

Too 'nice' to be Tories?

*How the Modernisers have damaged  
the Conservative Party*



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Anthony Scholefield and Gerald Frost



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Social Affairs Unit  
314–322 Regent Street  
London W1B 5SA  
[www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk](http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk)

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## About the Authors

Anthony Scholefield is an economist and accountant who has been a self-employed businessman for many years. He co-founded the UK Independence Party in 1993; stood in various elections; was the Party Secretary and, for some years, the party operated from his office. He also worked closely with the NO Campaign; has written various studies and numerous articles on the EU, demography, public finance and immigration. His latest publication from the Social Affairs Unit is '*Warning: Immigration Can Seriously Damage Your Wealth*'.

Gerald Frost is a journalist who has written widely about domestic and international politics. He has been Director of the Centre for Policy Studies (1992-95), and head of the Institute of European Defence and Strategic Studies, which he founded in 1981. He has edited more than 70 books and monographs and has published *In Search of Stability: Europe's Unfinished Revolution*; *Europe in Turmoil*; *Hubris: the Tempting of Modern Conservatives* (with Digby Anderson); and, *Not Fit to Fight: the cultural subversion of the armed forces in Britain and America*. He has drafted speeches for Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph. His most recent book is *Champion of Liberty, a biography of Sir Antony Fisher, the founder of the Institute of Economic Affairs*, published by Profile in October 2002. He has contributed articles to a wide variety of British and US newspapers. From 2001 until 2009 he was editor of the fortnightly publication, *eurofacts*

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## **Executive summary**

1. The Tory modernisation programme rested on the assumption that the Conservative brand had become contaminated and that the Party had consequently become unelectable.
2. According to the modernisers, Conservatives were widely perceived as the ‘nasty party’ – uncaring, out of touch, intolerant and indifferent to environmental concerns.
3. What was required was a systematic rebranding exercise that would demonstrate that the Party was more tolerant, more liberal, more inclusive, more environmentally aware and more devoted to the preservation of the public services than popular stereotypes suggested.
4. ‘Modernisation’ would mean resuming the search for the middle ground, a political approach abandoned by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, but according to the modernisers this would enable the Conservative Party to appeal to LibDem supporters and middle of the road voters, thereby reversing the decline in the party’s electoral fortunes.
5. In order to succeed, ‘decontamination’ would have to take priority over policymaking and all other concerns. Inevitably the modernisation programme seeped into policymaking and effectively halted serious policy thinking on important and central topics such as Europe, the future of the public services, immigration and the environment.
6. Judged by the modernisers’ own criteria it is clear that the modernisation programme has been a disaster: the Tory Party failed to win an overall majority in 2010, failed to

eat into the LibDem vote (which actually rose despite the loss of three seats) and also failed to in its declared aim of increasing the proportion of women and ethnic minorities voting Tory. Its many harmful consequences included the neglect of new sources of support and the loss of traditional supporters to UKIP and the BNP. Despite these failures the party's direction continues to be influenced by the underlying assumptions of the modernising project.

7. The empirical basis for the modernisation programme rested on the claim that policies became unpopular the moment they were revealed to be *Tory* policies. This claim was supported by opinion poll data. Two polls were said to be of special significance, but one of these was superficial and woefully inadequate, the other was flawed and contained errors. The findings of these two polls were then misrepresented or exaggerated by leading party members in order to build support for the modernising agenda.
8. In many ways, the Cameron approach represents a reversion to of the Conservative managerialism of the Heath era. One of the defining characteristics of this was the absence of a theoretical framework for analysis, with policies justified on the grounds of pragmatism or the need for 'modernisation' but with political direction decided by others. The present absence of firm ideological moorings, suggests there is a distinct danger that history is about to repeat itself.
9. The Conservative vote has begun to disintegrate in most Western democracies. Centre-right parties, once the dominant force on the right of the political spectrum, are increasingly seen by significant numbers of their supporters as being dominated by their centre. This has led to the formation of new right-wing parties. The final humiliation for the conservative wing of the Tories was that, condemned to silence, they saw new parties arise which expressly proclaimed their own core beliefs in patriotism, the free market and social order. The activist

base began to desert the Conservative party. In European elections, the desertions grew from a trickle to a flood.

10. The formation of the Coalition with its leftwards drag on the Conservatives is bound to impact on electoral behaviour. In the circumstances, it is hard not to see still more voters breaking off to the right. It would be extremely risky for David Cameron to blithely assume that these will be more than offset by gains from Labour and the LibDemocrats.

## Introduction

In the wake of the 2010 British general election it was widely asserted that the election outcome showed that the world had changed in such a way as to make an outright Tory victory an impossibility. Even though the outgoing Labour government had been deeply unpopular; and its leader was regarded as “unhinged”, even by some colleagues; and despite the fact that the election followed one of the worst financial crises in modern times; and the Tory leader was said to have performed miracles in detoxifying the “contaminated” Tory brand; it had still proved impossible for the party to attract much more than a third of the popular vote.

If an overall majority was not possible in such circumstances, it was unlikely that it ever would be. Coalition government, along with a referendum on changing the voting system which was deemed necessary to keep the new Tory–LibDem Coalition intact, was now an unavoidable political necessity, not just for now but perhaps for the indefinite future.

All of this came as dismal news to Conservative Party members, but not, it seems, to the Tory Party leadership which appeared thoroughly satisfied with the election outcome. Its attitude appeared to reflect a belief that British politics could be realigned with a Liberal–Conservative alliance at its centre. In the words of James Forsyth, *The Spectator’s* political correspondent, “Rather than planning to ditch Mr Clegg at their earliest convenience, many of those closest to Cameron want the pair to walk into the sunset together”. What had begun as a temporary marriage of convenience and a means of saving the leader’s skin was

in the process of becoming a permanent arrangement providing the self-described “heir to Blair” with a chance of creating the “progressive alliance” of which Blair himself had only been able to dream.

Simply stated, the argument of this publication is that irrespective of the merits of Coalition government and of the policies currently being pursued by the government, such arguments do not stand up to serious intellectual scrutiny. The assertion that the Conservative Party is unelectable, except as a member of a Coalition, is not supported by an analysis of recent voting behaviour or the claims made on the basis of polling data.

Rigorous scrutiny of the facts not merely casts doubts on the wisdom of the Cameron election strategy but on the project of Conservative modernisation which he inherited. The starting point for that process, it will be recalled, was the assertion that Conservatives were widely regarded as being nasty, uncaring and out of step with contemporary Britain. In short, the Tory brand had been “contaminated” and would remain so until some means could be found to persuade the electorate to view the party in a more favourable light. The proof for this contention was said to be found in opinion polls that showed that policy initiatives which might command popular support became unpopular the moment they were perceived as *Tory* policies.

What was required therefore was a rebranding exercise which would manipulate public perceptions of the modern Tory party and thereby enable it to appeal to a wider cross section of the electorate. If successful, such an approach would enable it to win the support of a substantial number of LibDems as well as a significant number of middle-of-the-road voters who remained undecided. The concerns of the core Tory voters, including those who might be tempted to vote for UKIP, the BNP or one of the other small parties, could therefore be safely neglected since these did not constitute a serious threat to the Party’s prospects. Accordingly, the Tory modernisers set out to demonstrate

that the Conservatives were more tolerant, more liberal, more inclusive, more environmentally aware and more devoted to the preservation of public services than popular stereotypes suggested, as well as less prone than formerly to divisive splits over “Europe”.

The case for “modernisation” rested on the assertions briefly characterised above, rather than upon serious analysis or even a definition of what “modernisation” actually meant. Previous generations of Tory politicians had taken it for granted that politicians were likely to be people with sharp elbows and that it was more important to be respected than liked. What mattered now was to *appear* agreeable, pleasant, nice, and of sunny disposition whatever the problems.

One of the many things which distinguished the Cameron modernisers from the Tory “dries” who had charted a new course for the party following Heath’s defeat in the 1974 election was the remarkable pre-eminence given to presentational factors. Whereas the starting point for Keith Joseph and the Centre for Policy Studies, which he founded later that year, had been an analysis of national ills based on Conservative principles, leading in turn to the formulation of policy, the modernisers effectively reversed this process. Hitherto, the spin doctor and the image-maker were the last on the scene; they now enjoyed a pre-eminent role. In the words of one self-declared über-moderniser: “Brand decontamination comes before everything”.<sup>1</sup> The starting point was now the image that the Tories wished to project of themselves. Henceforth in as far as policy had any role at all it was to be fashioned in accordance with that image. Accordingly, whereas Margaret Thatcher encouraged her policy advisers to “think the unthinkable” in trying to find solutions to the most intractable problems of the day, the modernisers preferred that there should be no thinking - at least no thinking out loud - since this might run the risk of interfering with the task of brand “decontamination” and of

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1. Daniel Finkelstein, “Six reasons why I’m an über-moderniser”, *The Times*, 3 October 2007.

steering the party back towards the middle ground.

Ironically, when the general election came, the public had no very clear image of the image-conscious Tory party, as polling data amply demonstrated.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it can be shown that the polling data which encouraged Cameron to embark on his modernising course was either misunderstood by the Tory modernisers or simply flawed. There was no objective reason for supposing that sound policies would be tainted by the party's label any more they would be tainted by the attachment of any other party label, as we shall show.

The new approach was also patronising since it assumed that even after it had fallen out of love with Tony Blair – as it inevitably would – the public would be incapable of responding positively to a coherent set of policies that answered to current needs. But where was the evidence for such a claim? The only evidence produced was opinion poll data which, properly understood, either failed to show any such thing or which was seriously flawed. The result was a costly rebranding exercise which left the electorate uncertain about what the party stood for and distracted it from the Opposition's proper task of preparing for government.

George Osborne's 2006 promise to raise the threshold on capital gains tax to one million pounds was unique in that it went against the grain of the modernising project, strongly appealing to the tax-cutting instincts of Tory traditionalists as well as the many others with doubts about the Cameron strategy. It proved to be to the most popular proposal made by a shadow chancellor in recent decades. But if it were truly the case that the Tory brand contaminated everything in its path the public reaction should have been quite different, perhaps confirming the presumption that the Tories were

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2. According to an opinion survey conducted by Comres for the Daily Politics television programme in February 2010 only 36 per cent of voters knew what the party stood for, and only 28 per cent both knew and liked what they thought it stood for.

only concerned with the interests of the rich and privileged. Osborne's proposals, however, were a one-off, and indeed one of the many ironies of the situation was that the modernisers' strategy greatly restricted the areas in which popular initiatives reflecting a distinctive Conservative view of the world were possible. The historically high levels of state debt, the high levels of taxation, growing scepticism about climate change, the case for the radical restructuring of the public services either joined immigration and "Europe" on the list of taboo subjects or had to be dealt with in a way that prevented the articulation of a clear, coherent and popular public message. Desperate to confirm the good opinion of the media and the metropolitan elites, it sometimes seemed that the Tory leadership would do anything to be popular – except advance popular measures.

In the event, the strategy failed in its central purpose: LibDem supporters did not switch to the Tories at the general election: while the former lost three parliamentary seats, the total number of votes cast for LibDems actually increased, as did that party's share of the vote. If anything, the new "A" list candidates who were intended to play a key role in broadening the party's appeal did less well than candidates who were not on the list. Another key objective of the modernisers was to win more support from women and ethnic minorities, but the party's relative support among these groups remained exactly as it was in 2005. Moreover, support for UKIP – which in April 2006 Mr Cameron had famously dismissed as "a bunch of fruit cakes and loonies and closet racists" – showed a 50 per cent gain in its share of the vote, thereby costing the Tories more than 20 seats and an overall majority.

The immediate price of Coalition government was the abandonment of the Party's commitment to renegotiate the terms of British membership of the European Union in the specific areas of social and manpower policy; a greater than planned dependency on taxation as a way of reducing the public deficit; and a commitment to holding a referendum



on changes to the voting system. Having neglected the opportunity that Opposition provides to develop a coherent policy approach based on principle there is a distinct danger of incoherence at the heart of the policy-making process. There are already signs that the habit of seeking to manage public perceptions through spin and image-making will enjoy the same pre-eminence as during the Blair and Brown years – to the detriment of the proper tasks of government. In the longer term, this is very likely to increase the public’s cynicism about politics and to widen the yawning gulf between the public and the country’s political elites which David Cameron has promised repeatedly to repair.

If the Conservative Party is to retain its identity and to survive as a distinctive force in British politics its members will need to see through the modernisers’ self-serving claim that the 2010 general election proved that an overall Tory majority is an impossibility and that Coalition government and a change to the voting system are inescapable necessities. The Conservative Party failed to win the 2010 election because the “modernisation” project rested on false assumptions; because it rested on a misreading of polling data; and because it destroyed the link between philosophy and policies. Provided that these truths are grasped there is no reason whatever for supposing that the Conservative Party is inherently incapable of achieving an outright victory at a future general election and that it must therefore cease to be conservative.



## Chapter One

### Return to the middle ground

... the middle ground turned out to be like the will-o-the-wisp, the light which flickers over marshlands by night beguiling the weary traveller; as he moves towards it, the currents of air he sets up by his movement sends it dancing away from him, and he goes on following, stumbling deeper and deeper into the mire.

Sir Keith Joseph, speech to the Oxford Union,  
December 1975.

Prominent modernisers and their admirers in the media have given the impression that prior to the election of David Cameron, the Conservative Party was controlled by a group of narrow, inward-looking and mean-spirited traditionalists whose influence guaranteed electoral defeat. This is an impression that Cameron himself has helped foster. At the end of his first year as leader, in an interview designed to justify the evident irritation felt by members of his own party at the course he had set, he stated: “I don’t go out of my way to annoy anybody, but I want to change my party and get it back to the middle ground”.

Cameron, however, was concerned with image rather than reality. The truth is that while he may have taken the modernising strategy further and faster than his predecessors, he did not invent it. The party was already located on the heavily congested political middle ground when David Cameron became leader. Indeed, the adoption of a vague but progressive agenda of diversity and inclusiveness had begun eight years earlier after the Tories lost office in 1997. Leading modernisers such as Francis Maude, Andrew Lansley, Daniel Finkelstein and George Osborne, as well as

Cameron (who helped write the 2001 manifesto), played a key role in the election strategies of 2001 and 2005, though they were later to criticise those strategies.

Of the three Conservative leaders who fought and lost elections against Tony Blair – John Major, William Hague and Michael Howard – the latter is regarded as the most right wing, but this reputation has much more to do with his record as Home Secretary than his record as leader. Howard's achievement was to impose discipline on the warring factions within the party and to lead a more cohesive front bench team, but there was no significant move to the right under his leadership; those who departed from the party line by publicly advocating swingeing tax cuts, or major changes to the welfare state or the renegotiation of British membership of the European Union (EU) were dealt with ruthlessly. Howard's own tax cutting proposals were extremely modest, amounting to £4 billion, and strongly favoured the elderly and less well off. On immigration, Howard proposed an annual cap on asylum seekers based on an assessment of the demand for asylum and a point-based system for others of a kind later advocated by the Labour Party. On the EU, Mr Howard said as little as possible.

