

Back to the future? Cameron's Conservatives and social policy

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Following the general election of 1979 the Labour Party took many years to come to terms with its defeat and the subsequent dominance of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party. In a similar fashion, the Conservatives too seemed for a considerable time unable to learn the lessons of their defeat in 1997 and the rise of New Labour. After three general election defeats and five leaders since 1997, under David Cameron there does appear to have been some change in the Conservative Party's rhetoric, and to some extent in its policy positions on a range of social policy issues, designed at least in part with the intention of making the Party electable again.

Drawing upon a range of evidence including the Conservative Party's policy documents, speeches by frontbenchers and interviews with 74 MPs and 78 Peers conducted between 2004 and 2008, this paper begins with a consideration of the Conservative Party from 1997 to 2005, before moving on to examine developments under David Cameron, and then to a consideration of the possible support for and the challenges that a Conservative Government might face in getting its social policies through the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The Conservative Party, 1997-2005

The Thatcher legacy

Having been a member of Ted Heath's government from 1970 to 1974, Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 general election on the back of the 'winter of discontent', which had seen high levels of trade union action, including strikes, and a perceived period of poor economic performance. She had become converted to free market views and believed that the state had grown excessively, with levels of taxation being too high and the responsibilities of individuals subverted; she thus set out to reduce and restructure government in the United Kingdom.

The Thatcher governments sought, with mixed success, to cut taxation and public services, to reduce government involvement and regulation, and to privatise state enterprises, and these policies, together with successive election victories in 1979, 1983 and 1987, reinforced her popularity with Conservative Party members, although not necessarily with the electorate. Whilst, in hindsight, the Heath government may perhaps be seen as something of a transition from the 'one-nation' Conservatism that had dominated the leadership of the Conservative Party since the 1950s, the Thatcher governments brought the New Right influenced wing of the Conservatives to the fore. Indeed, the extent of Thatcher's dominance, and the support for her and her policies amongst party members, was to have a major impact upon the Conservative Party for more than a decade after she lost the leadership.

Although Thatcher's successor, John Major, won the 1992 general election, despite virtually a decade of poor economic performance and high unemployment, his government immediately ran into difficulty when the pound was forced out of the European Monetary System, and this was compounded by internal divisions and a growing concern over 'sleaze' within the government.

Part of Margaret Thatcher's legacy to the Conservative Party was arguably to leave it more ideologically driven than it had ever been. The party that had frequently been described as flexible and pragmatic in its pursuit of government was now divided over Europe, the role of the public sector, and moral issues, with the right of the party generally dominant, inside and outside

Parliament. This was to be reflected in the Conservatives' struggle to come to terms with New Labour and its own position in Opposition.

Changing leadership

From the mid-1990s the Labour Party's shift towards the centre and apparent control of the political agenda, together with the Conservatives' attachment to Thatcherism, meant that the Conservatives found it hard to develop an alternative identity and policies. Whilst sections of the party at various points advocated a return to something like pre-Thatcherite 'one-nation' Conservatism, or a new form of 'compassionate Conservatism' which sought to appeal to the public's apparent desire for increased expenditure on public services, this inevitably created tensions with those on the right of the party who continued to advocate tax cuts and a *laissez-faire* approach to welfare provision.

John Major's successor, William Hague, initially attempted to reach out to potential supporters by apologising for the party's failure to listen to voters in the final years of the Major government, adopting a more liberal line on some social issues, such as gender, race and sexuality, and, like Blair, 'modernising' the party by increasing the role of party members in electing the leader. However, Hague's period as leader was ultimately characterised by an attempt to consolidate the Conservative's core support. In terms of policy, Hague's most distinctive shift was to harden the Conservatives' line on the Euro, saying that the UK would not join the single currency for at least two parliaments. In other areas, there was no major shift; Hague struggled to persuade many within the party of the need to convince the electorate that the public services were safe in Conservative hands, and in practice the Party continued to argue for privatisation, low income tax and a flexible labour force.

One notable example under Hague illustrates the problems facing the Conservatives in seeking to move the party towards the electorally profitable centre ground. In April 1999, Peter Lilley, who had been appointed Deputy Leader by Hague and charged with undertaking a major policy review, delivered the R. A. B. Butler memorial lecture, in which he stated that there was a need to renew public confidence in the Conservative's commitment to the welfare state, but argued that 'we will only do so if we openly and emphatically accept that the free market has only a limited role in improving public services like health, education and welfare' (Lilley, 1999). In a significant breach with Thatcherism, Lilley argued that most Conservatives did not believe that the market could effectively deliver universal services like health and education, and that the party had no plans to extend privatisation in those areas. Lilley's speech caused consternation in the party and within the shadow Cabinet, compounded by the fact that it was delivered on the twentieth anniversary of Thatcher's election. This is reputed to have resulted in a certain amount of finger-wagging in the Shadow Cabinet from former Thatcherite Ministers such as Michael Howard (White, 1999), and some veiled criticism from Thatcher herself (Pierce, 1999). Hague was forced to clarify Lilley's points in an article in *The Times*, in which he argued that Lilley's speech did not mark a radical departure from the Conservative past, but that what he had meant to say was that the private sector had a role in making additional provision, and that there should be greater partnership between the state, private and voluntary sectors (Hague, 1999). Lilley himself was moved in a reshuffle which followed shortly afterwards.

