Ghost at the feast: no Tory leader since Margaret Thatcher, before she was forced out in 1990, has enjoyed the unalloyed confidence of the entire party.
The great moving right show

Once celebrated for its "majestic pragmatism", the Conservative Party – still haunted by the spectre of Margaret Thatcher – has become increasingly reckless as it is pushed towards hard Brexit by a phalanx of nationalists

By Colin Kidd

The Conservaties have been described as the stupid party and the nasty party, but never, until now, the reckless party. Their notorious stupidity was unthreatening, reassuringly bovine, stolid and inert; their nastiness coolly rational and grounded in the harsh realities of laissez-faire economics. But now a sharp-elbowed phalanx of nationalist hardliners within the party seems determined to push through a "clean" Brexit and, short of that, to wreck any kind of agreed departure from the European Union. The consequences for the UK economy are, as all reputable commentators contend, potentially devastating; though Tory Brexiteers, of course, deny this. How has a party of hard-nosed Scrooges, of austerity and fiscal rectitude, so suddenly become a party of wishful-thinking Micawbers?

The party still considers itself Thatcherite – indeed, as we shall see, it is haunted by the trauma of the coup against her in 1990 – but forgets that one of Margaret Thatcher's most insistent mantras was that you can't "buck the market". Sterling fell to a 30-year low against the dollar on the day after the Brexit vote in June 2016. Now, bizarrely, the party of the market economy, hijacked by English nationalists and semi-indulged by a fellow-travelling Jeremy Corbyn, confronts no more compelling opposition than the staunchly capitalist Economist and Financial Times. That the Conservative Party – or a large chunk of it – seems to have taken leave of its senses is, understandably, our colloquial response to the current farce, but it does not pass muster as a cogent account of how we got here.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Conservative Party is a formidably ruthless election-winning machine. Arguably, it has been the most successful political party in the democratic world. Few proprieties or taboos have stayed its relentless pursuit of votes. The party has, it seems, constantly reinvented itself, chopping and changing matters of substance as well as signature styles and personalities in the race for office. Its churn of leaders has proved almost as rapid as its turnover of key policies. Chris Paten, a former party chairman, felt obliged to rebut the charge that Conservatism rested on nothing more solid or enduring than a kind of "majestic pragmatism".

There were several reasons why pragmatists were usually in the ascendant. In order to stave off socialist revolution and a wholesale redistribution of property, Britain's landowning elite found means of wooing waves of new voters. Moreover, if what mattered ultimately to the upper class was to perpetuate itself in office and to keep its radical opponents away from the levers of government, then elections mattered much more than programmes, policies or principles. Self-interest, noblesse oblige and the fact that conservative allegiance within the elite was a matter of inheritance rather than a conscious ideological choice, meant that leading Tory politicians drawn from the upper reaches of society, such as the late...
Peter Carrington, were largely non-ideological. They constituted rather a cadre of notables whose primary commitment was to unobtrusive and efficient governance. In the post-Ashby era this meant acceptance of the welfare state, but a determination to manage it more prudently than its Labour architects. This was the era of cross-party Keynesian consensus, what was caricatured as Butskellism: a coinage named after the outwardly tentative but supremely competent Tory moderate Rab Butler and the Labour centrist Hugh Gaitskell. The absence of a defining set of Conservative ideas was palpable. When she took over as Tory leader in 1975, Margaret Thatcher famously complained: “The other side have an ideology...we must have one too.”

However, this undeniably insightful interpretation—that historically Tory politics before Thatcherism were pragmatic-veering-on-hollow—amounts only to a half-truth. It deflects attention from those periods when the party, or an influential section of it, has—contrary to the received cliche of its empty instrumentalism—sacrificed popularity on the altar of deeply felt principle. In the mid-19th century the party was consigned for decades to a protectionist dump of landowners when it abandoned Robert Peel over his repeal of the Corn Laws.