Party activists (as well as those who have decamped to UKIP) have shown themselves more acutely aware than the media of the extent to which the modernisers have rewritten the party's recent history as the following *cri de coeur* posted on the *ConservativeHome* blog following the 6 May result, makes clear:

it just isn't true that the Conservative Party's "right wing" got to argue for what it believed in 2001 and 2005 and lost. We have no idea whether the platform favoured by the "right wing" 75% core of the party could be elected or not. What we do know, because they've tried the same tactic three times and failed with it three times, is that the tactics of the modernisers [make us] unelectable. Three times we have listened when they said that if we talked about the things that interested

us – the economy, keeping down public spending, reforming health and education and welfare, renegotiating our position within the EU – the voters would regard us as nutters and the election would be a landslide victory for Labour. Three times we listened when they insisted that they were the cunning masters of PR, with their core vote strategies, their dog whistles, their detoxification programmes. Three times we let them pick eccentric concerns far from the mainstream of the voters’ interests – asylum-seekers, gypsies, a referendum on the single currency (guaranteed by Labour anyway), MRSA, green issues, gay rights – and waste their time focusing our energies on these issues, in strategies so eccentric and so obviously bizarre that we assumed there must be some cunning plan behind them that mere mortals such as us were unable to comprehend.

And three times they lost.

### **Modernisation as ideology**

By the time of David Cameron’s election as leader, in 2005, “modernisation” had become the ideology of what Peter Osborne has referred to as the New Political Class to which, along with influential Central Office officials, Cameron, his PR guru Steve Hilton, his principal political lieutenants and media allies all belonged.

Most members of this new elite had begun their careers as student politicians or started work at political think-tanks or in the research departments of one of the major political parties; many, like Cameron himself had no working experience outside the inter-connected worlds of politics, government relations and PR. As a result of their professional background and training, the members of this group gave greater attention to polling data, focus groups and image-making than earlier generations of politicians while the role of ideas, principles and traditions was substantially reduced. What was formerly regarded as the small change of politics has consequently become its central preoccupation, while ideology played a steadily decreasing role.

As Osborne noted, the New Political Class no longer feels bound by core beliefs. In its judgement, the age of political ideology is over. Although difficult to define and finding no resonance with the public at large, modernisation provides an alternative political vocabulary and an agenda for action.

According to Osborne:

Modernisation has become the creed which distinguishes members of the Political Class from less enlightened members of the parties to which they formally belong ... .

A Conservative politician who claims to be a moderniser is indicating that he has rejected the longstanding attitudes and beliefs of his party membership.

As the very party name implies, modernising Tories faced an especially arduous task of intellectual self-justification since the Conservative intellectual tradition is partly defined by scepticism about novel political ideas and wheezes. No such task has been attempted. Instead, modernising Tories have pursued their aims through a series of symbols and gestures, changes in dress, photo opportunities and sound-bites designed to indicate they had left their nasty ways behind them. Observing Tory obsession with PR, the political journalist and former Thatcher speechwriter and policy adviser John O'Sullivan commented:

These ideological gestures, in addition to failing to win over centrist voters, minimised bedrock Tory support. Facing imminent catastrophe at the polls, the Tory leaders then switched to more traditional policies – too late to win the election but just in time to save the modernisers from blame for the defeat.

The belief that electoral victory could best be achieved by a party which had captured the middle ground, had been explicitly rejected by the Thatcherite leadership in the late

1970s. It had done so on the grounds that the political centre could only be defined by reference to the extremes, and these had moved steadily to the left. Sir Keith Joseph, the principal architect of the party's policy re-think, attacked the notion that the party's stance should in effect be determined by a form of political geometry that took no account of the electorate's wishes and aspirations and which allowed limited scope for analysis and judgement. In an attempt to break the pattern of post-Second World War politics, he declared:

In retrospect it is clear that the middle ground was not a secure base, but a slippery slope to socialism and state control, whose present results even socialists disown. Of course, we did not see it that way at the time. The middle ground was accepted by us, the vast majority of us, as the apex of political sophistication. By locating and holding the middle ground, we were enjoined to believe, we should be granted power in perpetuity. And if, by any mischance, we should lose office briefly, this would only be because Labour had been even more finely discriminating in locating the middle ground and more self-denyingly skilful in seizing it: hence, we thought, they could be relied on to act moderately.

Events have patently not followed this scenario, nor was there any real chance of it working.

For the middle ground was not rooted in the way of life, thought and work of the British people, not related to any vision of society, or attitude of mind, or philosophy of political action. It was simply the lowest common denominator, obtained from a calculus of assumed electoral expediency, defined not by reference to popular feeling but by splitting the difference between Labour's position and the Conservatives!<sup>1</sup>

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1. Mrs Thatcher criticised the imperative to seek out the middle ground in more graphic terms: "Standing in the middle of the road is very dangerous; you get knocked down by the traffic from both sides".

In place of the middle ground, Sir Keith argued that the Tory task should be to articulate a *common* ground of shared values and aspirations:

you will gather that I see the search for common ground as the elaboration of a mental map we can honestly share. This is the exact opposite of opportunistic assent to views or expedients with which we are really out of sympathy but which we think may win votes.

In his speech, Sir Keith explained how cleaving to the middle ground had inhibited Conservative politicians from looking into the true cause of problems because they feared that they would be regarded as “immoderate” or “right wing”—the very fear that that was to grip Tory modernisers thirty-five years later.

As an account of the dangerous allure of the middle ground, and the consequences to which the quest for it can lead, the passages quoted above could scarcely be bettered. In retrospect, it can be seen that abandoning the quest for the middle ground liberated the party intellectually, enabling it to reconnect with the electorate and with a distinctive Conservative vision, thus permitting the party to confront problems that it had hitherto lacked the courage and resolve to address.

The rediscovery of the middle ground more than a quarter of a century later has had exactly the opposite effect; it has narrowed the range of public concerns which Tories feel able to address, without providing a coherent philosophy of political action and, at the same time, it has distanced the party from the concerns and aspirations of ordinary people. Indeed, it is the party's misfortune to have recently been run by an elite which is so keen to appear to be “modern” that it appears embarrassed by its own recent successes.

To be sure, there are those who argue that the Thatcherite analysis outlined above lost its relevance once the economic



argument had been won and the parameters of economic debate had shifted to the right. At a time when the Secretary for Business in a Con-Lib Dem Coalition can be routinely heard blaming “capitalism” for the nation’s ills this not a persuasive argument. Moreover, while the right may have won the argument about the economy in the 1970s and 1980s it has not won the argument on a wide range of social, cultural and welfare state issues (some of which it has not even addressed) with the result that the parameters of debate on these matters have moved steadily leftwards. Cleaving for dear life to the middle ground prevents an open discussion of such issues and limits reform to piecemeal changes and administrative tinkering. Indeed, it is striking that what Joseph said about the Britain of thirty-five years ago is even more true today: “We spend more than ever on education and health than ever before, but with results which can please only the blinkered. We spend more on welfare, without achieving wellbeing, while creating dangerous levels of dependency”.

Joseph attributed these failures to declining rationality in society’s workings and the obsession with the middle ground to which politicians had clung all the more fiercely the more untenable it had become. What, more than anything, persuaded a demoralised and inward-looking Conservative Party to forget the lessons of the 1970s and 1980s and to renew the quest for the middle ground was the emergence of New Labour under Tony Blair. Blair seemed to personify the qualities the modernisers wished to embrace in order to “detoxify” the party’s allegedly tainted image. He was nice, sympathetic, charming, in touch, and above all else, modern (though never defined, this term was repeated ad nauseam in Blair’s early speeches). It was presumably these qualities, rather than Blair’s careless attitude towards the truth, his reliance on spin, his contempt for national institutions and his evident belief that he could please all of the people all of the time that led Cameron to describe himself as the “heir to Blair”. Those characteristics stand in direct

contrast to the qualities which, according to the modernisers, the Tory party displayed to the world.

Many Tories, and especially those who were to become members of Cameron's inner circle, made no secret of their admiration for Blair and some even admitted they secretly wished to serve in a Blair cabinet. The gushing admiration which the modernisers displayed towards the Labour leader was typified in an article in *The Times* by Michael Gove:

Blair's outbreak of courage deserves the respect of natural Conservatives. You could call it the Elizabeth Bennet moment. It's what Isolde felt when she fell into Tristan's arms. It's the point when you give up fighting your feelings, abandon the antipathy, and admit that you were wrong about the man. By God, it's still hard to write, but I am afraid I have got to be honest. Tony Blair is proving an outstanding Prime Minister at the moment.<sup>2</sup>

Mesmerised by the apparent success of Blair, ignoring the evidence of the last decade and forsaking the Thatcherite conviction that the perimeters of what is politically possible can be changed by reasoned argument, the Tory modernisers resumed the quest for the middle ground. In this, they could count on the uncritical support of the Tory managerialists, notably Ken Clarke and Michael Heseltine, who had never doubted that the centre ground was the place to be. A few discordant voices such as that of John Redwood argued for a more distinctive Tory approach, but the depleted parliamentary Tory right failed to organise its resources to halt the leftwards drift and even to examine critically the evidence which was supposed to show that the only alternative to "modernisation" was slow political death. To a striking extent, it was left to distinguished members of the Upper House to challenge the prevailing consensus and to bring a distinctive Conservative perspective to the

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2. Michael Gove, "I can't fight my feelings any more – I love Tony", *The Times*, 25 February, 2003.

debate on such obviously important subjects as public expenditure, the EU, public service reform, immigration and climate change.

As John O’Sullivan has pointed out, one of the things wrong with the modernisers’ view of the recent past and of the narrative which they developed is their solipsism. They assumed that politics revolved around the Tory party. But, from 1997 to around 2005 the country was in love with Tony Blair, although his popular vote was always lower than that achieved by Margaret Thatcher. During the period 1997 to 2005, the Conservatives were certainly not popular and Tony Blair achieved parliamentary majorities on quite small proportions of the vote – with the exception of 1997 nowhere like those achieved by Thatcher. This was due in large part to the inherent unfairness of the electoral system. In these circumstances, there was not much the Tories could do about it, except keep their collective nerve and remind themselves that patience is a vital political commodity. The prevailing mood of introspection, complicated by the still visceral feelings aroused by the forced resignation of Margaret Thatcher, meant that the party was capable of neither.

### **We are the “nasty party”**

Drafted by the über-moderniser Mark MacGregor, a senior Central Office official, the speech of party chairman Theresa May to the 2002 party conference represented a major development in the ascendance of the modernising credo as well as an example of the solipsism of which O’Sullivan complained:

never forget this fact. Twice we went to the country unchanged, unrepentant, just plain unattractive. And twice we got slaughtered. Soldiering on to the next election without radical, fundamental change is simply not an option.

More than that, we must step up the pace of change...

There's a lot we need to do in this party of ours. Our base is too narrow and so, occasionally, are our sympathies. You know what some people call us – the nasty party.

It is undeniable that the allegations of sleaze, many of them well-founded and skillfully exploited by the nice Mr Blair, had damaged the party, just as similar allegations were later to damage Blair's image and that of his ministers. In politics, it is a truism that it is better to be respected than to be liked. Was the nastiness which Mrs May diagnosed really so powerful and all-pervading that this truth had been overturned? Hitherto the British public had seemed able to live with the reality that effective politicians are likely to be ambitious people with sharp elbows and the same weaknesses as the rest of us. Mrs May cited the election results as proof of her contention. There were, however, many reasons for not voting Tory in 1997 and 2001 which had nothing to do with accusations of Tory nastiness. Indeed, John Major was frequently depicted as nice but indecisive and ineffectual with no strong views of his own. A more significant factor in determining voting behaviour had been the loss of the party's long established reputation for economic competence following Britain's enforced departure from the Exchange Rate Mechanism. In the media, the complaints that the Tories no longer knew what they stood for were as frequent as the accusations of sleaze, even if they made less exciting copy. William Hague, Major's successor, was perceived as decent, straight dealing and a highly competent parliamentary performer; it was his timing that was awful: his misfortune to become leader at too early an age and to take on Blair at the height of his popularity. Hague was the first post-Thatcher moderniser, although like his successors, he tacked to the right when the expected political dividends did not materialise. The only displays of public nastiness to have occurred during his leadership that are likely to have stuck in anyone's his mind were the attempts of the Portillistas, the band of ultra-modernisers

around Michael Portillo, to undermine the Hague leadership through press briefings.

### **What modernisation meant in practice**

In the main modernisation meant avoiding policy commitments – since these would be automatically tainted and because the task at hand was to detoxify the Tory brand. In practice, in addition to the gestures and sound-bites designed to show that the party had become nicer, greener and more caring, modernisation also involved adopting some Labour policies, not challenging others, and imposing a silence on issues such as immigration, crime and the EU.

This was spelled out by a self-declared über-moderniser Daniel Finkelstein:

When David Cameron became leader he was told by almost every commentator that he needed lots of policy. Not us über-modernisers.

Policies don't win elections. Victory comes from voters feeling that a party is fit for government and preferably that voting for them is something to be proud of. And policies don't tell people how you are going to govern either.

What was required, according to Finkelstein, was “a sunshine strategy,” advice which Cameron may well have received from other modernisers and which he appears to have taken seriously. When dealing with solemn topics which simply had to be addressed in order to demonstrate the party's transformation, these had to be given an upbeat tone.

Accordingly, Cameron, while appearing to accept some of the starkest warnings regarding man-made climate change, insisted that his message on the issue was more optimistic than that of any the other parties “because we can do something about it”. If by this he had meant that Britain should take prudent measures to deal with the *consequences*

of climate change, Cameron might have carried his party with him. But fundamental to “blue-green-revolution” was support for the ambitious and vastly expensive measures to limit carbon emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 and at least 26 per cent by 2020 contained in the Labour Party’s 2008 Climate Change Act, an aim not shared by many – probably a majority – in his own party. Only 40 Conservative MPs voted for this legislation while five voted against. A *ConservativeHome* poll of 141 Tory candidates in winnable seats found that “reducing Britain’s carbon footprint” was rated the lowest of 19 possible priorities for a Cameron Government. Tim Montgomerie, who runs *ConservativeHome* has suggested that 80 to 90 per cent of Tories disagree with the Cameron position on climate change. Meanwhile the public has become increasingly sceptical; according to an Ipsos/ Mori poll carried out in 2008 more people doubt that global warming is taking place than believe that it is.<sup>3</sup>

On this issue, as on others, the Cameron team appears to have projected the views of a relatively small metropolitan group on to the electorate as a whole – and to have erred massively. Given the complexities of the subject, the emergence of critical voices within the scientific community and deep scepticism within his own party, the prudent course might have been to set up a commission with aim of creating a more open and balanced debate. But according to one leading moderniser, commissions were frowned upon because they blurred the image which the Tories wished to project of them themselves and resulted in a lack of “focus”.<sup>4</sup>

The desire to appease this group and to persuade it that the party had shed its nasty old ways lay behind the Cameron team’s promise to match Labour’s spending plans for three years, in much the same way as Blair and Brown

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3. *Observer* 22 June 2008

4. Daniel Finkelstein, “Six reasons why I’m an über-moderniser”, *The Times*, 3 October 2007

had promised to match those of the Major Government in New Labour's early years of office. In announcing plans to raise spending on public services by two per cent per year George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, explained his approach on political rather than economic grounds:

The result of adopting these spending totals is that under a Conservative government there will be real increases in spending on public services, year after year. The charge from our opponents that we will cut services becomes transparently false.

Osborne also promised that there would be no unfunded tax cuts at the subsequent election. The Tory position did not change until the credit crunch of 2008 at which time the shadow chancellor repeatedly criticised the Labour Government for having "failed to mend the roof while the sun was shining". Given the Tory commitment to spend record sums on public services, it is clear that had the Tories been in office at time the roof would have been in an identical state of disrepair. Osborne also erred in supposing that economic growth would continue indefinitely. For, as the former Tory cabinet minister Lord Forsyth pointed out, Osborne's promise tied the party to proposals which would inevitably commit it to higher borrowing or tax increases or both in the event of a significant economic downturn.