By the time of the 2001 general election, with press speculation rife about who was likely to succeed Hague, the Conservatives had produced few new significant policy initiatives, in part because they found it difficult to deal with New Labour's shift to the centre ground, in part because those issues on which they were potentially electorally strongest were those of least salience to voters, and in part because the primary emphasis was on maintaining the party's 'core vote', rather than reaching

out to potential new supporters. The 2001 general election manifesto therefore again called for a smaller state and 'welfare without the state', and emphasised the party's support for the family, including tax cuts, 'freeing' schools from local authority control, increasing police numbers, tougher sentencing for criminals, and increased expenditure on the health service.

Hague resigned within hours of the result of the 2001 general election, having effectively failed to regain any of the electoral ground that the Conservatives had lost in 1997. In the ensuing leadership contest one of the biggest surprises was the defeat of Michael Portillo, who, while previously associated with the right, had moved in a more liberal and socially inclusive direction since 1997. One of the other candidates, Kenneth Clarke, was pro-European, in a party that had become increasingly Eurosceptic. The other three candidates were David Davis, Michael Ancram and Iain Duncan Smith. After the parliamentary ballots left members a choice between Clarke and Duncan Smith, it was not surprising that the latter won 61 per cent of the vote in the ballot of members.

To some extent Duncan Smith's leadership followed a similar line to that of Hague, with attempts to be more positive about public services, to use more socially inclusive rhetoric, and to recognise the 'sins of the past', perhaps best summed-up by then Party Chairman, Teresa May's, speech to the party conference in October 2002 when she said that the public viewed the Conservatives as the 'nasty party'. Despite his much publicised Euroscepticism, following his election as party leader Duncan Smith sought to close down debate about Europe and refocus the party onto issues with appeal beyond the core voters targeted by Hague, such as health, education and transport. In February 2002, he set out his vision of 'Compassionate Conservatism' in a speech delivered on a Glasgow housing estate in which he pledged his commitment to public service reform and helping 'the vulnerable' (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005).

Like Hague, Duncan Smith struggled to generate widespread support for a more inclusive approach to social policy within the Conservative Party, and particularly within the Shadow Cabinet. However, unlike Hague, Duncan Smith's advocacy of 'compassionate Conservatism' did find an audience, particularly amongst a group of new, young Conservative MPs who would eventually come to prominence when David Cameron became leader in 2005. Duncan Smith also had strong support from David Willetts who held the Conservatives' social security portfolio from 1997 to 2006 (a period in which six Labour Secretaries of State held the same brief), and who was a strong advocate of 'Compassionate Conservatism' (Willetts, 2005a). In the run-up to the Conservative leadership contest in 2005, whilst older figures such as Malcolm Rifkind called for a return to 'one-nation' Conservatism, Willetts argued that it was not sufficient for the Conservatives to be 'a bunch of backward looking people who want to recreate British society as it was in the 1950s', and instead advocated a 'new Conservatism' which combined a commitment to a strong economy with social justice (Willetts, 2005b). Interestingly, following Cameron's election as party leader, it was Duncan Smith who was rewarded with the chair of the policy review group on social justice, whilst Willetts, who had supported David Davis in the leadership contest, has remained in the background.

Under Duncan Smith, however, there continued to be no improvement in the Conservatives' performance in opinion polls, although they did do somewhat better in European and local elections. Perhaps as a result, there continued to be whisperings, conspiracies and divisions about Duncan Smith's leadership; there was also some concern about payments to his wife for work done as part of his office, which did not help his position. In autumn 2003 he was challenged by a request for a no-confidence vote by the backbench MP, Derek Conway, which received support from at least 25 Conservative MPs. Following this he lost the confidence vote and resigned.

The next Conservative leader was Michael Howard, a former Home Secretary. Whilst some saw this as something of a return to the Thatcher/Major era, Howard did make the Conservative Party in parliament something more of a political force. However, having backed the war in Iraq, Howard was unable to exploit one of the government's biggest weaknesses and at the 2005 general election, whilst the Party did gain thirty-three seats, perhaps in part aided by Blair and Labour's increasing unpopularity, its share of the vote increased by only 0.5 per cent, undermining any claims of a significant advance, and Howard stood down as leader.