At the turn of the 20th, an ambitious project to develop a more robust industrial economy behind imperial tariff walls proved divisive and alienating. Imperial preference, as it was called, drove a young MP Winston Churchill over to the ranks of the free-trading Liberals in 1904, and consigned the Conservatives to a catastrophic defeat in the general election of 1906. More recently, in the immediate post-Thatcher era of the 1990s, a combination of hangers, floggers and scarcely disguised white supremacists.

The Conservative Party has long been home to clusters of ideologues, a mosaic pattern of High Church Anglians, imperialists, strict free marketeers, right-wing populists and Little Englanders, along with more liberal counterven- ders, such as the Tory Reform Group. An aggregate of several ideological tribes—and often buffeted by inter-tribal tensions, such as between paternalists and laissez-faire individualists—the party has generally been glued together by those who keep their principles, if any, in check: an anti-ideological squirearchy, eugenists, and party loyalists. But rarely has the party been held hostage to one of its single-issue factions.

Equally as bewildering as this variety bill are the strange gaps in the party’s repertoire. There are significant roles not taken in modern British Conservatism. Why did the Tories not become a green-tinged party of conservation, combining the claims of environmentalism and heritage with a defense of private property as the most effective means of responsible stewardship? There are pointers in this direction in William Weldegrave’s eloquent treatise The Binding of Lebanon (1978). Why, moreover, did what is properly known as the Conservative and Unionist Party not promote itself as the party of decentralised pluralism, of an explicitly multilingual Britishness?

Again, there are hints and possibilities. In the late 1940s Churchill embraced administrative decentralisation and flirted with home rule—Scottish control of Scottish affairs—as an alternative to Labour’s Whitehall-centric commitment to the nationalisation of industry. There was nothing inevitable about the Tory loss of Scotland. More important still from today’s perspective is the party’s curious distance from cross-Channel conservatism. Why did British Conservatism never converge with the conservatisms of other Western European nations? Only Chris Patten—a lay Catholic and Europhile—has ever shown much interest in alignment with continental Christian Democracy.

This is one of the most telling features of British Conservatism. Its networks and connections are predominantly transatlantic. European conservatism is notable only as an absence. Michael Oakeshott, the leading conservative thinker of the 20th century, argued that there was “nothing whatever in common between British Conservatism and any of the categories of Continental politics”. The crude binary of right and left fails to explain the particularities of British Conservatism, which evolved in...
rather different circumstances from its continental counterparts. In Europe the right emerged in reaction to the French Revolution, and provided robust legitimist defences of monarchy and the Catholic Church against the threats of antideral radicals. In Britain, by contrast, there were two aristocratic-led parties, the Whigs and the Tories, both of which invoked the Protestant constitutional order inherited from England’s Glorious Revolution of 1688.

In the course of the 19th century, there was considerable interplay between the two parties. Peelite Tories, including William Gladstone, the future leader of the Liberal Party, joined the Whig Liberals in the aftermath of the split over the Corn Laws in the late 1840s. In the mid-1830s, Gladstone’s commitment to Irish Home Rule drove his new party’s Liberal Unionist wing over to the Tories. Britain’s liberal-inflected Conservatism made it a different beast from the Continental right. Nor has Britain’s admission to the European Economic Community (EEC) done much to end this insularity. In 2009 David Cameron withdrew Conservative MEPs in the European Parliament from the main centre-right alliance, the European People’s Party. The Euro-federalist Christian Democrats, it seems, not “one of us”.

At the heart of Toryism there resides nothing so positive as a core idea, but rather a propensity to allergic reaction: an aversion to radical panaceas, to all-encompassing utopian plans, to clever tricks theory. Conservatives believe the accumulated wisdom of the ages – embodied in the common sense of both the British people and the Conservative Party – easily trumps the woolly, impractical offerings of dreamy socialist highbrows. Of course, it might be argued, there are exceptions here too in the recent Tory past. What about the reign of monetarism and market ideology during the Thatcher years? Yet Thatcher herself was content to stop short of the logical destination of her policies in order to court certain interest groups or mollify particular constituencies; and when she didn’t, in the case of the poll tax, the Conservative Party – in its collective wisdom – toppled her and jettisoned her most controversial policy.