The Tories' tax and spending plans had already ignored the recommendations of Forsyth's 2005 Tax Reform Commission which Cameron had asked the former cabinet minister to lead. This had recommended tax cuts of £21 billion (five times the cuts proposed by Michael Howard in 2005) as well as a range of measures to simplify the tax system. Closely and well argued, the commission's report had presented powerful reasons for substantial tax reductions, arguing that these would not necessarily reduce tax revenue since they would lead to economic growth which in turn would increase the tax base while also

reducing tax avoidance and evasion.

If a majority of those attending the 2007 Tory conference were dismayed to learn that funding to the public services would continue to rise at the same rate as under Labour and there would be no unfunded tax cuts, they were evidently delighted by Osborne's promise to raise the inheritance tax threshold to one million pounds. Political analysts speculated that the purpose of the proposed cut was to appease an increasingly disgruntled Tory membership; if so, it was entirely successful. Here, at last was a policy commitment that was recognizably Tory, which would go over well on the doorstep and play well in the opinion polls. At least, the Tory conference thought so. According to the deeply held convictions of the modernisers, no such boost in popularity could occur since the tainted Tory label would prevent any rise in their poll ratings. In fact, the announcement turned a six-point deficit into a three-point lead. Five days later, on 6 October, the Prime Minister announced that there would no election: political analysts have since suggested that the evident popularity of the proposed inheritance tax cut with Middle England was one of two factors which persuaded Gordon Brown to call off an election which he would almost certainly have won, the other being uncertainty over Labour support in marginal seats. The reaction of the Tory modernisers to the news was mixed. According to Nick Robinson, the BBC's political editor, while they were delighted by the spike in the party's poll ratings – the biggest leap in popularity during the Cameron leadership – they recognized that this was “a moment of maximum danger”. Although events had just falsified their theories, they evidently believed that the public might regard the proposed tax cut as a sign that the party was returning to its “bad old ways!” Truly, the party leadership was in the grip of a new and powerful ideology!



## **Chapter Two**

### **Where have all the voters gone?**

One of the most important rules in business is to retain the customers you already have. Keeping customers is much less expensive than winning new ones. Satisfied customers do not search for new suppliers. However, existing customers need nurturing and to be reminded of the qualities which led them to choose your product or service in preference to others. Complaints need to be dealt with sensitively rather than rudely dismissed.

Attracting new customers can be a difficult and costly process which depends for its success in persuading them that their needs can be better met by your company than by their existing supplier. Except where customers are dissatisfied with their existing supplier, this is not an easy or straightforward matter.

This simple approach to marketing can be summed up in the following words: secure your base as a matter of priority, then build on it. It is one from which the Conservative Party evidently has much to earn.

The Conservatives secured over 13 million votes at each of the elections between 1979 and 1992 (14 million in 1992). In 1997, this plunged to 9.5 million then to 8.5 million while in 2010, when the Tories recorded a weak and partial recovery, the total rose to 10.7 million. Where have all the Tory votes gone? Why have so many Tory voters withdrawn their support?

The failures of the Major government, distortions in the electoral system, and a revived Labour Party under Tony Blair explain part of the loss but they do not explain the full extent of the huge and continued haemorrhage of Conservative votes since 1997. This can best be explained

by the neglect of the core Tory vote.

The origins of this process go back to the 1960s and 1970s. Tory ministers under Macmillan and Heath demonstrated that they were prepared to disregard the views of the core, for which in any case they had scant regard, whenever these were in conflict with key policy aims. The Thatcher years saw a reversal of this process. Margaret Thatcher strongly identified with the party faithful; she grasped instinctively that the party's moral strength and cohesion derived in large part from its core values and outlook, which she shared.

Thatcher's subsequent political downfall can be attributed to a number of factors but none of these was more significant than the deep dissatisfaction of her ministerial and parliamentary colleagues with her increasingly hostile attitudes towards the goal of European political integration. Her attitudes on this issue were those of the Tory rank and file. Her opponents were dismissive of the core vote and hankered after imaginary new voters and the regard of the metropolitan elites.

Her downfall therefore represented a pivotal moment in the party's history in that it marked the point at which the leadership broke with its core supporters in order to resume its quest for the political middle ground. Many of Mrs Thatcher's opponents within the parliamentary party believed that they could safely get rid of her because they assumed – wrongly, as it transpired – that there was nowhere else for the core vote to go. They also underestimated the lasting damage that would be caused by her enforced departure; it was not just the manner in which the most successful post-Second World War Tory Prime Minister was disposed of that undermined the party's sense of identity and unity; in rejecting Margaret Thatcher her cabinet, and many of her parliamentary colleagues, were also rejecting the beliefs and aspirations of its core supporters. Not surprisingly, the scars are taking a long time to heal.

Looking back, it can be seen that since 1970 the Conservative Party has been remarkably careless about its

core vote, allowing no fewer than three parties – the Ulster Unionists, UKIP and the BNP – to take bites out of its electoral strength. This carelessness began in the Heath era of managerial conservatism during which period the Party leadership displayed a lofty disdain for core Conservative interests and ideals. The beneficiaries were small political parties grounded on formerly traditional Conservative beliefs about democracy, patriotism and the national interest. First to depart the Tory fold were the Ulster Unionists whose parliamentary representatives signaled their dissatisfaction with the direction of party policy by refusing to support the party at Westminster.

The last decade has witnessed a gradual but steady rise in support for UKIP and the BNP. These parties plug into separate but vital core areas of politics and offer policies which differ from the three main parties in these areas. It is hard to see them going away; indeed their prospects seem to be brighter than for a long time.

The BNP mainly takes votes from Labour and some UKIP votes also come from this source. But in both cases, these are votes which might have flowed to the Tories in response to the widespread dissatisfaction with the Labour Government which preceded the 2010 general election. These are votes which the conservatives will have to gain if it is to win an overall parliamentary majority at a future general election.

### **Core policies and the immigrant vote**

Heath's enthusiasm for Europe did not do immediate damage to the Conservatives' ability to win elections but the European issue eventually ignited in the 1990s with the formation of the Referendum and UK Independence Parties. Not for the first time, a substantial section of the Conservative Party felt itself to be so estranged that it split off. Moreover, the policy stance of the new parties was vindicated by the collapse of wider public support for the party, as reflected in numerous opinion polls, and the chronic

evasiveness of Conservative politicians on the European issue.

Finally, the ruling liberal Conservative elite showed little interest in the impact of mass Third-World immigration on British working-class areas and the long-term demographic transformation of the country. This enabled the BNP, despite the unsavoury past of some of its leaders, to gain a foothold. In fact, the impact of the BNP is probably underestimated since it presents a real obstacle to Conservatives recovering in the metropolitan areas outside London where, in 2005, they held only five out of 124 seats. In effect, the Tory working-class vote cultivated by Conservative leaders so assiduously in the nineteenth century has been ignored and has now collapsed in most of the midlands and the north of England. Whatever its other consequences, it can now be seen that mass Third-World immigration has not served the Conservative Party's electoral interest.

The MORI study for the Electoral Commission, Black and Minority Ethnic Survey, published in July 2005, showed that only 2.5 per cent of black voters and 12.0 per cent of other ethnic voters actually voted Conservative in 2005 while 80 per cent of black voters and 47 per cent of other ethnic voters voted Labour. In fact, our calculations based on the MORI findings, show that less than 8,000 black voters and about 115,000 other ethnic voters voted Conservative – out of a total Conservative vote of 8,772,000.

Plainly the arrival of additional black and ethnic voters in the country has been highly damaging to the electoral prospects of the Conservative party.

Could the Conservatives turn this situation to their own advantage? The evidence from such countries as the US, Belgium, Germany and France, is that black and ethnic minority voters vote overwhelmingly for left-wing welfarist pro-immigration parties and, in the absence of special factors such as those which apply in the case of Cuban immigrants to Florida, have done so consistently.

There is no reason to expect a different result in the UK.

Although it seemed hardly to register, the first jolt to the complacency of the Conservative leadership was the arrival of the competing parties in the 1997 election – the Referendum Party and UKIP.

Among the general debris of this electoral defeat, the Conservatives still did not take much notice of these new arrivals. Historically, there were few examples in British political history of new national political parties that had survived the ambitions of their founders. The last new party of substance, the Labour Party, had come together in the 1890s. The new political parties were consequently regarded as a temporary flash in the pan and, indeed, Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party soon folded, with some of its activists transferring to UKIP. Nevertheless, the success of the SNP and Plaid Cymru in the Celtic fringe should have given pause for thought.

The founder of UKIP, Alan Sked, and the UKIP MEP for London, Gerard Batten, were quite clear about the UKIP strategy. As Gerard Batten put it:

The only thing the major political parties take notice of is the loss of seats and votes. That might even one day make them change their policies. UKIP has to keep up the pressure. It does not matter which of the three main parties forms the next government because our real government is in Brussels.<sup>1</sup>

And, further: “Even when Britain leaves the EU, who among our members and voters wants to go back to voting for parties who have betrayed our country for decades?”

Much of Alan Sked's analysis contained in his book, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Post-War Britain*, remains fundamental to UKIP thinking today.

Meanwhile the BNP which had been founded out of the remains of earlier right-wing minor parties, has abandoned street politics in a bid to become respectable.

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1. *eurofacts* 22 January 2010.

It has particularly targeted working class areas in the north and midlands and was the first party to prioritise the increasing threat of radical Islamic violence.

During the period 2001 to 2004, the Conservatives paid little attention to the signs of disaffection among their core supporters, despite UKIP winning three seats in the Euro elections of 1999.

The Euro elections of 2004 should have alerted Conservative Central Office to the changing nature of the British political landscape. UKIP obtained 16 per cent of the vote and the BNP took 4.9 per cent. Labour had their lowest national vote ever at 23 per cent, and the Conservatives, at 27 per cent, their lowest national vote for over a century. The new parties of course did even better in the Euro elections of 2009, gaining 15 MEPs between them.

However, this result was treated as a matter of little consequence since it was expected, partly correctly, that these parties would get much smaller votes in a first-past-the-post general election.

Again, the view of the political class was that it did not matter: the EU was not a sufficiently “salient issue” to influence a general election.

At this point, it seemed to many within the Conservative Party, if not to the Tory High Command, that the Party urgently needed to address its loss of electoral support. Instead David Cameron reacted by describing UKIP on the LBC radio station as “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists, mostly”. Yet many Conservative voters had just supported UKIP in the 2004 Euro elections and presumably felt sufficiently strongly about the EU issue to at least contemplate voting the same way at a general election. It was becoming clear that some Conservative members were also UKIP members, but were hanging on to their old party affiliation in the hope that the Tories would move more unambiguously in a eurosceptic direction. A significant number of those who switched from Conservative to UKIP at the Euro elections had broken the voting habit of a

lifetime. Once broken such habits would be easy to break again. Were Mr Cameron's words more likely to make them reconsider their growing sense of alienation from the Tory Party, or to strengthen it? Mr Cameron seemed not to care, evidently believing that abusing eurosceptics would make him popular with the larger number of Lib Dem supporters, an assumption which was not borne out by the results of the 2010 general election.

It was now clear that part of the conservative vote was becoming detached from the Conservative Party and, in the language of market analysis, was testing new products. The authors of *The British General Election of 2010*, have drawn attention to the impact that these new parties are having:

Even when the minor parties are unlikely to take seats, the major parties are always aware that the attractions of the minor parties can cost them votes.

These parties are now often serious contenders for elections and office, rather than simply a depository for the disgruntled and disaffected.

The parties also matter as a constraint on the activities of the major parties, which are continually aware of the manoeuvrings on their flanks.

Suddenly, the Conservatives found themselves contending with the fact that the British electorate now includes not one but two blocks of swing voters. The first is the traditional group who switch between the three main parties. The second block swings between the Conservatives and the new parties of the right. Intriguingly, the strategy of forming Conservatives into a swing block who will not necessarily support a liberal Republican party is currently being advocated by conservatives in the USA.

To be sure, from time to time, Conservative leaders,

such as William Hague, Michael Howard and even David Cameron, have made token attempts to halt the loss of core support. These have usually taken the form of eurosceptic speeches, culminating in David Cameron's "cast-iron" guarantee of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. They had also made somewhat less enthusiastic promises to curb mass immigration. However, it had been long apparent that these would not be enough to staunch the loss of support. The voters simply did not believe in the intention, the competence, and the will of the Conservative leadership to act decisively on these issues.

While the Conservative Party was being careless about its core support, an overlooked aspect of the 2010 election was that Labour was, by contrast, marginalising the left splinter parties which had detached some of its voters in ethnic minority constituencies in London and also in Scotland. As a more ideological party, the Labour Party has a history of dealing with splits and minor parties on its flank in a way the Conservatives have never known. These splinter parties were quite small relative to those now challenging for the Tory vote but they were localised and thus of some electoral importance, even if concentrated in what were very safe Labour seats.

The 2010 election saw Labour successfully re-integrating its breakaway factions. Respect and the Scottish Socialist Party virtually disappeared. The Greens' percentage of the vote fell almost everywhere, despite the party's success in winning a seat in Brighton. As a result, seats that could have presented real problems for Labour were turned back into electoral fortresses. This development means that in future elections, Labour, having seen off the challenge from the Greens will be in the position nationally of being able to sweep up the entire left vote which will be further bolstered by disaffected members of the Lib Dems. By contrast, the right-wing vote appears increasingly fissiparous with UKIP set to play a role loosely analogous to that of the American Tea Party.



The increasingly favourable prospects now opening up for UKIP and the BNP, it should be stressed, are not the result of the roll of the political dice but the direct consequence of the Tory decision to move the party to the left as part of its modernisation agenda. David Cameron had dropped his “cast-iron” guarantee to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, he had confirmed his enthusiasm for Turkey to join the EU and he confirmed that he could and would do nothing about EU immigration.

On a wider front, he continued to be enthusiastic for globalisation and lukewarm about curbing Third-World immigration; he had completely bought into the climate change warmist agenda with its projected £18 billion annual cost to British consumers and taxpayers. All these policy positions created unease among millions of natural Conservative voters.

There were other moves which disturbed traditionally minded social conservatives. There was a stress on gay issues which in the view of many conservatives outweighed their importance. There was promotion of ethnic minority and female parliamentary candidates “out-of-turn”. There was a tendency to ridicule traditional positions and even candidates who were dubbed “turnip Taliban”. The consequences have been noted by independent observers as well by Mr Cameron’s critics. The authors of *The British General Election of 2010*, refer to “... underlying concerns about ... the shortlists of the type imposed by CCHQ at Surrey East, where the five people shortlisted did not include a single heterosexual white male”.

There were moments when David Cameron seemed to be quite consciously provoking mainstream opinion. After staying the night with a Muslim family in Coventry, he said, “Not for the first time [sic], I find myself thinking that it is mainstream Britain which needs to integrate more with the British Asian way of life, not the other way around”. Mr Cameron may just have been impressed by the sense of family and hard work he had encountered, but given

the strong feelings aroused by large-scale immigration, a political leader with extensive PR experience could surely have framed his comments in a way that did not offend mainstream opinion.

Such attitudes, and the political calculations on which they rested, have provided fertile recruiting ground for UKIP and the BNP, enabling them to exploit issues where the Conservative party had nothing to offer its traditional taxpaying social conservative base.

Nor have social Conservatives take kindly to the news of Conservative MPs' excessive expense claims.

Despite this favourable electoral atmosphere, UKIP had problems of its own.

The whole of the 2005 Parliament had seen a continuous exodus of UKIP activists and office holders, many complaining of broken party rules, bad behaviour by UKIP MEPs, two of whom had ended up in jail, as well as endless personal in-fighting. After Nigel Farage had stood down as leader, complaining of the pressure, Lord Pearson of Rannoch was elected leader, although Farage was to return as leader in September 2010.