Each of Cameron's three predecessors did appear to embrace more socially liberal and inclusive policies early in their leaderships, but none appeared particularly comfortable in this position and it was perhaps unsurprising that each moved back to the right after failures to increase the Conservatives' standing in the opinion polls (Dorey, 2007). Indeed, the continued support for Thatcherism within the Party leads Bale (2008) to point out that the Party failed 'to separate the impressive election victories (and huge personal following among party activists) by Mrs Thatcher and her far more ambivalent record when it came to public policy and indeed public support' (p. 282), and that the failure to admit that things went wrong made it difficult for the party to produce credible policy responses to New Labour.

From rhetoric to policy?: the Conservative Party and social policy under David Cameron

Following his defeat of David Davis (widely seen as a Thatcherite traditionalist) in a ballot of Conservative members, and reflecting the Party's difficulties that had brought him to the leadership, David Cameron made clear that the Conservatives needed to broaden their electoral appeal beyond the core vote that was then insufficient to deliver victory. In particular he quickly sought to make Conservative candidates more diverse, by including more women and black candidates in winnable seats through the development of an 'A-list'. He also argued that the Conservatives had to accept that Blair and New Labour had been right in their analysis of the mood of the United Kingdom in the 1990s, with economic success and social justice going hand-in-hand.

Cameron almost immediately began to alter the language used by the Conservative Party and to move in the direction of the political centre ground. Early in his leadership he argued, for example, for the Conservatives to support social action to promote social justice and combat poverty, stating that economic stability would take precedence over tax cuts, and suggesting that the Party should reach out beyond its core support. Cameron's stance on such issues was widely perceived as genuine, and as harking back to 'Tory paternalism' and one-nation conservatism (Dorey, 2007), as well as reflecting his experiences of the NHS with his disabled son, Ivan, who died in February 2009 aged only six. Critics, however, noted that he had been one of the architects of the Party's 2005 general election manifesto.

Cameron's early years as leader saw a considerable emphasis on social inclusion which arguably marked a significant break with the Thatcherite past. In the 2006 Scarman Lecture he said:

Let me summarise my argument briefly. I believe that poverty is an economic waste and a moral disgrace. In the past, we used to think of poverty only in absolute terms – meaning straightforward material deprivation. That's not enough. We need to think of poverty in relative terms – the fact that some people lack those things which others in society take for granted. So I want this message to go out loud and clear: the Conservative Party recognises, will measure and will act on relative poverty (Cameron, 2006c).

However, in contrast to Labour, Cameron also argued that 'it involves a dramatic decentralisation, a big shift in emphasis... from the state to society', and emphasised the role of the voluntary sector in tackling poverty (Cameron, 2006c). He later suggested that 'Communities, rather than the state, are best equipped to effectively tackle social deprivation', that 'The answer lies in communities themselves, not in well-meaning schemes directed from Whitehall' and that 'Social enterprises in particular represent a huge potential resource for our most hard-pressed communities... The social enterprise is the great institutional innovation of our times. At the moment, however, we are not making nearly enough use of the potential of the voluntary sector' (Cameron, 2007).

At the 2006 Party Conference Cameron promised to make the preservation of the NHS a priority and at the same time rejected 'pie-in-the-sky tax cuts' (Cameron, 2006b). However, in the following weeks he also promoted traditional Conservative concerns such as crime and support for traditional family structures. Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in June 2007 Cameron sought to explain how his 'new' approach fitted with more traditional Conservative positions, arguing:

I am a Conservative because of the values that I have believed in all my life: family, responsibility and opportunity. I am a Conservative because I believe that those values lead inexorably to a political agenda whose central mission is to give people more power and control over their lives ... because we want people to rely on their family, not the state; because you can't take responsibility for something unless you have control over it; and because true opportunity means having the freedom to achieve all you can in life.

Cameron has also placed considerable emphasis upon 'quality of life' issues, such as climate change and the environment and the work-life balance, thus linking the Conservative Party's traditional emphasis upon the family as a desirable social institution with ideas such as a 'flexible' pattern of work, arguably in a more sympathetic way than Thatcherite Conservatism and New Labour (Dorey, 2007). Having previously supported the 2004 Civil Partnerships Act, as leader he has also taken a more tolerant line on sexual orientation and lifestyles than many of his predecessors.

In relation to crime and anti-social behaviour, Cameron famously departed from the Conservative Party's traditionally punitive stance, when he argued, in July 2006, in a speech to the Centre for Social Justice that the recent media furore over young people wearing 'hoodies' was misplaced and that:

The long-term answer to anti-social behaviour is a pro-social society where we really do get to grips with the causes of crime... Family breakdown, drugs, children in care, educational underachievement - these provide the backdrop to too many lives and can become the seed bed of crime... Of course, not everyone who grows up in a deprived neighbourhood turns to crime - just as not everyone who grows up in a rich neighbourhood stays on the straight and narrow. Individuals are responsible for their actions - and every individual has the choice between doing right and doing wrong. But there are connections between circumstances and behaviour...

going on to argue that in order to understand what causes such behaviour requires an understanding of the reasons for it, that law enforcement is not sufficient as an answer, and that the role of the voluntary sector is crucial in contributing to an understanding of the challenges that young people face and in offering the care and emotional support that they need (Cameron, 2006a). However, Bennett (2008) argues that within a year Cameron was reiterating the view 'that

punishment is legitimate, that we are faced with dystopian moral decay and that the long-term solution lies in a reassertion of a traditional family structure' (p. 464).