The distinguished Oxford philosopher Anthony Quinton, whom Thatcher elevated to the peerage, identified at bottom three fundamental elements in British Toryism: respect for tradition, a preference for incremental organic development over flattening, geometric solution-mongering, and a healthy scepticism about abstract ideas.

Quinton argued that, while this three-pronged set of intuitions derived ultimately from Anglican precepts, such intuitions now existed within Toryism in secular form. A lack of religious belief was no barrier to a shrewd, down-to-earth scepticism towards pie-in-the-sky visions and promises of a man-made heaven on earth. The quietly irredecent Adam Smith, for example, taught the lesson that from every human initiative, unpredictable, unintended consequences followed.

It is well-established scepticism of this sort, I suspect, that provides a rationale for Tory division, not least for the otherwise
seemingly irrational delusions of Brexit ultras. The topic of Europe presents Conservative sceptics with a perplexing fork in the road. Sceptical Remainers and soft Brexiteers, conscious of the UK’s immersion over 40 years within European institutions and markets, view Brexit with the utmost scepticism as a risky leap into the unknowable. However, we tend to forget that for all their dyspeptic Euroscepticism, Brexiteers are equally sceptical: Eurosceptics regard the very ideal of European integration as a species of windy utopianism, an implausible gravity-defying attempt to transcend the nation-state.

Of course, there are differences, too, within the party over nationhood, and the relative importance of parliamentary and popular sovereignty, but, at bottom, notwithstanding keen division over matters of substance, there is shared sceptical disposition. Each side in the Brexit civil war thinks that its opponents are acting in very un-conservative fashion, trying to promote policies that go against the grain of reality.

In this instance, though, it is hard to argue convincingly that the European idea is utterly foreign to Tory tradition. For, make no mistake, European integration has been pre-eminently a Tory cause, notwithstanding persistent anti-European rumbles within the party. Not until the late 1970s did Labour abandon its instinctive hostility to the common market, which was viewed pejoratively as a capitalist project.

Postwar Conservatives had no such qualms. Churchill spoke enthusiastically about “United States of Europe”. Britain’s commitments to the empire and Commonwealth, to the special transatlantic relationship with the US and to a reconstructed western Europe were, he considered, sincerely meant and mutually consistent. Even the hard-boiled imperialist Julian Amery found nothing incompatible in the maintenance of empire and closest integration with the EEC.

Harold Macmillan was the first prime minister to seek access to the EEC, and it was Heath who took Britain into the common market in 1973. At this stage, membership provided capitalist bail at against the excesses of socialism at home; a view shared by Conservatives and, disparagingly, the Labour left. Thatcher herself enthusiastically welcomed the Single European Act of 1986 that created the single market, and the overthrow of Thatcher, no leader has enjoyed the entire unalloyed confidence of the Conservative Party. Although Major soon won an unexpected victory over Neil Kinnock in the general election of April 1992, this success turned to ashes in September when market turbulence and, tellingly, a conspicuous lack of support from the German Bundesbank or of flexibility and understanding from Britain’s supposed European partners, forced the UK out of the ERM that it had joined in 1990. The idea of a Tory Brexit was born on 16 September 1992.

It seems unlikely that the two factions warring over the meaning of Brexit will notice, or feel able to acknowledge, their shared debt to an engrained tradition of Tory scepticism. This year, as last, there will in effect be two Tory conferences under the same big tent: one the seemingly irrational cult of hard Brexit, the other a muted affair of head-shrugging and hand-wringing. Until the stain of matrice holds been expunged and the demons of Black Wednesday exorcised, it is hard to imagine the party seeing the world straight.

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