Some critics of the UKIP leadership have complained that it has an excessively tactical and reactive approach to politics, ignoring the in-depth thinking and analysis that would be required by a party which was serious about charting an exit route from the EU; such a course, it is said, might have enabled it to have recruit a greater number of intellectuals and well-known public figures who are known to be concerned about the costs of British EU membership and to have attracted a greater number of defections from the Conservative Party.

Nigel Farage's decision to stand against the Speaker in the 2010 general election campaign, which appeared to be unrelated to either UKIP's political aims or its electoral strategy, was unsuccessful. As for Lord Pearson, he went to the West Country and actually campaigned for Conservative candidates against his own UKIP candidates.

He compounded this by wearing a Conservative rosette.

With sharper, more collegial leadership, UKIP could have done much better. Despite its shortcomings it increased its share of the vote by 50 per cent.

Farage is a gifted platform and television performer. But UKIP has not so far produced a modern leader with the personality or the populist skills of a Pim Fortuyn or Geert Wilders in Holland. These leaders seemed very “modern” when set alongside traditional Dutch politicians and were prepared, like UKIP, to concentrate on issues that mattered to the electorate but which had been neglected by the big parties.

As Matthew Goodwin observed in *Prospect Magazine*, June, 2010, “That polite alternative (UKIP), if it finds a charismatic leader, is well positioned to undercut the old far-right and mount a serious electoral challenge in the years to come”.

Meanwhile the BNP has been successfully demonised by the political class and has failed to break out from its working class ghetto.

Nevertheless, if the Conservatives continue to neglect their core vote the leakage to the minor parties of the right will inevitably grow. Indeed, one of the many ironies of the present situation is that “modernisation” has rendered the Conservative Party incapable of recognising and responding to important changes to the contemporary political landscape.

## Chapter Three

### What the data demonstrates – and what it doesn't

The conviction that the Conservative Party was inherently unpopular as a result of “brand contamination” had been gaining ground since the leadership of Ian Duncan Smith. It was advanced by admirers of Michael Portillo – the so-called Portillistas who included Central Office officials – as well as members of C-change, a new Tory pressure group advocating change in the party’s strategy, organisation and style. In 2005, two opinion polls, one by Populus and another by ICM, appeared influential in fostering this conviction among leading Tories, if not among the Conservative rank and file.

The then Conservative Party Chairman Francis Maude expanded on this view in an interview with *ePolitix.com* in 2005, drawing attention to the evidence of the opinion surveys: “It wasn’t that people particularly disliked our policies, lots of research showed that people approved of the policies by and large until you told them they were Conservative Party policies and that made them feel differently about it” .

Later that year Maude, who was also chairman of C-Change, waved the findings of what he called “killer polls” at the 2005 Conservative Party Conference. In his 3 October speech to the Conference he declared:

People liked our policies – until they found out they were ours. Look at this chart. It shows the approval of our immigration policy before it was identified as a Conservative policy and then once they knew it was ours, support halved. This chart tells its own story.

Mr Maude's speech, to the significance of which Maude himself drew attention in an article in the *Guardian* five years later, is rightly seen as the start of the modernisation programme.<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Finkelstein, another Tory moderniser and a former Director of the Conservative Research Department, recognized the importance of Maude's claims not only to the direction of Tory policy but also to the rise of David Cameron in an article in *The Times Online* on 10 March 2010:

One of the events that propelled Mr. Cameron into the leader's chair was the presentation to the 2005 Tory Conference of opinion research on the Conservative brand. Tory immigration policy garnered significantly less support the moment voters were informed which party supported it. Informing voters that the immigration policy they had just been asked about belonged to Labour made no difference to their support. The brand problem was confined to the Conservatives.

In retrospect, it is striking how quickly the Maude view quickly gained adherents, although it is also striking how many of them misunderstood the polls cited in its support, muddled them up or failed to recognize their limitations and shortcomings. Few, if any, questioned whether concepts which had been imported from the world of marketing and PR, were likely to provide as reliable a basis for political strategy and policy-making as was suggested, or whether or not the poll findings did indeed support the modernisers' claims. Still more astonishing is the part these polls were to come to play in shaping the party's priorities and direction.

Adam Rickitt, the Coronation Street actor and one of the first aspiring candidates to be included in David Cameron's

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1. *The Guardian*, 2 October 2010

“A” list, was not untypical of those who were impressed by the polls without actually understanding them. He told the *Daily Telegraph* on 6 June 2006:

I recall with horror the findings of a Populus focus group before the last election where a Conservative policy was presented to people without the Conservative label attached, 82 per cent of respondents agreed with it. When people were told it was a Conservative policy, that support fell to 65 per cent. The problem was the brand.

(Actually, the figures quoted by Rickitt originated in the ICM poll, not a focus group run by Populus.)

Far more significantly, Lord Ashcroft, a former party treasurer who masterminded election strategy in marginal seats at the 2010 general election and to whom the party’s pollsters reported directly, had come to similar conclusions in his report on the Party’s lack of electoral success. One of the key messages in *Smell the Coffee: A Wakeup Call to the Conservatives*, was that “the Conservative label was undermining its ability to sell its policies”.<sup>2</sup>

For obvious reasons, the assertion that polling data validated the modernisers’ claims in relation to “brand contamination” was music to the ears of the other parties but also gained the support of independent analysts and thus acquired the status of received political wisdom. In their books on the 2005 General Election, Dennis Kavanagh, who cited the Populus poll, and Robert Worcester, who based his comments on the ICM poll, appeared to accept uncritically the Maude thesis that the Tory label automatically tainted the policies that it advanced.

Writing in *The Times* in October 2007 with the poll findings evidently still in mind, Daniel Finkelstein argued that the modernising programme had not gone far enough,

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2. Michael A. Ashcroft, *Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party: A Study of Public Opinion and the Conservative Party’s Campaign for the 2005 General Election Campaign*, London 2005.

backing up his claims by referring to the allegedly corrosive nature of the Tory “brand”:

A proper core strategy requires a more liberal, tolerant party in tune with working women and the modern middle class. The very start of the modernization process was the realisation that a proposition that could win popular support became unpopular the moment it was advanced by the Conservatives.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Finkelstein concluded that “brand decontamination” therefore “came before everything”, and that contrary to the views of those who criticised the party leadership for not making clear where it stood in policy terms, “the danger is having too much policy, not too little.”

It was not until 5 March 2010 that anyone began to question the empirical basis behind the modernising strategy. It is seldom that five-year-old poll findings become the subject of heated controversy but that is what happened when Janet Daley recognized just how significant these had been, in a posting on her Telegraph blog:

Over at *ConservativeHome*, Tim Montgomerie [the *ConservativeHome* editor and founder] notes the new polling arrangements at CCHQ: the Populus organization run by Tory modernisers has lost its monopoly of internal polling. The party will now be using opinion-gathering information from *YouGov* as well.

Tim goes on to point out that some of the chief tenets of the Tory Modernisation doctrine which Populus embraced were contained in Lord Ashcroft’s report ‘*Smell the Coffee*’. One of these, which I have had reiterated to me with much fervour over the past few years, runs as follows: “We in the Tory party have to drop all those issues (immigration, Europe, etc.)

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3. Daniel Finkelstein, “Six reasons why I’m an über-moderniser”, *The Times*, 3 October, 2007.

that were previously strongly associated with us because our traditional image is so hated by the voters”.

The definitive proof of this particular hatred for the Tories was that when voters were presented with Conservative policies that were not identified with the party, they approved of them. But when told that these were “Conservative” policies, they rejected them. Hence, the existing Conservative “brand” was irretrievably damaged.

What the Ashcroft report did not mention was the truth imparted to me by an executive of a major polling organization: the very same principle applied to Labour. When the public was offered what were in fact Labour policies but which were not identified as such, they approved of them. When told that these were official Labour policies, they said they disliked them. So where exactly does that leave us?<sup>4</sup>

Andrew Cooper, the head of Populus, immediately replied:

The ‘truth’ you report from the executive of another polling firm is, quite simply, a lie. The research you refer to – which is published in its entirety – found that the same proportion of voters agreed with Labour immigration when it was attributed to the party as when it was tested unattributed. But there was a significant drop in agreement with Tory immigration policy when it was attributed to the party than when it was tested unattributed. ‘So where does that leave us’ – it patently leaves us with a brand that was contaminated.

Actually, the Populus poll figures demonstrate that putting a Labour “badge” on a policy yielded a net greater vote than not putting a Labour “badge” on it (see Appendix). This was a peculiar result just before an election in which

4. [<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/janetdaley/100028597/tory-modern>]



Labour lost a large chunk of its vote and needs explanation.

The public disagreement between Daley and Cooper showed how critical these five-year-old polls were to the Tory modernisation strategy and the remarkable extent to which the modernisers depended on them to face down those opposed to the “modernisation” strategy or doubtful of its success.

Mr Cooper, who formerly worked for the Conservative Research Department (and before that for David Owen prior to the collapse of the Social Democratic Party) subscribes fully to the modernisation credo that his agency was employed to test. He was appointed to the post of Downing Street’s Director of Political Strategy in February 2011, a clear indication that the leadership sees no reason to abandon the modernising project which, in our view, has served the Party so badly.

In any event, a critical examination of the two poll findings suggests that these did not support the conclusions that Maude, Ashcroft, Cooper and other influential Tory modernisers drew from them and that Janet Daley’s reservations were therefore well founded.

Our detailed analysis of the two polls, which is necessarily technical, is contained in the Appendix.

Our conclusion is that neither the ICM nor the Populus poll provided a sound base for the modernisers’ central contention: that policies which might otherwise command popular support become unpopular the moment that the voters realise that they are *Tory* policies. The ICM poll was superficial and woefully inadequate; the Populus poll findings were flawed and contained errors. The findings of these two polls were then misrepresented or exaggerated by leading party members in order to build support for their programme of political “rebranding.” But as events have shown, a misreading of polling data which is either superficial or flawed is a poor basis for shaping the priorities and direction of a major political party. It is a pity that those on the Tory Right missed the opportunity

## TOO 'NICE' TO BE TORIES?

to look more critically at the data and the claims based upon them; they have paid a heavy price in terms of lost influence as a result of this failure.

## Chapter Four

### **Failure at the polls: how UKIP's intervention cost the Tories an overall majority**

That the Conservatives' campaign failed at the election of 2010 is not in dispute. This is despite the fact that they won an extra 3.8 per cent of the national vote taking them to 36.1 per cent of the total, that they gained a net 97 seats and that that this result took them into government.

The failure can be defined in two ways: objectively, in an assessment of the outcome and, secondly, by examining whether the Conservative campaign achieved the goals set by its leaders.

One of the most obvious facts about the results is that the Conservatives gained a much smaller share of the national vote than in any of the four elections between 1979 and 1992 when they won between 41.9 per cent and 43.9 per cent of the vote.

The fact that the party attracted fewer gains in votes from other parties than those in 1970 and 1979 must also be regarded as a setback.

It is worth comparing the electoral fortunes of the Conservatives in 2010 with their record in the other game-changing elections of 1970 and 1979.

CHANGE IN SHARE OF THE VOTE (UK)			
	Conservatives	Labour	LibDem
1970	+4.4%	-4.9%	-1.0%
1979	+8.1%	-1.6%	-4.5%
2010	+3.8%	-6.1%	+1.0%

What stands out is that the Conservatives in 1970 captured almost all the share of the vote shed by Labour and,

in 1979, they did even better, scooping up all the votes shed by Labour and the LibDems and the minor parties, mainly Scots Nationalists.

In 2010, by contrast, the Conservatives captured only 60 per cent of the votes shed by Labour and made no inroads into the LibDems at all, although this was a major Tory objective. At the same time, the vote for UKIP and the BNP rocketed, UKIP capturing an additional 0.9 per cent of the vote and the BNP 1.2 per cent, thus together well over half the percentage total gained by the Conservatives.

It should be noted that the BNP and UKIP did not stand in all seats and their voting percentage would have been higher if they had done so.

Nor was this unforeseen. In *eurofacts* in April 2006, four years before the election, one of the present authors pointed out that the total potential Conservative vote was about 42.5 per cent, roughly the total achieved in the Thatcher/Major victories. Up to 1992, the Conservatives did not face any party attacking them from the right so they were able to sweep up the entire right-wing vote. All this changed from 1997 with the existence of new right parties compressing the total available vote for the Conservatives.

The author of the article quoted above estimated that “the Left Bloc may shrink from 60 per cent to 55 per cent if the Tories detach some of it with their current strategy but, historically, it is unlikely to go lower.” In the event, on 6 May 2010, the parties of the Left achieved just over 55 per cent of the vote.

Of course, the exact parliamentary result depended on tiny shifts in votes in seats won by small majorities but it was possible to forecast the approximate dimensions of the result fairly easily.

In fact, the new parties of the right took a considerably larger share of the national vote. UKIP increased its share from 2.2 per cent to 3.1 per cent, the BNP from 0.7 to 1.9 per cent and the English Democrats took 0.2 per cent of the

vote – altogether 5.2 per cent of the vote. Expressed another way, this amounted to 14 per cent of the Conservative vote.

The arithmetic could not be simpler. Adding together the Conservative vote of 36.1 per cent and the new right's total of 5.2 per cent gives the sort of vote achieved by Thatcher and Major.

Yet it was as though the modernisers did not care.

Francis Maude helpfully laid down the benchmarks of previous Conservative electoral failure and the tests of what the modernisers had to achieve in his speech to the Party Conference on 3 October 2005 and also in an *ePolitix.com* interview earlier that year.

The authors of this study do not believe that these benchmarks were well-chosen, but it is worth examining the results against them in order to see how far the modernising strategy paid off in its own terms. Unlike more ideologically motivated political factions the modernisers regarded victory as the sole political objective; everything, including the party's traditional outlook, was to be subordinated to that goal. If, on examination, it can be seen that on the basis of the modernisers' own criteria the strategy resulted in losses in support as well as gains and that progress was not achieved overall, it is clear that it should have no part in future election campaigns.

### **Francis Maude's speech**

Francis Maude's speech of 3 October 2005, from which the following quotations are taken, was commendably clear about where the party was to build its support. In the following paragraphs we juxtapose Mr Maude's aspirations for the party with details of its actual performance on polling day.

1. "Among Britain's ethnic minority communities we're in third place."

Plainly Mr Maude intended that the Party would do better

in this regard and its PR machine consequently focussed on candidates from ethnic minorities. However, there was no change in the support from the ethnic minorities. In London, where half the ethnic minorities live, the swing from Labour to Conservative was very low: – 2.5 per cent.

2. “Fewer women than men voted for us.”

The attempt to win over women voters failed. There was no change in the proportion of women casting their votes for the Conservatives.

2010 Conservative vote: male 38 per cent, female 36 per cent.

3. “Among what should be our core vote – graduates and people working in business and the professions – we lost support.”

Here the Tories achieved a small improvement: in 2005 the ABs vote fell by 2 per cent; in 2010 the Tories regained what they lost in 2005.

4. “Among younger voters we lost support.”

Result:

2005	18–24 +1 per cent	2010	+2 per cent
	25–34 + 1 per cent		+10 percent

This represented a considerable improvement among the 25–34 year olds.

5. “North of Birmingham we lost support.”

Did the Conservatives fulfil Maude’s aim and do proportionally better in 2010 “North of Birmingham”? For this test, we take the results in the North West, the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside and Scotland.

CHANGE IN PERCENTAGE OF THE VOTE			
	Conservatives	UKIP	BNP
UK	+3.8%	+0.9%	+1.2%
England	+3.9%	+0.9%	+1.3%
North West	+3.0%	+1.2%	+1.1%
Yorkshire	+3.9%	+1.4%	+1.6%
North East	+4.2%	+1.6%	+3.5%
Scotland	+0.9%	+0.3%	+0.3%
South East	+4.9%	+1.0%	+0.6%
London	+2.6%	+0.3%	+0.9%

North of Birmingham the Conservatives did increase their votes at about the national average, except in Scotland.

