the mid-1970s. But it was able to reinvent itself precisely because its right-wingers (and the rumbling critique of its supposed 'surrender' to socialism) never entirely disappeared. Then, after Enoch Powell was dismissed by Heath following his 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, they found the figurehead they needed to mount a challenge to the contemporary common sense – a challenge that eventually (though, as we have seen, by no means inevitably) paid off a few years later when Thatcher effectively dusted it off in the wake of the disasters of 1970–74.

CAMERON: NOT THE NEW MACMILLAN

Some 30 years later, there were some who believed, hoped even, that David Cameron would play the same role, albeit in reverse. Thatcherism, it seemed, had outlived its usefulness. Having met the country's needs brilliantly in the 1980s it was already looking dated by the '90s and positively clapped-out by the '00s. It appeared the Tory right had had its day, just as the Tory left had done by the mid-'70s. It was time for a man whom many convinced themselves was the heir not so much to Blair but to Macmillan. It wasn't just Cameron's ability to communicate across classes and his evident social liberalism. It was the endlessly avowed enthusiasm for the centre ground, the unambiguous support for the NHS, the repeated assurances that public sector workers weren't parasites but doing a valuable job, the refusal to join the clamour to bring back grammar schools, and the turning down of the volume and the change of tone on law and order and immigration.

Yet, for all this, Cameron, as leader of the opposition, never really engaged in any of the big arguments with his party that someone driving genuine change really needs to have. In part, this was because he didn't believe in picking fights as a strategy. But the underlying reason was because, if one scratches beneath the surface appearance of centrism that he initially believed was vital to securing electoral victory, Cameron was and is ultimately no less a Thatcherite than the vast majority of his colleagues. This became obvious even before May 2010 when, on the verge of power, he reverted to orthodox type in response to the domestic consequences of the global economic crisis.

Because there was no transformation towards post-Thatcherism, let alone pre-Thatcherism, Cameron as prime minister is now faced with a party

which, in parliament and in the media, borders on the delusional. It is unable to accept that simply swallowing more and more of the medicine once prescribed by their heroine won't do the job, nor that it still stands too far from where most voters currently see themselves to win the kind of victory that will allow it to govern on its own.

ALL RIGHT IS NOT ALRIGHT

In a proportional representation electoral system, this wouldn't matter: the Conservatives, like a number of centre-right parties in Europe, could team up with a populist party and govern, either as a minority with a confidence and supply arrangement or in a full-blown coalition. But in a first-past-the-post system in which UKIP is unlikely ever to win a significant number of parliamentary seats, the Tories have no alternative but to try to pull off a plurality win. In the absence of a sizable lead over Labour on competence, party unity, economic performance or leadership (a lead which at the moment, Cameron versus Miliband excepted, the Tories do not enjoy), this can only be achieved by the Conservative party positioning itself reasonably near the point on the left–right continuum where, right now at least, the bulk of the electorate locates itself.

Despite the efforts of a few outspoken (and well-resourced) realists like Lord Ashcroft to provide polling evidence for staying on (or at least near) the centre ground, this cannot and will not happen unless there are enough people within the party itself who are willing to make a positive argument for a different kind of Conservatism to that which currently rules the roost. Ideologically, the Tory left would be ideally placed to fulfil that role. Sadly – and possibly fatally for the party's chances at the next election and beyond – it is nowhere near strong enough to do so.

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The weakness of the Tory left may also account for an even more pressing problem, namely the difficulties the Conservative party is currently experiencing in coalition. The gap between the Tories and the Liberal Democrats has proved much bigger than creative thinkers on the Conservative side, such as Nick Boles, hoped that it would be – precisely because the number of his colleagues willing and able to reach across it is so small. Cutting taxes and the deficit was no problem for most of Cameron's troops, but so many of them clearly believed – and continue to believe – that the government should go even further and even faster. And as for the Liberal Democrats' enthusiasm for corporation tax, employment protection, protecting the NHS, constitutional reform and a more pragmatic line on the EU – enough said. All this might have been different had the Tory left not withered away to the extent that it has over the last two or three decades, leaving the Conservative party bereft of voices prepared to emphasise what potentially unites rather than hopelessly divides the coalition partners.

Ironically, one reason why the Tory left failed to reproduce itself was the fact that the party's drift to the right became, after a while, self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating. Young would-be politicians who might once have been comfortable as Conservatives concluded that there was simply no point

in them joining such a ‘nasty party’ – assuming they even considered the possibility at all. Some gave up politics altogether. Others, like Nick Clegg, joined the Liberal Democrats. In May 2010, they set aside the concerns of their colleagues who hadn’t signed up to their ‘Orange Book’ smaller-state liberalism and grabbed a once-in-a-political-lifetime opportunity to bring the two parties closer together. For a few short months it looked like they may have succeeded – and, had there been more Conservatives ideologically willing and able to forge what would have been a truly historic compromise, perhaps their success might have lasted. Ultimately, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to build a bridge from just one side of the shore.

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