Perhaps the most significant element of Cameron's message, particularly around social policy, is the idea that society is 'broken', whether applied to family breakdown, welfare dependency or poverty, or to problems with public services, such as schools, hospitals, policing and housing. In this respect Cameron's Conservatism owes something to his predecessor as Conservative leader, Iain Duncan Smith, who, after standing down, established the Centre for Social Justice which produced a report entitled *Breakdown Britain* (2006) and a subsequent report *Breakthrough Britain* (2007). Whilst the reports contained a mix of fairly traditional Conservative thinking, such as support for the traditional family and tax incentives for married couples, they also provided some new ideas such as a childcare tax credit and the tapering of financial support for parents. The reports also highlighted the way in which state provision could be seen as having replaced the role of charities and community organisations, to the detriment of the role and ideas of those groups. As a response to this there is perceived to be a need for a smaller central state, with more significant roles being played by many of the organisations of civil society.

Whilst the early years of Cameron's leadership saw a significant change of rhetoric and image for the Conservative Party, where policy development was concerned, they were, arguably deliberately, 'policy-lite', with frequent general statements of principle from the leader together with assertions that policies take time to develop. Kenny (2009) has pointed out that 'The first two years of his leadership witnessed a concerted attempt to shift public perceptions of the Tories and to develop Cameron's own political persona in ways that symbolised this transformation. This involved an important set of symbolic and policy shifts, designed to ram home the message that the party was willing to move away from Thatcherism and the rightward lurches on crime, migration and morality attempted by his predecessors William Hague and Michael Howard' (p. 152).

With echoes of New Labour's Policy Forum, the Conservatives established six policy review groups, including those on 'Public services improvement' (to look at issues including health, education, social care and social housing), chaired by Stephen Dorrell and Baroness Perry, 'Social justice' (examining topics such as family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency, addictions and the voluntary sector), chaired by Iain Duncan Smith, and 'Globalisation and global poverty' (looking at areas such as overseas aid, international development and international conflict), chaired by Peter Lilley. These groups included people drawn from outside the world of mainstream party politics, such as academics or practitioners, generally establishing sub-groups to look at particular issues, again often drawing upon additional outside experts. These resulted in a series of 'Policy Green Papers'. Whilst specific policy proposals were often lacking, and indeed the Party leadership generally failed to endorse particular policies or recommendations, it is possible to identify a number of themes or common features across the Policy Green Papers. These included: a continued use of assessment and increased sanctions for benefit claimants; a commitment to a strong voluntary and social enterprise element in society and the provision of public services, together with significant private sector input; promises of reductions in bureaucracy, but retaining inspections and audits; an emphasis on choice for consumers of services.

Where policies have been adopted, in places there are clear echoes of past Conservative policy ('we will recognise marriage in the tax and benefits system' (Conservative Party, 2009a) and a commitment to 'tough sanctions' for unemployed people who refuse to engage in welfare to work programmes (Conservative Party, 2009b), although there are others such as a commitment to real increases in health spending, and raising the basic state pension, albeit only in line with earnings, which may be less familiar from the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

However, even now, less than twelve months from a general election, the Conservatives' social policies remain generally vague, with policy statements frequently referring to what they will not do ('We will scrap stop and search forms and cut bureaucracy to allow police officers to spend more of their time on the streets fighting crime' (Conservative Party, 2009c)), being rather imprecise ('devolving power to local authorities' (Conservative Party, 2009d), 'improve discipline and behaviour in schools' (Conservative Party, 2009e), or making it 'easier for social tenants to own or part-own their home' (Conservative Party, 2009f)), or about structure rather than substantive services (introducing directly elected police commissioners, 'we will set the NHS free from the ministerial meddling that has resulted in money being diverted from patient care to wasteful bureaucracy', Conservative Party, 2009g)).

Clearly, as with Tony Blair's New Labour message, there are different, and indeed arguably contradictory, strands within Cameron's rhetoric and statements, whilst, in general, the Conservative's policies continue to lack specificity, and in some areas, even a clear sense of direction. It remains unclear the extent to which the Conservatives' attempts to move into the centre ground and to promote new social policies and a commitment to public services, including the NHS, can in reality fit with those approaches which emphasise and are likely to produce a small state, with services provided by the private and not-for-profit sectors. Similarly, attempts to identify the ideological underpinnings for Cameron's Conservatism may be complicated by its political pragmatism and its drawing from a variety of political traditions. However, it does appear to represent a return to a form of Conservatism that is less ideologically driven than since the 1970s.