However, there were large numbers of Labour votes being shed and up for grabs, which the Tories failed to win.

CHANGE IN PERCENTAGE OF VOTE – LABOUR LOSSES			
	2005	2010	Share of Vote Percentage Lost
North West	45.1	39.5	-5.6
North East	52.9	43.6	-9.3
Yorkshire	43.6	34.4	-9.2

It is worth putting the figures another way by translating the percentage changes above into actual votes on the ground. These are taken from the BBC website.

CHANGE IN NUMBER OF VOTERS FROM 2005			
	Conservatives	UKIP	BNP
North West	192,772	45,751	38,503
North East	67,933	20,493	42,268
Yorkshire	129,343	33,585	43,187
TOTAL	390,048	99,829	123,958

So, in the three North of Birmingham regions of England, the Conservatives gained 390,048 votes and UKIP and BNP together 223,787.

Additionally, the English Democrats gained some 23,000 votes in the three regions.

To sum up, the Conservatives did not lose support North of Birmingham. In these regions they gained roughly in line with their increased percentage gains nationally, except in Scotland. However, their vote was mediocre given the scale of Labour losses. The UKIP/ BNP/ English Democrats, starting from tiny bases, amounting to approximately 10 per cent of the Conservative vote, won well over half as many new votes as the Conservatives.

Not only did the new parties have tiny bases, they were woefully behind the Conservatives in terms of electoral muscle. This meant that in these three English regions, the Conservatives had vastly more media coverage than their smaller rivals, had dozens of MPs and their publicly paid staff campaigning full-time, enjoyed substantial taxpayer funding under the Short Money Scheme and were supported by thousands of councillors and city donors – yet all this only added 166,000 more voters than the two minor parties.

### **Francis Maude's ePolitix interview**

Francis Maude's ePolitix interview of the 16 August 2005 explained the then party chairman's assessment of the party's electoral predicament: "We are chasing our vote up the age range, into parts of socio-economic groups that are shrinking and into the South East Quadrant of England." Again, we set Mr Maude's aspirations alongside details of the party's general election performance.

#### 1. "Up the age range."

Result: percentage voting Conservative:

Over 65s	2005 – 41%	2010 – 44%
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So in 2010 the Party was even more dependent on the Over 65s than in 2005.



2. “Into parts of the socio-economic groups” that are shrinking – the C2s, Ds, Es.

Result: Social Class percentage voting Conservative:

	2005	2010	Change
AB	37	39	+2
C1	37	39	+2
C2	33	37	+4
DE	25	31	+6

Overall the Conservative percentage gain was 4 per cent. The gain among DEs far the highest.

3. “Into the South East quadrant of England.”

Clearly, the Tories were still chasing their support into the south east where their vote increased considerably more than other regions in the north.<sup>1</sup>

Using the benchmarks set in Maude’s conference speech, one can see that the result was decidedly mixed. Applying the benchmarks set out in his ePolitix interview, there were three failures out of three.

So, an overall assessment of the strategy is bound to demonstrate the following: failures:

- A failure to win anything like the percentage of the vote won by Thatcher and Major, and as a result, an overall majority in the House of Commons.
- A failure to capture little more than a bare majority of the voters leaving the Labour party unlike the results in 1970 and 1979. Much of this previous Labour vote went to the despised minor parties.

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1. Note: All figures in this section are from MORI. Final Election Aggregate Analysis 2005 and General Election Outcomes 2010. Figures are GB only.

- A failure to reach most of the tactical objectives set by Francis Maude. The Conservative vote is now more elderly, more socio-economically DE and more south-east based than it was at the two previous elections on which occasions the Conservatives were roundly beaten.

This will certainly have disappointed Mary Seighart of *The Times*, the newspaper which most strongly supported the modernising strategy. She told her readers on 25 March 2006 that the voters the Conservatives needed to win “are not socially Conservative, elderly or working class folk but younger, more urban, middle classes”. As we have shown, this was not where the additional Tory votes came from; it may well be where she and the other modernisers would have *liked* them to come from; after all, the rebranding exercise was fashioned with this latter group in mind. In terms of electoral arithmetic, however, their support was no more desirable than that of any other socio-economic group: the ballot box is blind to issues of class and geography. And, as we have also argued, there were particular reasons why the pitch to young, urban professionals was unlikely to be successful.

What mattered, of course, was not the class basis of the Tory votes but the fact that there were not enough of them. It should not be forgotten that the vote for UKIP alone exceeded the margin by which the Conservatives failed to win in 21 constituencies. Although some UKIP support, and a good deal of BNP support, may have come from Labour voters, it is very likely that the Tories would have won a small overall parliamentary majority but for UKIP's intervention. In November 2009 David Cameron was handed the opportunity to win back disaffected Tory voters who were unhappy with the Party's stance on the EU, when Lord Pearson of Rannoch offered to withdraw all UKIP candidates in return for a promise to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The offer was flatly rejected.

Those analysts who deny that UKIP's intervention cost the Tories the election tend to make much of the fact that some UKIP votes may have come from past Labour supporters rather than from Tories. However, had Tory policy on immigration and Europe been more attractive to such voters they may well have voted Conservative rather than for UKIP or the BNP. There are circumstances in which a vote lost by Labour to UKIP or the BNP can be as damaging to the Tory interest as a Tory vote lost to UKIP or the BNP. As we noted earlier, it is a highly significant fact that fewer disaffected Labour supporters switched to the Tories than in 1970 or 1979.

It is clear from our analysis that there are rich pickings for UKIP and BNP if they can overcome their present problems and difficulties.

When learning that senior Conservatives such as John Major believe that the Coalition should become a permanent fact of political life, many ordinary Conservatives will be asking themselves whether all of this will inevitably mean further haemorrhaging of support to the right.

## Chapter Five

### Electoral consequences, policy consequences

The modernisers' case has rested on a number of assumptions. The first was that an election could only be won on the centre ground and it was therefore necessary to move the Conservative brand in the direction of the median voter, a notional figure whose position was located midway between the Conservatives and Labour. It was also assumed that the median voters shared the same views as the modernisers in wanting a government that appeared to be modern, caring and liberal. Further, it was assumed that the "swing" voters were of the same persuasion as the median voter. The modernisers' strategy depended on two additional assumptions: that if Labour lost votes, the Conservatives would pick them up and that the Party would retain its core vote because it had nowhere else to go.

None of the above assumptions were adequately tested; nor was the strategy as a whole subjected to the kind of rigorous analysis which would have allowed the negative impacts of implementing such an approach to be weighed against the possible benefits.

As we have argued, these assumptions were unsupported by conclusive evidence but were highly congenial to a party leadership that reflected the attitudes of an emerging political class with an innate tendency to project its own views on to the wider population. As a result, nearly all the Conservative effort was directed at their preconceived idea of what the "swing" voters wanted, both in presentation and in policy.

A central purpose of the modernising strategy was to win over Liberal Democrat voters. In this the Conservative Party dismally failed. Furthermore, only 60 per cent of the voters leaving Labour went over to the Tories. Many of these were

not from the groups targeted by the modernisers. Some of the biggest additions to the Tory vote were among the over-65s and the social classes DE. Francis Maude had made abundantly clear in his 2005 Conference speech and his ePolitix interview, that these were not groups that the Party wished to target and he appears not to have been challenged over this by senior colleagues. The tone and style of the 2010 Tory campaign amply reflected the determination to look these potential gift horses in the mouth. As we explained earlier, there are specific reasons for thinking that the Tories could have picked up more votes from these groups had it grasped their electoral significance.

Our estimation is that the Conservative vote increased by approximately 1,954,140, of which the over-65s represented 472,680.

This increase in the over-65s voting Conservative was due to three factors: an increase in size of the grey vote, a slight increase in its turnout among the over-65s and an increase in the percentage of the over-65s voting Conservative – from 41 per cent to 44 per cent. A coordinated drive to harness the grey vote could have yielded rich dividends and, unlike its pitch to LibDem supporters, would not have necessitated asking the Conservative party to compromise on its principles.

It should be noted that in 2015, there will be an increase in the over-65s of 1.35 million as the baby boom generation reaches retirement age. This compares with an increase of 638,000 between 2005 and 2010. Even though a change of course would amount to a tacit admission of error it would be foolish in the extreme to repeat the mistakes made in 2010 by continuing to ignore so important a source of potential support. Were it to do so, it would confirm the suspicions of many rank and file Tories that the changes imposed on their party by the modernisers have much more to do with the latter's own prejudices than with Tory principles or even intelligent electoral calculation.

It is also worth noting that in the targeted areas of north

of Birmingham, UKIP and the BNP – neither of which is exactly famous for its liberal values or modernising agenda – picked up nearly 60 per cent as many votes as the Conservatives. Evidently, the country at large does not share David Cameron's view of UKIP, expressed in an interview on *BBC News Channel* on 4 April 2006, "I don't think they have got anything to say to a modern country".

The persistent – some would say deliberate – refusal to reach in to the immense latent Conservative vote has been stressed by Norman Tebbit, one of the Party's most successful and experienced election strategists. As he has pointed out, there were 3.3 million voters who voted Conservative in 1992 who did not return to the Tories in 2010. Additionally, there was an increase in the electorate of 2.3 million between 1992 and 2010. Neither of these blocks of votes went over to Labour. 1.7 million went to parties that did not exist in 1992 while a huge number simply abstained. To fail to reach in to these 5.5 million voters and, instead, to concentrate on the voters swinging between the main parties represented a major blunder. Those 5.5 million voters were possible converts, but by switching to new right wing parties more than one and a half million of them indicated that they felt abandoned by the main political parties and by a political class that has given every impression of holding them in contempt.

To sum up, five years of modernisation pushed the Tory vote up by a paltry three per cent, but at the same time caused natural supporters to defect to UKIP or the BNP while preventing it from attracting a new pool of voters and from winning back disaffected Tory supporters. There seems little sign that the party leadership has grasped this or has any interest in analysing the reasons why it failed to win an outright victory. The news that Steve Hilton, the party's electoral strategist and image maker, has been asked to continue his work on "brand detoxification" suggests that David Cameron still doesn't understand why his party failed to sweep to victory in the general election.

### **The failure to examine alternatives**

A discerning leader would have observed the disconnection between the political class and the electors reflected in massive vote abstentions and the rise of new parties, already present in the Blair years, but growing ever wider. It is not as if this development was a uniquely British phenomenon. This disconnection, the frequent topic of newspaper editorials in the conservative press, has been visible in many western countries with new populist parties forming in Europe and with popular discontent with the Bush administration already laying the seedbed for the subsequent emergence of the Tea Party in the US.

A more reflective leadership would have wanted a deep analysis of the interlinked phenomena of globalisation, EU membership, mass immigration, escalating fiscal deficits and debts and inter-generational accounting imbalances. None of these major issues appears to have engaged the minds of the modernisers.

### **Coalition and its alternatives**

Would a minority Conservative government under David Cameron have done anything more to promote Conservative policies than the Coalition?

Quite obviously, a Conservative minority government would not have to take on board Liberal Democrat policies. However, the constraints of minority government would have made implementation of the remaining Conservative policies difficult. More important, a second election would have been likely.

Despite the evidence that modernisation had only marginally increased the Conservative vote, it can be assumed that the modernisers would have remained in control of the Conservative Party and would not have abandoned their strategy. As Alfred Sherman (*Paradoxes of Power*, p.105) put it, “politicians tend to carry on in a straight line unless force majeure obliges them to change tack”.

The other possible scenario was the formation of a

minority Liberal Democrat/ Labour Coalition. Once again, a second election would have been likely and, once again, it is difficult to see why the modernisers in control of the Conservative Party would have abandoned their strategy.

Each of the two alternatives would have meant that the Conservatives would not have to adopt Liberal Democrat policies but the search for the centre ground would have continued with further abandonment of Conservative policies.

**Are the Conservatives in a better position because they failed to win the election?**

Some observers have speculated that the modernisers would like to go further in their project, that is, to dump “unpopular” policies and “dump” right-wing voters and replace them with centrist Liberal voters. They conjecture that this would be more possible under the Coalition rather than under a straightforward Conservative government.

There are a number of problems with this analysis if it is, indeed, the view of the modernisers. First of all, many policies unpopular with the modernisers are actually popular with the electorate. Second, the problem of dumping right-wing voters and replacing them with Liberal voters is that the Liberal voters are deserting the Coalition in droves and the “dumped” right-wing voters have new homes to go to.

When “über-modernisers” assert that the creation of the Coalition has put the party leadership “in a better position” it is not clear in which respects they or the Party would be better placed. Clearly, it is not better placed to carry out traditional Conservative policies designed to be popular with voters.

If the priority is to carry out the Coalition’s existing policies of deficit reduction and, crucially, maintain the Conservatives in office, then having Liberal Democrats tied in to the policies of deficit reduction, will give the Conservatives extra parliamentary support as well as greater kudos with the metropolitan elites. However, the fall of the Liberal Democrats in the polls, and that party’s worsening



prospects suggest that these advantages could prove to be short-lived.

### **Political effects of the Coalition**

Since the creation of the Coalition the need to cut the deficit and to give the impression of economic competence has joined modernisation as key elements in the Cameron strategy

The promise of economic competence of is, of course, is one that could be made by any political party. It is an offer of better management. It is not specifically connected with Conservatism, although it is obviously a necessary condition of success for the Conservative-LibDem Coalition, as indeed it would have been for an incoming Labour Government.

The Cameron strategy can only succeed if the Coalition remains intact. This has inevitably meant a series of concessions, and will require still more concessions in the future since Conservatives and LibDems are very likely to react to events quite differently. Conservatives who believe that the concessions made to their Coalition partners could be limited to those set out in the formal agreement reached in the aftermath of the election have already been disabused of this view and are likely to be further disappointed in the future. Moreover, the further the LibDems fall in the polls the greater will be their desire for additional concessions.

LibDem spokesmen tend to be more candid about the political consequences of Coalition than are Tory ministers. As Lord Ashcroft, the former Party treasurer, has pointed out, "He [Cameron] recognises he is doing a deal not a sell-out. But in doing so he has pulled the Tory party further towards the centre ground and an acceptance of Coalition politics".

To date, there have been concessions to the Liberal Democrats on student finance, Trident, Lords Reform, and tax cuts. A further concession to the Liberal Democrats, announced by Nick Clegg, was the dropping of the promise to repeal the Human Rights Act and to withdraw from the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

As it has been throughout his leadership, Cameron's priority on Europe has been that it shouldn't flare up and cause him a problem of party management. The difficulty is that because EU influence extends to almost every policy area and by virtue of the dysfunctional nature of the EU decision-making processes, the flare-ups are becoming more frequent. As a consequence, Cameron is standing by helplessly while the broad outlines of policy are determined in Brussels. Any other approach would bring him into direct conflict with his Coalition partners as well as with Britain's EU partners. This state of affairs effectively involves huge cost to Britain, while ruling out any serious attempt to push forward Britain's own interests and even rules out following the previously stated Conservative policy of not allowing further transfers of powers to the EU.

As Iain Martin put it in the *Wall Street Journal* of 27 September 2010,

Almost unnoticed, his [Cameron's] MPs have voted for a list of measures that a few years ago would have triggered full scale Tory war. There was the expansion of justice and home office powers involving the extension of the so-called European Arrest warrant. The European External Action Service – or EU diplomatic service – was nodded through. New regulations for the City of London require the establishment of three pan-European supervisory bodies. This was accepted and if there were protests from the Conservative benches they didn't make much noise. A higher budget for the EU has also been approved.

A further concession to the EU was the agreement to join in the bail-out of Ireland. This meant, effectively, becoming entangled in the problems of the eurozone by contributing to the EU funding mechanism to support failing eurozone members. Additionally, George Osborne agreed to a loan of £7 billion to Ireland.

No one should be surprised by any of this; even prior to 6

May and the creation of the Coalition, Mr Cameron put a lot of effort into wooing Ms Merkel and Mr Sarkozy ahead of the election, reassuring them that he would be a constructive member of the European leaders' club. This work has continued after he took office.

In many ways, the Cameron approach represents a reversion to the Conservative managerialism of the Heath era. One of the defining characteristics of this was the absence of a theoretical framework for analysis and policy prescription combined with a general distaste for the role of ideas. During this period, one of the most disastrous in the Party's history, policy thinking was discouraged and analysis of problems from first principles abandoned. But others did not take this road. Trade Unions, the EU, the immigration lobby, the CBI and the welfare lobby, among others, had clear policy goals, many of them rooted in ideology, for which they pressed strongly. The economic and industrial crisis occurring at that time was seen as an opportunity. As a consequence, policy-making under Heath descended into a series of reactive gestures and administrative tinkering with changes justified on the grounds of pragmatism or the need for "modernisation" but with political direction decided by others. The present absence of firm ideological moorings, suggests there is a distinct danger that history is about to repeat itself.

### **Electoral effects**

The effect of the Liberal Democrat participation in the Coalition on the Liberal Democrat vote has already been severe, their support having fallen from 23 per cent at the election to 12 per cent in the polls in November 2011. This is likely to continue.

Much of the Liberal Democrat defection has transferred directly to Labour. Hardly any has transferred to the Conservatives, despite the modernisers' emphasis on decontamination and their pursuit of the centre ground.

Although the AV electoral proposals are expected to have

little influence on electoral outcomes and, indeed, Liberal Democrats have indicated rejection of AV would not cause them to leave the Coalition, commentators say that the AV referendum is likely to reinforce the leakage of Liberal Democrat votes to Labour as both parties will campaign for AV against the Conservatives with Liberal Democrat and some leading Labour politicians on the same platform.

If the Liberal Democrats continue to fall in the polls, in any case, their parliamentary representation, after a new election, will be derisory. Should an electoral pact be formed at the next election, there would be plenty of disgruntled Conservative voters in currently Liberal Democrat held seats, and vice versa, who will be receptive to a real conservative or populist party offering an alternative to supporting the current incumbent.

Norman Tebbit forecasts in his *Critical Reaction* blog on 1 November 2010 that an electoral pact (of the Liberal Democrats) with the Conservatives would

bring a huge change in the political scene. With those 6.8 million (Liberal Democrat) votes up for grabs, Labour and the Tories alike would be eager to feast on the corpse of the Liberal Democrat party – but that would be at the risk of losing their traditional support.

The likelihood is that the main beneficiaries, apart from Labour as the established Opposition party, could be other parties who Liberal Democrat voters have not considered in the past: the UKIP, BNP and the Greens.

## Chapter Six

### Public choice theory and the perils of modernisation

In his first speech to the Conservative Party Conference as leader in October 2006 David Cameron said:

Our party's history tells us the ground on which political success is built. It is the centre ground. The centre ground is where you will find the concerns, the hopes and the dreams of most people and families in this country.

This was an odd thing to say. It is not at all clear why politicians should assume that the hopes and dreams of ordinary people should be located on the political middle ground. As we argued earlier, the middle ground is determined by splitting the difference between rival groups of politicians, a process from which the plans and aspirations of ordinary people may be absent. Second, Cameron's assertion belies recent history since it takes no account of the Tory victories in 1970, 1979, 1983 and 1987 at which times the party was said to have moved to the right.

Revealingly, this speech, by a young leader, harked back to the two-party system which existed prior to 1970.

This assertion is based on a spatial proposition which is illustrated below:

\_\_\_\_\_POSITION OF PARTIES AND VOTERS\_\_\_\_\_

Labour	Median Voter	Modernising Conservative (B)	Pre-Modernising Conservative (A)
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In this situation, the modernisers believe that by changes of image and policy the Conservative party should move

towards the median voter in order to attract more votes.

Prior to 6 May 2010 the Conservative leadership therefore pursued a kind of 20-20 strategy based on the idea that elections are decided by small movements among the 20 per cent of swing voters in the 20 per cent of marginal constituencies who are assumed to have views near those of the median vote. Thus about four per cent of the actual voting electorate, or about one million voters, determine the result of elections. This assumption, however, no longer corresponds to the political reality. As we have shown in earlier chapters, “swing” voters or “marginal” voters do not only have the alternative of Labour and Conservative. Part of the “swing” vote now swings between the Conservatives and the new parties of the right.

The seminal work on public choice by Professor Gordon Tullock, *The Vote Motive*, originally published in 1976 by the Institute of Economic Affairs, contains important insights on the ways political parties should position themselves to win votes in a two-party system and in a multi-party system.

Tullock points out that “in a two-party system there is a simple operational rule for the politicians: find out what the other party is doing and take a position very close to it in the popular direction”.

This is based on the so-called “median voter” theorem:

If the parties would rather be elected than beaten, and they choose their policies accordingly, they would attempt to take the position of the median voter, because that assures them of success against any other policy taken by the other party. In practice, of course, we observe that in most two-party democracies the parties are very close together and near the dead centre of opinion.

This, as Tullock points out, does not prohibit politicians occasionally making a mistake and, on some occasions, adopting policies far away from the median.

This median voter theorem roughly describes the way

politics worked in Britain prior to 1970, but it provides a poor explanation of political life after that date. Yet the underlying assumptions behind this approach are exactly those of today's Tory modernisers who, ironically, have failed to grasp just how out-of-date they actually are.

There are two other points worthy of note. In his analysis Tullock acknowledges that parties may veer away from "the popular direction". Since about 1970 the political class has veered further and further away from "the popular direction" in many policy areas, such as EU membership, mass Third World immigration, overseas wars, climate change, crime, etc., while remaining close to "the popular direction" in such areas as the NHS, the mixed economy, etc.

The second point is that since the 1980s Britain has had a three-party or two-and-a-half party system. However, the Alliance and later the LibDems did not in fact move far away from the other parties and acted more as a liberal wing of the Labour Party, from where many of them indeed originated.

One weakness of the spatial proposition is that it assumes that moving the party along the continuum is costless, that is to say, no voters are lost to the right while voters are gained towards the median position.

This was indeed the position up to 1992 for the Conservatives when there was no alternative party on the right. This all changed with the arrival of the Referendum Party, the rise of UKIP, the BNP and the English Democrats. There is also the point that some voters, possibly potential Conservative voters, will move directly from the pool of possible converts among LibDem and Labour voters directly to the new parties of the right. This raises the possibility that the losses on the right may outweigh the gains derived from moving to the centre, a possibility which the modernisers have either ignored or discounted.

Another problem arising from the application of spatial analysis to present conditions is that it fails to accommodate the increased importance of new issues such

as EU membership, mass Third World immigration, overseas wars, climate change alarmism, crime, etc. In such areas, the median voter position is often distant from the area where the major parties congregate.

At the same time, the “middle ground” area, as defined by the political class, has become uncommonly crowded with three parties all trying to occupy the same space. The Tories faced a particular difficulty when opposing Tony Blair since he was perceived by the electorate as being either dead centre or even slightly to the right of centre. According to Thomas Quinn in “The Conservative Party and the ‘Centre Ground’ of British Politics” published in the *Journal of Elections* 2 May 2008:

In 1997 and 2001 Labour even fell on the right side of the political spectrum for the first time in its history ... Under Blair, Labour occupied traditional Tory territory on economic management, defence and crime which, effectively, led the parties to compete for centre right votes.

The replacement of Tony Blair and the financial crisis has removed this particular problem for the Conservatives.

Professor Tullock’s public choice theory analysis is more comprehensive and sophisticated than spatial analysis. It depicts the electorate as a square with the parties pitching for support at different points within it.

By means of geometric analysis he shows how everything changes in the case of a three or more party system. In this situation, instead of clustering together, parties move away from the close togetherness of the two old parties:

The party which moved away from the middle lost votes in the centre of the (statistical voting) distribution, but pushed up votes around the edge **and the net result of this move was a gain** (*emphasis added*).

Thus one anticipates that the parties in a two-party system



would be very close together but that there would be considerable differences between them in a three (or more) party system.

A three (or more) party system requires a good deal more skill on the part of the party leaders and mistakes **are much easier to make** (*emphasis added*).

These propositions were illustrated by Professor Tullock using the alternative propositions of spending money on either police or fire services. We have slightly amplified Professor Tullock's diagrams in the illustrations below.

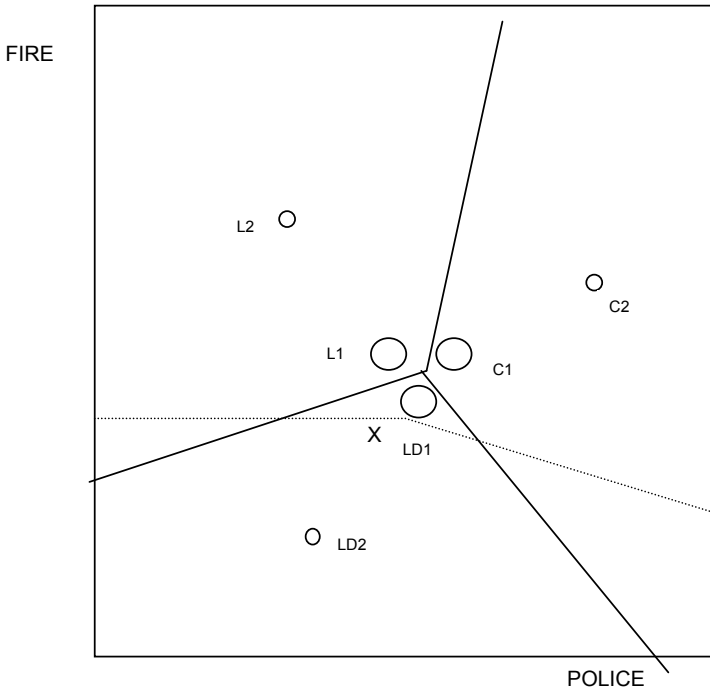
In Diagram A, with two parties called L and C, the parties cluster together in the centre of the voter distribution.

DIAGRAM A



In Diagram B, where there are three parties, the three parties are initially close together, being represented by L1, C1 and LD1. Let us suppose that the LD move from LD1 to position X. This means the LD party loses some votes in the centre but picks up far more votes around the periphery of the voting distribution.

DIAGRAM B



The reaction of the L party and the C party is that they themselves move away from the centre so as to maximise their vote and counter the gains made by the LD party. Equilibrium is restored when the three parties take up positions L2, C2 and LD2. Of course, a move away from the centre can go too far, as Professor Tullock points out. It would be possible to insert new parties into the diagram to show geometrically how chunks of the electorate have been annexed by the new parties.

Today, we are still in the time frame where the move of a party to position X has occurred (in this case by the arrival of new parties such as UKIP) but the existing parties have not reacted. They have not moved away from the middle ground to contest that part of the electorate which has broken away to support new parties.

The change introduced by the arrival of more parties is amplified if (1) the issues which are salient now are different from issues which were salient in the past; and (2) if the old parties cluster far away from “the popular direction” on these new issues. A new party can make less headway where the old parties stick close to the centre of opinion, for example, on the old issues of the NHS or the mixed economy. But a new party is likely to prosper a great deal if the old parties have a consensus a long way from “the popular direction” on new salient issues, such as on the EU or mass Third World immigration or climate change.

The Tullock analysis would seem to be borne out by the 2009 Euro election in which the total Labour/ Conservative vote fell to the mid-40s. Both sought to occupy what they perceived to be the centre ground but, to use Tullock’s terminology, the outside areas of the voting square broke away from them.

The conclusion would seem to be that the Conservatives are not likely to gain many votes from Labour, LibDems or Greens in future elections unless these parties make errors. In the 2010 election, Labour clearly did so. The Liberal Democrats did not.

If the Conservative Party continues to position itself in relation to Labour, the Party is effectively confining itself to battling Labour over the 67.6 per cent of the vote the two parties won in 2005 while ignoring the other 32.4 per cent of the voters. Indeed, the combined Labour/ Conservative share of the vote in 2010 fell to 65 per cent, even below the previous low set in 2005. Positioning itself fractionally nearer the “popular direction” but still remaining close to Labour on issues which are salient now, such as the EU,

immigration, climate change or parliamentary expenses reform, will not do the Tory Party much good in a multi-party system – as can be seen from the results of the euro elections of 2004 and 2009.

There are new parties roaming the edge of the (statistical voting) distribution. According to Tullock's analysis, in order to win back voters from such parties, the old parties will be forced away from the centre, and especially from a consensus on issues where they have taken up collusive stances with other parties and where these stances diverge significantly from public opinion.

Within a three-party system, nothing so simple (as being close to your opponent but in the popular direction) exists. Difficult decisions must be made and frequent errors are to be expected.

What may save the Conservatives for a time is the fact that Britain does not have a system of proportional representation. In proportional representation systems, such as used in the EU parliament, every vote counts. In first-past-the-post electoral systems each constituency only produces one elected member as opposed to several members as in Euro elections. At present there are few constituencies where there is a realistic chance of any of three or more competing parties electing that member (that is, three-way or four-way marginals). Therefore, seats can be won in the old way with a lower and lower plurality of voters with the voters on the edge of the distribution being ignored. It is, however, a very risky strategy which gives even more weight to tiny movements of voters between the major parties and especially to the differential rate at which voters abandon the two old parties. It also excludes an increasing number of the electorate and weakens the mandate.

Looking further ahead, on current trends the sort of dynamic which reduced the combined Labour/ Tory vote to the mid-40 percentage in the 2009 euro elections will continue so that in the next euro elections the Labour Party

and the Tories will be reduced to supplying two of six parties – all with shares of the vote of roughly the same magnitude. The possibility is that UKIP, with good leadership and organization, could become the largest party in the next euro elections.

If the Cameron government goes off the rails, this dynamic is likely to spread into first-past-the-post Westminster elections with more four- or five-party marginals and minor parties actually electing Westminster MPs. This, however, is likely to be a very gradual phenomenon.

Moving away from the central consensus may lose a small number of votes in the centre but, as Gordon Tullock shows, such a move “gains votes around the edge” which is now a vote-rich area.

Tory “modernisation” is largely a matter of electoral calculation. But the interplay of political forces is now more complicated than formerly and it is not at all clear that the modernisers have calculated correctly. Are the losses to the right likely to be fewer than gains on the left as they seem to think? In euro-elections the answer is unequivocally no. A large chunk has broken off from the Conservative vote.

The 2010 general election in which votes haemorrhaged to the right and consequently limited Tory gains showed that the same forces are in operation in general elections. However, the first past the post electoral system minimised the loss in seats.

The formation of the Coalition with its leftwards drag on the Conservatives is bound to impact on electoral behaviour. In the circumstances, it is hard not to see still more voters breaking off to the right. It would be extremely risky for David Cameron to blithely assume that these will be more than offset by gains from Labour and the LibDems.

## Chapter Seven

### The break up of the centre right

The conservative vote has begun to disintegrate in most Western democracies. Centre-right parties, once the dominant force on the right of the political spectrum, are increasingly seen by significant numbers of their supporters as being dominated by their centre. This has led to the formation of new right-wing parties.

It is a development that has proceeded further in other western countries than in Britain because of the nature of their voting systems (whatever its defects, proportional representation reflects changes in voter sentiments more sensitively than the first past the post system).