Like Blair and the other architects of New Labour, Cameron has had to respond to what he saw as new political realities, including, for example, that issues such as inflation and trade union power are no longer key concerns, and that opinion amongst the electorate had changed (Norton, 2008), leading to a view that the Conservative Party had to 'modernise', so that, for example, in responding to issues such as poverty and social 'breakdown' he recognises a role for the state and for public services, including in creating the conditions for a flourishing voluntary sector, and therefore seeks to draw upon both one-nation and neo-liberal approaches, as well as aspects of New Labour discourses (Kerr, 2007). Similarly, attempts to disavow the Thatcher years, including the statement that 'there is such a thing as society, it's just not the same thing as the state' (Conservative Party, 2006), can be seen as responding to a changed politics, as much as a statement of ideology.

Conservative policies and public opinion

Since 1997 a great deal of effort has been expended by Conservative leaders in trying to persuade the public that both the economy and public services are safe in Conservative hands. If Cameron is to succeed where his predecessors have failed, this will be the result of a marked shift in public attitudes towards the Conservative Party. However, it may also represent a shift in public attitudes towards the role of the state. Throughout the Thatcher and the Blair years, despite the adoption by governments of both left and right of policies designed to reduce the level of state involvement in welfare provision, indicators of public opinion, such as the annual *British Social Attitudes* survey, suggested sustained and broadly consistent public support for a high level of state provision. However, in recent years evidence suggests there has been a shift in public attitudes about the degree and nature of state provision which may benefit the Conservatives.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the public remain committed to a broad range of state provision in a number of sectors. In particular, whilst Labour sought to introduce a more selective approach to social policy in some areas, public support for a broad range of state provision

in some respects increased during Labour's first two terms. When asked whether provision in a range of areas was mainly the responsibility of the government, the person's employer, or individuals and their families, a consistently high proportion feel that it is mainly the government's responsibility to pay for healthcare for the sick, ensure that long term sick and disabled people have enough to live on, and provide for the unemployed (Table 1). Only in the case of providing enough support for individuals to live on in retirement does public support fall below 80 per cent, although a growing majority still favour state support in this area.

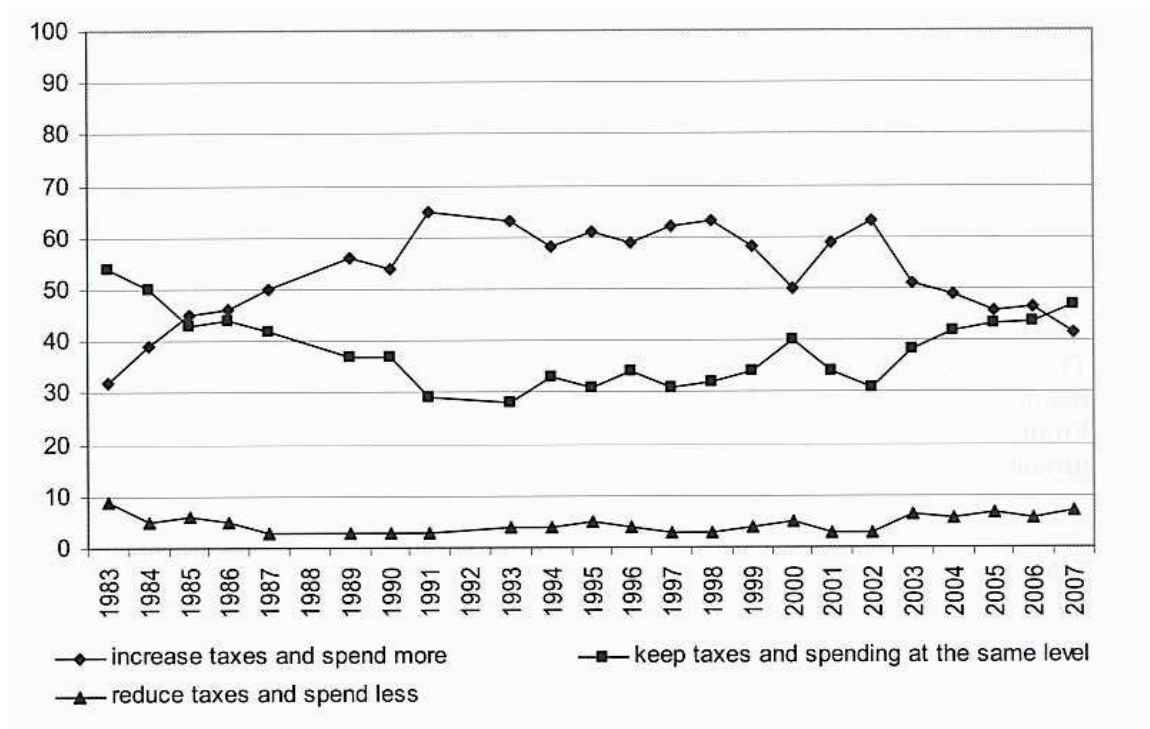
TABLE 1: Public attitudes to state versus personal responsibility, 1998-2003 (Jowell et al, 1998; Park et al, 2005)