In the US, the same forces have led to the creation of new groups within the Republican Party and to some dramatic results in the Republican primaries and the mid-term elections. A succession of Republican journalists and pundits of centrist beliefs have recently beaten their way to the door of David Cameron in the mistaken belief that the British conservative leader has uniquely overcome problems that beset other conservative parties. The reality is that those problems are merely better concealed, and that Mr Cameron's American admirers have not grasped that his arrival in Downing Street is more likely to signal the continuing decline of conservatism than its revival.

In the US, the reaction to centrist trends in the Republican Party has fused with a general hostility towards the political class and this has seen the emergence of the Tea Party, a vehicle for discontent at the economic crisis engulfing much of America. Centrist Republicans have lost primaries, despite the advantages of money, incumbency and media support.

Like the Tea Party, the new political parties in other western countries are based primarily on an appeal to social conservatism and the politics of national identity. At the same time, the economic crisis has led to a questioning of the bureaucratic and centralised welfare systems established in all western countries during the last century; this process has gone furthest in the U.S. but remains at an early stage.

Within the last few years, new parties reflecting these trends, have gained ground in Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Holland, Belgium and, most recently Sweden.

### **Reaction of the centrist leadership**

In the face of this upheaval, centrist leaders of conservative parties have tended to become even more obsessed by the quest for the centre ground and the need to ensure that their supporters do not stray from it, even though this approach has produced no extra votes or improved their poll ratings. One consequence has been a lack of fresh policy ideas. In as far as the established conservative parties have produced anything new to offer this has been a matter of style or piecemeal tinkering, one of the few exceptions being the proposals for welfare reform currently being introduced in Britain by a traditionally-minded Conservative politician.

Verbal attacks by centrist leaders on the new conservative parties have, of course, been applauded by Left-inclined parties which, together with the mass media, have encouraged the centrist leaders to cling more tenaciously than ever to the centre. Only in the US has there been a serious attempt by some of the Republicans to reintegrate disgruntled conservatives who feel let down or betrayed by their party's leadership; at the time of writing it is too soon to gauge its outcome.

One notable exception to this centrist reaction has been the recent upheaval in the Australian Liberal Party with the ejection of the centrist Malcolm Turnbull as leader

and his replacement by Tony Abbot. Abbot led a forceful but, ultimately, just unsuccessful election campaign to re-integrate the conservative part of his voter base. It should be noted, however, that he did not face a challenge from a breakaway conservative group.

### **Causes of the breakdown**

Why had this breakdown between the traditionalist and the centre parts of right wing parties occurred?

One factor is undoubtedly that the centre-right leadership is perceived by its traditional supporters in its conservative base as no longer representative of the wider population. Rather, it is seen as an integral part of a political class which is distant, cosmopolitan and wealthy, and which is absorbed by preoccupations, e.g. homosexual rights and Green issues, which the conservative base either does not share, or which come a very long way down its list of priorities. With a growing sense of dismay party traditionalists have observed that many of their leaders are more comfortable when dealing with international and trans-national political projects than with national ones. Mrs Thatcher, whose successes at three general elections attest to her shrewdness, once remarked that in order to succeed the Conservative party needed to become more vulgar; the present leaders of the British Conservative party, like those of other conservative parties, have reached the opposite conclusion without anything in the way of electoral success to support their prejudices.

It is also evident that in many countries, ordinary members of conservative parties believe that they have been personally disadvantaged by policies and measures which have been imposed by their parties' leaderships or in which their leaders have acquiesced. This has included not only liberal policies on crime and education, but also the transfer of powers to unaccountable institutions (this belief is particularly prominent in Switzerland, the US and the UK, although spreading elsewhere in Europe), policies



that permitted mass immigration and job losses that have resulted in a pervasive sense of economic insecurity. An article in the *American Spectator* by Angelo M. Codevilla in August 2010 aptly described the gulf that has opened up between the political class and the wider electorate:

Today, few speak well of the ruling class. Not only has it burgeoned in size and pretence, but it also has undertaken wars it has not won, presided over a declining economy and mushrooming debt, made life more expensive, raised taxes and talked down to the American people. America's conviction that the ruling class is as hostile as it is incompetent has solidified.

George Bush can scarcely be regarded as the darling of American liberal elites but his brand of “compassionate conservatism” – the platform on which George Bush ran in 2004 – exemplified many of the traits which were later to be displayed by other middle of the road conservatives. This was combined with an adventurous neo-conservative foreign policy, which departed from the principles that traditionally inform conservative foreign policy approaches. Nevertheless, “compassionate conservatism” was essentially a centrist construction involving an extension of state welfare, liberal policies on immigration, and massive over-spending leading to unprecedented trade deficits and contributing to the financial disasters of 2008 which were followed in turn by the loss of well-paid manufacturing jobs. In large part, the Tea Party movement represents a repudiation of “compassionate conservatism”, which perhaps explains why it is better at explaining what it is against than what it is for.

A further cause of the breakdown in the centre-right relationship was the growing belief that the political class now defined its political objectives in a way that aligned itself with a wealthy upper class and was consequently losing touch with its middle class and working class support. Globalisation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Deng Xiao Ping's economic liberalisation in

China along with similar reforms in India, had set off an economic chain reaction which exposed ordinary working and middle class families in western countries to an unaccustomed blast of economic competition.

The loss of western industrial monopolies and the free movement of capital clearly benefited capital holders and the highly skilled, but exposed working families to an era of economic uncertainty, risk and in many cases, falling living standards. High levels of immigration, partly the consequence of EU membership, benefited employers and the wealthy, while holding down native wages and forcing those at the bottom of the ladder to compete for housing, schools and hospitals, with new, needy and capital-less immigrants.

Centrist conservatives accepted and, indeed, welcomed globalisation without acknowledging that both its costs and benefits were very unequally spread. While preserving existing welfare structures and expanding welfare spending they failed to find ways that would cushion the sharp edges of change in order to help those worst affected without destroying the advantages of free trade. Stephen Roach of Morgan Stanley noted the key difference between previous trade conflicts and today's backlash against globalization: "Today, the pressures are being borne disproportionately by labour, whereas twenty years ago, capital and labour were in the struggle together. Today, US companies, as seen through the lens of corporate profitability, are thriving as never before while the American workforce is increasingly isolated in its competitive squeeze."

Globalisation resulted in the rapid growth of the financial sector; this has proved a lucrative source of party funding and it has been influential in shaping economic policy, but it has had a number of unforeseen consequences. Inter-generational wealth transfers have favoured those with wealthy parents. Those with high skills could earn sufficient to insulate themselves from the impact of economic decline and mass immigration. In extreme cases, such as South Africa and now Ireland, a large part of the young skilled

white work force emigrated leaving behind those who were old, poor or unskilled.

Within limits, the highly skilled and the holders of capital had been willing to go along with “compassionate conservatism” – after all, apart from some extra taxes, it did not affect them and they were gaining a lot from globalisation. Putting up with some extra taxes may also have fulfilled a psychological need in that it made it easier to live with the visible gulf opening up between the beneficiaries of global capitalism and the rest.

The result was that the capital holders and the highly skilled were largely content with centrist political leadership, while the lower middle classes and the working classes, who could see their relative economic situation deteriorating and the prospects for their children looking grimmer, began to search for alternatives.

Of course, in every country, there were regional variations. Some economic sectors remained prosperous. Some regions had few immigrants. Some regions, such as Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Wales in the UK were quite willing to cede political powers to institutions in Brussels rather than to London.

The trigger for the disintegration of the centre right was usually the establishment of new political parties. Unlike other western countries, the primary selection system in the US provided a partial safety valve and at least a chance to get away from the static political postures of the dominant centrist elites. Elsewhere in the European countries, widespread use of proportional representation meant that new conservative parties rapidly became major political players in Switzerland, Austria, Holland and Italy.

### **The UK – an exception**

The UK remained an exception. UKIP and the BNP rapidly eroded the centrist Conservative Party vote and, to a lesser extent, the Labour and Liberal Democrat vote in elections conducted by means of proportional representation, such

as those to the European Parliament. The first past the post system prevented the small parties from winning seats at Westminster: they could, however, gain enough votes in 2010 to prevent a centrist Conservative Party winning an absolute majority.

The UK also lacked an open party primary system of the kind which provides a safety valve in the US. Although the British Conservative Party had run two centrally controlled postal primaries, as well as some other “open” selection meetings, these were not truly open – the candidates still had to be centrally approved and those selected turned out to have centre-right views. Proper open primaries would, of course, have eroded the centrist top down dominance of the Conservative Party. Instead, the Conservative party had moved to a more top-down system of selecting shortlists for consideration as candidates, insisting on high quotas of female and ethnic candidates, thereby making nonsense of its claim that its new-found enthusiasm for primaries would reduce public cynicism about politics and enable it to re-engage with ordinary voters.

The current Westminster system, with the centrist leadership of the Conservatives largely static in terms of ideology, lacks the safety valves of either proper proportional representation or an open party primary system. Voting support for centrist conservatives has shown a continuous decline. This is likely to continue with the centrist leadership losing its middle class and working class conservative wing. At the same time there has been a sharp fall in Conservative membership under David Cameron, another indicator of its narrowing political base. According to a report on the *Guardian* website (5 October 2010), “Tim Montgomerie, the editor of the influential grassroots Tory website, *ConservativeHome*, told a fringe event at the 2010 Conservative conference that two separate sources had told him that party membership was now 177,000 – down 80,000 on the 2005 figure of 257,000.”

Members of the audience concurred with the figure, which

Montgomerie called “extraordinary”. “It raises questions about what it means to be a party member now ... What do you get in terms of choosing your party candidate. What is the value?” he asked.

Montgomerie’s question gets to the nub of the matter. The imposition of politically correct centrist candidates on local parties makes membership of the Conservative party pointless. The imposition of “democratic centralism” has effectively destroyed the renewal and cleansing aspects of party democracy. As a result the prevailing attitudes of the centrist leadership cannot be challenged in a way that happens, albeit imperfectly, in the US.

Fossilising the party is the road to extinction.

### **Atrophy of the conservative wing of the Conservative Party**

One of the reasons for the triumph of the modernisers in gaining full control of the Conservative party was the failure of the conservative wing of the party to offer an alternative approach. This should not have been an impossibility, given that the success of the modernisers was achieved despite their lack of policy and their lack of sympathy with traditional Conservative concerns.

The failure of the conservative wing was due both to its lack of leaders and to lack of application to the arduous task of reworking policy and establishing common positions. There have been some impressive individual contributions to the debate about the party’s philosophy and future direction, most notably from John Redwood, Douglas Carswell and Dan Hannan but there has also been a lamentable failure to unite around an agreed set of objectives and priorities.

Yet Keith Joseph had shown the way in the 1970s. John Hoskyns, Alfred Sherman and Norman Strauss, in association with the CPS, worked out over four years a programme called *Stepping Stones*, which involved conservative-minded politicians such as Norman Lamont

and John Redwood. The result was that the key Thatcherites had at least understood the problems facing them, the scale of effort required and were in possession of a strategy to guide them as events threw up new problems and obstacles. As Hoskyns observed, without this process of intellectual preparation the Thatcherite forces would have been in the position that the allied forces would have been in on D-Day had the generals dispensed with military planning and simply advised the troops: "Make your way to Berlin".

It is also evident that from Portillo to Hague, the Conservative cause has been handicapped by Tory leaders who have been adept at providing the kind of right wing mood music that plays well at party conferences but who when it was time for action have failed, for whatever reason, to display the courage of their supporters' convictions. Of them, it could not be said that what you got was what it said on the tin.

In short, the Conservative cause has lacked energy, organisation, courage, consistency, clarity – and effective leaders.

One problem after 1997 was the sheer shortage in the number of Conservative MPs. If one deducts the left wing and the trimmers and career-minded politicians who generally make up about 70 per cent of any political party, there were not many conservative Conservative MPs of note left standing after 1997. From the story of the expenses scandal, it was clear that many Conservative MPs in the later Labour years had simply jogged along in a comfortable taxpayer funded existence.

Thatcherite figures in the House of Lords, such as Lords Lamont and Forsyth, offered alternative approaches to policy-making, but that House is not a place to lead from. One shining exception was Lord Tebbit who was prepared to speak out without fear on a wide range of policy issues but whose contribution to debate appears to have been regarded by the Conservative leadership as more an irritant

than a source of wisdom. Significantly, the weakness of the Conservative think-tanks and politicians meant that the strongest voice against the climate change scare and its huge resulting costs was another peer, the former Chancellor, Nigel Lawson.

Throughout this period, the conservative wing continued to be cowed by frequent accusations that it was responsible for the Party's "nasty", "uncaring" image and was consequently to blame for the Conservatives' poor performance in the general elections of 2001 and 2005. Given Thatcher's success in consistently winning 42 to 43 per cent of the popular vote this is a hard case to make (and since 6 May 2010 when the Tories won 36 per cent of the vote it has become harder still). However, for a long period the prevailing mood on the right of the party betokened a lack of intellectual and moral confidence. Deconstructing the mythology built on the ICM and Populus polls of 2005 which were used to silence the Tory Right by their "evidence" of the alleged toxicity of the Tory brand began with Janet Daley in 2010. The purpose of the present study is to show – by means of a thorough analysis of the misleading nature of these polls and the interpretations placed upon them – that her scepticism was well founded. This may enable the conservative wing to throw off the "spell of toxicity" which has had such a stultifying effect on its thoughts and actions. Indeed, it is striking that many of its members themselves seemed convinced that they have acted as a brake on the party's recovery. One of several unfortunate consequences of this peculiar state of affairs has been a retreat into what might be termed "safe" euroscepticism, a position which entails criticism of the EU but baulks at advocating credible means to put Britain's relationship with the EU on a fundamentally different footing. This surely is the present-day equivalent of advocating the reform of the Dock Labour scheme or Upper Clyde shipbuilders of the 1970s. With only a few exceptions MPs on the right have preferred to stick to other safe Tory

topics such as defence or union-bashing.

The Brown boom had emasculated criticism of high public spending. When George Osborne, in his famous speech in 2007, promised to match Brown's fiscal incontinence there was little opposition to this even from the conservative wing of the Party. Indeed, it was largely taken for granted that the boom would continue and that globalisation was a wholly benign phenomenon. There was a complete lack of interest in the tasks of constructing proper national and government balance sheets and systems of inter-generational accounting that would have shown that the fiscal and economic costs of this debt-fuelled boom were being pushed onto future generations.

The final humiliation for the conservative wing of the Tories was that, condemned to silence, they saw new parties arise which expressly proclaimed their own core beliefs in patriotism, the free market and social order. The activist base began to desert the Conservative party. In European elections, the desertions grew from a trickle to a flood.

### **The real future for Conservatism**

This study has sought to draw attention to the paradox that although conservatism might seem to have little future in the Conservative Party under its current leadership, the market for conservative ideas is getting stronger in Britain, as in most Western countries. In many such countries this has resulted in the disintegration of centre right parties. This process has begun in Britain, and is set to go further

In most cases the essential trigger for the disintegration of centre right parties has been the establishment of new conservative parties which strive to be more responsive to majority opinion than the established parties. Only in the US, thanks to its system of open primaries has there been a partial renewal and reconnection with the conservative grass roots. This has occurred through the impact of the Tea Party on the direction of the Republican Party. In contrast to their British counterparts some American political leaders



have shown an awareness that the strongly expressed desire that policies should more accurately reflect majority opinion on core issues is not a transitory phase of limited significance, but an important phenomenon that will determine contours of the future political landscape.

In Switzerland, where the process has gone furthest and where direct democracy via referendum enables a more direct expression of popular will, the Swiss People's Party is now by far the largest party regularly winning referendums whose outcomes reflect majority opinion on such matters as EU membership, the minaret ban and the automatic deportation of foreign criminals.

What lies behind this phenomenon is the perception of large numbers of conservative-minded voters that the political class in general and the centre right parties in particular, no longer represent them or their interests and that the interests of the political class increasingly diverge from that of the electorate.

In Britain, however, the Conservative Party, despite its desperate embrace of modernity, gives the impression of not understanding or even being fully aware of forces which will inevitably shape this country's political future.

## Appendix

### The ICM poll

Two questions were put to two different but similarly weighted panels:

		Yes	No
Q1	Do you support the idea that immigration should be controlled more strictly?	82%	18%
Q2	Do you support Conservative policy to control immigration more strictly?	65%	35%

The first thing to be said about this poll is that even if accepted at face value the findings cannot legitimately be used to show that support for policies drops by half, as Francis Maude claimed in his speech, once it is realized that the policy in question is that of the Conservative Policy. A drop from 82 per cent to 65 per cent is a fall of 17 percent, not 50 percent. Supporters of the modernisation strategy have subsequently defended Francis Maude's claim, by saying that the findings showed that the balance between the "yes" and "no" votes halved, once "ownership" of a stricter controls policy was identified. But this is not what the ordinary person would have understood from Mr Maude's remarks; nor were his remarks reported in this way.

Mr Maude's treatment of the findings was disingenuous in another way. In his party conference speech his aim was to contrast the response to "our immigration policy" to the more modest approval rating for that policy "when they knew it was ours." The ICM question was: "Do you support the idea that immigration should be controlled more strictly" – it said nothing about this being a specific policy of one specific party which was then revealed in the second

question to be the Conservative party. It referred to an “idea”. The second question did not hang on or follow the first at all – it also presupposed knowledge of Conservative party policy.

However, the “killer fact” about the ICM poll is that it provided no basis for assessing whether the Tory badge was any more corrosive than the other party label. The poll was not weighted by party allegiance but inevitably the survey sample would have included supporters of all the main political parties and it can be taken for granted that the Labour and LibDem supporters taking part would have been less inclined to support a Tory policy on immigration than others, and that the total number of those supporting such a policy would be lower than that for those were prepared to support “the idea” of stricter but *unattributed* immigration controls.

Although the ICM Survey did not give any breakdown by party allegiance, it did give a breakdown by regions. In the Labour heartlands, such as Scotland and Northern England, there was a marked difference in responses to the two questions. In Scotland, 87 per cent supported Q1 and only 42 per cent Q2. In Northern England, 81 per cent supported Q1 and only 58 per cent Q2. In the South East, the difference was small: 73 per cent supported Q1 and 69 per cent Q2. Clearly, in Scotland and the North, where in Q1 substantial higher numbers supported a stricter immigration policy, Labour, LibDem and Nationalist voters did not want to give their approval to a Conservative policy directed to that end.

So, the ICM poll certainly showed that, once a popular policy was badged as a Conservative policy, support dropped. But that is of no significance unless an opposite effect or a substantially lesser effect can be shown to have occurred when a policy was badged as Labour or LibDem. In other words, one needs to see if badging a policy as Conservative was contaminating and led to a drop in support while badging it as Labour or LibDem was not

and did not lead to a significant drop in support. The ICM poll did not carry out this basic comparison but analysis of the regional results shows that the fall in support for a Conservative–badged policy occurred mainly in Labour areas, which is exactly as one would expect.

Nothing of significance can be drawn, therefore, from the ICM poll. If the poll had replaced the word “Conservative” with “Labour”, there would have been a substantial drop in support between Q1 and Q2.

In short, the ICM poll does not provide *any* evidence to support the modernisers’ case. To cast any light on the subject it would have had to be far more rigorous and comprehensive since it would necessarily have also involved measuring the effect the Labour and Lib “brands” so that a relative judgement could be formed. There would also have had to be questions on a range of policy issues, not just on immigration since this is a subject on which the promises of politicians are viewed with great scepticism. As other commentators have noted, the public has been given good reason to disbelieve the promises of politicians to “get tough” on immigration and such scepticism is something which could clearly influence their answers to the questions of pollsters on this matter.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Populus poll**

The Populus poll, which was reported in *The Times* on 4 March 2005, was both more interesting and comprehensive.

An extract from the Populus report on the poll is as follows:

Agreement with policies on immigration (attributed and unattributed):

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1. Since leaving Westminster politics Michael Portillo has argued that the electorate has effectively been disenfranchised on the issues of immigration and ‘Europe’ and is disinclined to believe the assurances which politicians have given about these matters.

Half the respondents were read a summary of Labour's immigration policy, attributed to Labour and a summary of Conservative immigration policy without attribution (B). The other half of the sample was read a summary of Conservative immigration policy attributed to the Conservatives and a summary of Labour's immigration policy without attribution (A).

The summaries are as follows:

#### Conservative

They will set an annual limit on the number of immigrants able to enter Britain, and give priority to those who would make a positive contribution, as they do in Australia. They will change the work permit system so that people coming to Britain on a temporary permit are no longer able to settle here permanently. They will set up a 24 hour surveillance at ports and airports, stop people who are not genuine refugees applying for asylum, and introduce health checks for immigrants to detect things like HIV, hepatitis and TB.

#### Labour

They will introduce a points system to ensure that those who enter Britain will benefit the country and end the right for immigrants to bring in their relatives. They will only allow skilled workers to settle long-term in the UK. They will introduce English language tests for those who want to stay permanently, and expand detention for failed asylum seekers.

The results were as follows:

Split Poll Results: % agreeing with immigration policies					
	All	Labour	Con	LibDem	Swing
B Labour policy – attributed	63%	80%	56%	53%	65%
A Labour policy – unattributed	70%	63%	92%	60%	70%
A Conservative policy – attributed	70%	63%	92%	60%	70%
B Conservative policy – unattributed	73%	71%	81%	60%	74%

## TOO 'NICE' TO BE TORIES?

Split Poll Results: Net agreement with immigration policies					
	All	Labour	Con	LibDem	Swing
B Labour policy – attributed	34%	63%	22%	11%	35%
A Labour policy – unattributed	32%	34%	54%	12%	30%
A Conservative policy – attributed	43%	29%	87%	20%	41%
B Conservative policy – unattributed	55%	50%	67%	30%	57%

3% margin of error

The net figure was the total in agreement minus the total in disagreement.

We should note there was an error in the published summary: the line A – Labour policy – unattributed should read (in comparison with the Line B – Labour policy – attributed):

	All	Labour	Con	LibDem	Swing
A Labour policy – unattributed	63%	65%	75%	53%	61%

If this line had been properly printed and properly understood, suspicions might have been aroused. After all, it showed that slapping a Labour badge on a policy actually *increased* support among supposed “swing” voters. When something looks too good to be true, it generally is.

The argument that those polling results showed the Conservative label was undermining its ability to sell its product was expressed in Michael Ashcroft’s book *Smell the Coffee*:

A telling illustration of how voters regarded the two main parties was offered in The Times in March. “Summaries of the Conservative and Labour immigration policies” were read to respondents, who were asked whether or not they agreed with each. However, only half the respondents were told which policy was which; the others were told that each was a policy “that one of the political parties has proposed”. Approval of the Labour policy was similar whether

respondents realized its provenance or not: net agreement was 34 per cent when attributed, and 32 per cent when not. Though approval for the Conservative policy was higher in both groups, the effect of attributing it to the Tories was dramatic.

When the policy was presented without attribution 73 per cent of voters agreed with it, with only 18 per cent disagreeing, representing a net agreement of 55 per cent. But the group which was told the policy had been proposed by the Conservatives agreed by a much smaller margin of 43 per cent. Agreement was slightly lower at 70 per cent, but disagreement was nine points higher at 27 per cent, with those answering “don’t know” down from 9 per cent to 3 per cent.

The effect on swing voters was clearer still. While only 17 per cent of them disagreed with the unattributed Conservative policy, 29 per cent disagreed when they knew which party had proposed it. Net agreement fell by 16 per cent, from 57 per cent to 41 per cent.

In other words, the Conservative label was undermining its ability to sell its policies. The drop in net agreement between the unattributed and attributed descriptions suggested that one voter in eight – and one in six swing voters – had such a negative view of the Conservative Party’s brand that they would oppose a policy they actually agreed with rather than support a Tory proposal.

Lord Ashcroft refers here to the results of the whole poll, listed in the “All” column, both the gross percentage in agreement and the net percentage (balance of yes and no) in agreement.

He also refers in a separate paragraph to the result among “Swing” voters. We discuss later how these “Swing” voters were assembled.

Both of these conclusions, on two separate results of the poll, need critical examination and will be shown to be based on flawed premises.

### **Problems with the Populus poll**

The Populus poll was more ambitious and comprehensive than the ICM poll. However, there were weaknesses. First, there were errors and shortcomings in the way the poll was weighted between the political parties. Second, the published polling results did not make clear that a split database poll, of the type used by Populus, would inevitably show a slight net movement away from the party with a smaller share of the database, to the party with a larger share of the database, as is analysed below. On this occasion this net movement was exaggerated by using incorrect party political weighting which dramatically reduced the Conservative share of the database vis-à-vis Labour's share.

The first area of weakness to examine is, therefore, the flaws in the way the poll was weighted between the political parties. The Voting Intentions at the head of the online published survey revealed that the voters in the database split as follows:

Conservative	32%
Labour	39%
LibDem	20%
Other	9%

Therefore, the ratio of Conservative to Labour voters is 82.05 per cent.

- a. While it [the "Voting Intentions" breakdown] may have been exact been exact at the time, it should be noted that Labour only polled 36 per cent at the election three months later, so there is a question mark over the accuracy of these figures
- b. The immigration questions were only put to the Conservative, Labour and LibDem voters. The "Others" at 9 per cent were simply ignored.



- c. We have examined the party political weights used in the Immigration questions which can be accessed on line at the Populus website and have confirmed with the pollsters that these were as follows:

Labour	40.8%
Conservative	29.5%

This is a ratio of 72.3 per cent and is a quite different and far more unfavourable ratio for the Conservatives than the ratio used in the “Voting Intentions” total, which was 82.05, as mentioned in (1) above.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, those, such as Michael Ashcroft, who have attached such great significance to the data, should have realised that the results in the “All” column, both A) the percentage agreeing with immigration policies and B) the percentage net agreement with immigration policies, are based on a database which contains Conservatives in a ratio to Labour of 72.3 per cent compared with the Voting Intentions’ ratio of 82.05 per cent and a general election ratio, three months later, of 92 per cent. In other words, the database was substantially overweighted in favour of Labour voters. What is being measured here is a Labour biased database which is bound to show a net unfavourable reaction to a policy bearing the Conservative brand.

- d. The “swing” voters were abstracted from the general database to form a new database as follows. Out of 466 respondents defined as “swing voters”, 295 were “not completely decided” voters taken from those expressing support for one of the major parties but were not weighted in any way. The balance of 171 were “self-defined

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2. The reason is because the published Voting Intentions’ figures are subject to modeling at a late stage in the polling process as all pollsters have done following problems in the 1992 election which happened before Populus existed

floating” voters from the “don’t knows” or “refusers” in the database. Of the 295, therefore, there could be an unrepresentative number favouring any of the parties, albeit weakly. We simply don’t know. It follows that the “swing” database is in no way a weighted sample but is a relatively random selection of voters (likely, heavily Labour and LibDem, albeit weak) and no conclusions can be drawn from it. Again, this is due to the fact that there are more Labour voters in the database than there should be because the ratio being used in the immigration questions is 72 per cent Conservative/ Labour rather than 82 per cent as in the Voting Intentions published at the head of the survey.

Michael Ashcroft stresses the importance of the movement among “swing” voters and states that it was particularly strong. Bizarrely, but tellingly, he is quite correct but the movement was so strong it emphasizes the weakness built into the “swing” database. Those who did not support the Conservatives changed as follows (taken from Tables 20 & 19 on the Populus website). The figures are shown below.

Increase in non-supporters

	Con	Lab	LibDem	Swing
Conservative policy unattributed	14%	21%	30%	17%
Conservative policy attributed	5%	34%	40%	29%
Increase in non-supporters	-9	+13	+10	+12

The increase in non-support for the Conservatives was actually higher among ‘swing voters’, that is the 17 per cent and the 29 per cent referred to in the extract from Smell the Coffee cited above, than it was for LibDems and the same as for Labour voters.

Expressed in percentage terms relative to the base figure, the result is more striking.

## Non-Support for Conservative policies:

	Lab	LibDem	Swing
Unattributed	21%	30%	17%
Attributed	34%	40%	29%
% Increase	61%	33%	70%

The movement against the Conservatives among supposed 'swing voters' once they knew a policy was Conservative is actually greater than among declared Labour or LibDem voters, although the 'swing' voters would be expected to contain a significant proportion of Conservative voters. This makes the result quite unbelievable.

The second area of weakness in the Populus poll is that the polling results did not draw attention to their inherent dependence on the party political composition of the initial database. Readers evaluating the result of a split database poll should be aware of the exact basis on which such a poll is constructed and, in particular, that there is always a net movement away from the party with a smaller share of the database - in this case, the Conservatives.

The normal reaction (as evidenced in this poll) is that, presenting a policy as Conservative rather than withholding its provenance will have the effect of increasing support from Conservative participants while reducing support from Labour and LibDems, and vice versa. Each of these anonymous/party label type questions simultaneously attract and repels. The net change depends on the weighting of the poll.

Because of the simultaneous attraction/ repulsion even if the sample was correctly weighted to the 32 per cent, 39 per cent, 20 per cent, 9 per cent, as in the Voting Intentions, the result of such a poll will always be a small underlying movement from Labour-unattributed to Labour-attributed (as happened) and, in contradiction, an underlying net movement away from Conservative-attributed to Conservative-

unattributed because there are more Labour voters (39 per cent) than Conservative voters (32 per cent) in the database. There will, of course, be other shifts but the shift we refer to is built into the database.

The same underlying movements are also likely to occur with the “swing” voters. Again, the reason is that there likely are more Labour voters than Conservative voters among the “swing” and the “attraction-repulsion” differential will therefore be in Labour’s favour.

So, one would expect that both among the sample as a whole and the “swing” voters, there will be a slight movement towards Labour following “badging” policies and a slight movement against the Conservatives following “badging”.

There was nothing unexpected about a move to Labour following “badging” and a move away from the Conservatives following “badging”. This happened because there were more Labour voters than Conservatives in the database. In the case of this Populus poll, these two trends were exaggerated by the removal of “others” from the immigration question and, most important, by using completely different (and far more unfavourable to the Conservatives) ratios of Conservative and Labour voters (72 per cent instead of 82 per cent in the immigration question) than were the results of the Voting Intentions’ findings. This meant the results were significantly flawed since they exaggerated the move away from the Conservatives which occurred when “badging” took place.

### **Conclusion**

In short, neither the ICM nor the Populus poll provided a sound base for the modernisers’ central contention that policies which might otherwise command popular support become unpopular the moment that the voters realise that they are *Tory* policies. The ICM poll was superficial and woefully inadequate; the Populus poll findings were flawed and contained errors. The findings of these two polls were then misrepresented or exaggerated by leading party members in order to build support for their programme of political

“rebranding”. But as events have shown, a misreading of polling data which is either superficial or flawed is a poor basis for shaping the priorities and direction of a major political party. It is a pity that those on the Tory Right missed the opportunity to look more critically at the data and the claims based upon them; they have paid a heavy price in terms of lost influence as a result of this failure.

TOO 'NICE' TO BE TORIES?