% saying that the responsibility should be...	1998				2003			
	Health	Retire-ment	Sick-ness	Unemployment	Health	Retire-ment	Sick-ness	Unemployment
mainly the government	82	56	80	85	83	58	83	81
mainly the person's employer	9	9	9	3	7	11	8	3
mainly the person and their family	6	33	10	10	7	29	7	14

Even taking into account a relative lack of support for state retirement provision, and declining support for government spending on social benefits, it is apparent that a large proportion of the public feel that welfare provision is mainly the responsibility of the government. Evidence of broad public support for state provision is reinforced when people are asked to choose their priorities for extra government spending from a long list of policy areas. The mass public services, health and education, consistently head the list by a very large margin. Support for spending on housing and social security benefits, once consistently listed in third and fourth place, has slipped in recent years, with public transport and police and prisons now garnering more support. In contrast, areas such as roads, defence, help for industry and overseas aid, receive little priority for extra expenditure (Sefton, 2003; Park et al, 2005; Park et al, 2009).

Perhaps more significantly, surveys of public opinion indicate considerable and consistent public support for increasing taxes to pay for spending on health, education and social benefits (Sefton, 2003; Page, 2005; Taylor-Gooby, 2005; Appleby and Phillips, 2009). *British Social Attitudes* surveys indicate that the proportion of people supporting an increase began to rise steeply in the 1980s, from around one third to more than a half, and remained above that level until 2003 when support for tax rises began to fall (Figure 1). 2007 was the first year since the mid-1980s that the number of respondents advocating an increase in tax and spending fell below those wanted tax and spending to remain at the same level. The fall in support for tax rises from 2003 may be a response to the Government's well-publicised increase in National Insurance in 2002. However, whilst the majority of the public may feel that tax and spending are now at an appropriate level, there is clearly very little support for cuts in taxes and services, which have been supported by less than 10 per cent of respondents since the survey began in 1983.

FIGURE 1: Attitudes to tax and spend, 1983 – 2007 (Appleby and Phillips, 2009)



The level of public support for state provision, and in particular the lack of support for cuts in tax and expenditure, would suggest that there would be relatively little public support for Conservative policies designed to roll back state provision or to cut taxes and presumably services. However, recent *British Social Attitudes* surveys suggest that since Labour's election in 1997 there has been a hardening of public attitudes towards welfare recipients, and ideas about the role of government in the redistribution of wealth. Johns and Padgett (2008) draw upon the *British Social Attitudes* data to suggest that since 2002 'there has been a steep plunge in perceptions of social injustice and in support for income redistribution' (p. 208) and that fall may be a delayed reaction to the waning of consideration of equality in the parties' discourse. Similarly, they find that from the 1990s there has been a steep decline in support for welfare values, with people becoming less supportive of benefits to poorer people, less sympathetic to the recipients of welfare, and more critical of welfare dependency. On specific policy areas they also find levels of support for more government spending on unemployment benefits declining over twenty years (from 40 per cent in 1985 to 16 per cent in 2006), and more recently, a drop in the proportion of the population believing that it is the responsibility of the government to provide jobs.

In the same volume Taylor-Gooby and Martin (2008) also identify declining sympathy for the poor across a range of questions, including in terms of support for the government having a responsibility to reduce differences in income, for redistribution of income from the better off to the less well off, and for government spending more on welfare benefits to help the poor. They suggest that attitudes may be affected by perceptions of what the world is like, beliefs about the impact of policies, and the social values that direct people's judgements, and that that each of these has shifted in recent years, producing a climate where it is difficult, including for politicians, to argue for the reduction and elimination of poverty.

Curtice (2009) has argued that in shifting public attitudes to the right Labour achieved something which the Conservatives had failed to do during the Thatcher and Major years. He illustrates this with reference to shifts in opinion on redistribution and attitudes towards benefits levels, which began to display significant movement to the right after Blair's election in 1997. This shift has been achieved, Curtice suggests, primarily by changing the attitudes of Labour supporters, while the views of Conservative supporters have changed little. The result is a significant narrowing of some of the differences between Labour and Conservative supporters, and the emergence of an important electoral battleground in the centre of British politics (Curtice and Fisher, 2003; Curtice, 2009).

TABLE 2: How Britain moved to the right, 1983-2007 (Curtice, 2009: p. 177)

	% saying unemployment benefits are too low	% saying government should redistribute from better off to less well off	% left of centre
1983	46	n/a	n/a
1984	49	n/a	n/a
1985	44	n/a	53
1986	44	43	52
1987	51	45	55
1989	53	51	58
1990	52	51	59
1991	54	50	54
1993	58	48	59
1994	53	51	64
1995	51	47	61
1996	48	44	58
1997	46	n/a	51
1998	29	39	52
1999	33	36	50
2000	40	39	52
2001	37	38	49
2002	29	39	53
2003	34	42	51
2004	23	32	42
2005	26	32	44
2006	26	33	43
2007	26	32	44

Note: n/a = not asked

Source: *British Social Attitudes*

These shifts in public opinion suggest that Cameron may well be a beneficiary of Labour's attempts to develop a more selective, targeted approach to welfare, and in particular the recent hardening of the Government's attitude towards those in receipt of welfare benefits. The rightward shift in public

attitudes, coupled with Cameron's attempt to position the Conservatives on the centre-ground on social issues, does suggest a growing convergence between Conservative and public attitudes. However, in general terms on the question of welfare public attitudes continue to be somewhat closer to, and in some respects to the left of, Labour. Moreover, whilst there is now considerable evidence for a shift to the right in public attitudes on social issues, what is not clear is whether the current economic downturn and the resulting rise in unemployment may lead public attitudes to swing back towards support for a higher degree of state provision. *British Social Attitudes* data, such as that presented by Curtice and others above, indicates that public attitudes hardened during a period of economic prosperity, but also suggests that in times of economic hardship, such as during the recession of the 1980s, public support for more generous state provision increases. If that is the case, then support for Conservative policies which are designed to reduce the role of the state is far from guaranteed. Whilst Cameron's attempts since 2005 to emphasise the Conservative's commitment to social justice may have moved the party closer to public opinion than at any point since the 1980s, any hardening of the Conservative approach risks shifting the Conservatives off the centre-ground currently occupied by the public, and indeed by Labour.

The Conservative Party in parliament

Of course, even if the Conservatives do win the general election, like all governments, they will be faced with the reality of implementing policies and getting legislation through parliament. One of the fundamental problems facing the Conservative Government led by John Major prior to the 1997 general election was that the parliamentary Conservative Party, which had so often in the past been characterised by its pragmatism and unity, was fundamentally divided. Conservative divisions over Europe, and over the future direction of the party, which continued into Opposition did much to undermine the legislative programme of the Major Government between 1992 and 1997, and significantly damaged the Conservatives' electoral prospects at the end of that parliament, and beyond. If Cameron is to enjoy more success than his predecessors, then he must be able to present a united parliamentary party to the electorate prior to the 2010 general election, and persuade those newly elected Conservative MPs to support his policies in the chamber of the House of Commons in the years following the election.

Moreover, Cameron will face a new parliamentary barrier to his legislative programme with which previous Conservative leaders have not had to contend. Labour's reform of the House of Lords has for the first time created a chamber in which no party holds an overall majority. Whereas the existence of a large number of hereditary Peers had meant that previous Conservative governments were able to rely upon an in-built majority in the House of Lords, governments of whatever political hue are now likely to have to spend considerable time and effort navigating legislation through the upper House. This section considers the attitudes of Conservative MPs and Peers and their potential implications for social policy under a Cameron government.

The House of Commons

For much of the period of opposition prior to the 1997 general election the Labour Party had been deeply divided, and the Party owed its subsequent success in part to its ability to present an image of unity. As the work of Cowley and others has shown, this outward presentation of unity did not survive long into government with significant divisions within the parliamentary Labour Party on a range of topics, including social policy issues (Cowley, 2002). In contrast, Cowley predicts that a future Cameron government will enjoy a 'decent honeymoon from his MPs' and that 'the prospects of dissent will be limited early on' (Cowley, 2009). This conclusion is due in part to an assessment of the voting behaviour of current Conservative MPs, who have been more prepared to vote with the

leadership than their opposite numbers on the Labour backbenches, and indeed than backbench Labour MPs prior to the 1997 general election. In addition, an incoming Conservative government will also bring with it a large number of new MPs, many of whom will have sought their seats and been selected under Cameron's leadership, and many of them, although not all, might therefore be expected to share some of his views and policy objectives.

However, whilst the Conservatives under Cameron appear to be somewhat more united than they were under Major, there remain fundamental divisions within the parliamentary party and on issues related to social policy there is considerably less party unity than there was under Thatcher's leadership in the 1980s. Bochel's work on MPs' attitudes to welfare in the 1980s revealed that whilst there were fundamental divisions between the attitudes of MPs from each of the main parties there was a great deal of consensus within parties, with the attitudes of backbench MPs closely reflecting those of the party leadership (Bochel, 1992). Our recent research on MPs' attitudes to welfare reveals that although there is now a much greater degree of cross party consensus in MPs' attitudes to welfare, there is much more division within each of the main parties (Bochel and Defty, 2007b).

In the case of the Conservatives, while there are clearly a substantial proportion of Conservative MPs who favour only a minimal role for the government in social policy, there has been a movement towards the centre in terms of their views on the role of the state in relation to the provision of welfare (Table 3). A significantly smaller proportion of Conservative MPs (36 per cent) now believe the government should provide only a safety-net for those in the most need compared with the position in the 1980s (70 per cent) (Bochel, 1992). Indeed, among those Conservative MPs who supported a more active role for the state in improving people's lives there were many who came close to New Labour's views, referring, for example, to government having a role in building communities and in improving people's life chances, and a number who emphasised the importance of tackling poverty, particularly amongst children and older people.

TABLE 3. MPs' views on the role of the state in welfare, 2004-6 (percentage of valid responses by group)

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	SNP/Plaid Independent	Total
Safety-net only for those in most need	0	36	0	0	11
To support the extension of private provision	0	18	0	0	5
Beyond a safety-net to work with individuals and the private and voluntary sectors to improve lives in a range of sectors	0	45	0	20	14
Beyond a safety net to provide a mechanism to enable others to lift themselves out of poverty/into work	49	0	43	0	30
High national minimum level of services/universal provision	31	0	50	60	28
Redistribution of wealth	20	0	7	20	12

Number	35	22	14	5	76
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A similar pattern is clear in relation to attitudes towards responsibility for the provision of welfare services, with Conservative MPs' views being spread fairly evenly from a Thatcherite emphasis on private provision to more centrist positions around partnership between the public and private sectors and/or the voluntary and not-for-profit sectors. This emphasis on mixed provision was in some cases linked to what several Conservatives referred to as a new appreciation that the market will not always provide. Several echoed Peter Lilley's 1999 speech, referring to the limitations of private provision and the need for other providers to pick up where the market has failed. Significantly, however, whereas many Labour MPs in this context referred to the need for public-private partnership, there was much more discussion amongst Conservative MPs about the need to involve the voluntary and not-for-profit sectors, rather than the state.

Similarly, in contrast to the Thatcher years, relatively few Conservative MPs advocated tax cuts and resultant cuts in services. Conservative MPs were aware that policies on spending restraint left them vulnerable to accusations of seeking to cut public services. Such sensitivity has doubtless contributed to the Party's emphasis on streamlining and efficiency savings in government departments and public services. Nevertheless, some Conservative MPs, including frontbenchers, had forthright opinions on the need to rein in spending. One prominent backbencher spoke about open warfare within the party over Cameron's commitment not to cut taxes asking 'how can the Conservative Party not advocate tax cuts?'. Moreover, all of the interviews took place before the current financial crisis and consequent pressures on public expenditure. It may be that the relatively small number of Conservative MPs who were prepared to privately express their desire for significant cuts in taxes and services may in future feel able to be more open about their aspirations.

Interestingly the shift in attitudes amongst Conservative MPs cannot solely be attributed to Cameron's attempts to reposition the party on social issues but may reflect a broad shift away from Thatcherite policies under Hague, Duncan Smith, Howard and Cameron. Even before Cameron's election as leader there were a number of Conservative MPs, including former Ministers from both the Thatcher and Major governments, along with frontbenchers under Howard and Cameron, who sought to dissociate themselves from the Thatcherite past. These MPs made statements such as 'there is such a thing as society' and that 'people are social animals not atomised individuals'. One former Cabinet Minister under both Thatcher and Major declared that there was 'now a degree of humility, a degree of honesty, that we haven't succeeded in resolving the cycle of poverty and deprivation' but that it was now clear that the state did have a role to play. Several pointed out that the party was indebted to Iain Duncan Smith for drawing their attention to the need to tackle social deprivation, particularly in the inner cities.

However, as has already been suggested, there was by no means universal support within the parliamentary party for Cameron's position on social issues. A significant proportion of Conservative MPs continue to believe that the state should provide nothing more than safety-net for those in most need. There were powerful arguments about the disincentive nature of state provision and several calls for increased charging or fundamental cuts in services. Moreover, whilst there was clearly a small group of Conservative MPs who were strongly committed to developing an active Conservative approach to ameliorating poverty, they were hardly evangelical about the issue. One observed that he did not talk to his colleagues about this kind of thing and suggested that whilst such ideas were prevalent amongst those involved in Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice, he had no idea how widespread they were within the bulk of the parliamentary party or, more particularly, amongst party members in the country.

It is also far from clear that support for Cameron is greater amongst the more recently elected Conservative MPs. Cowley observes that some of those Conservative MPs who entered the House of Commons for the first time in 2005 have been particularly rebellious. Almost two thirds have voted against the party whip since they were elected, and five out of the twenty most rebellious Conservative MPs are from the 2005 intake (Cowley, 2009). This is perhaps not surprising. Cameron himself only entered Parliament for the first time in 2001, and has had little time either as an MP or as party leader to have an impact on attitudes within the party. Moreover, although it appears that Duncan Smith's interest in social justice has had some influence over a small group of Conservative MPs who are particularly interested in social issues, the frequent changes of leadership since 1997 means that Cameron's immediate predecessors have also had little impact. In contrast it appears that Thatcher remains a talismanic influence on Conservative MPs and particularly newer MPs. In interviews, MPs first elected in 2005 frequently referred to Thatcher as an influence, much more so than MPs who actually served in the Thatcher governments, perhaps because they were more likely to have achieved political maturity and first entered parliament under an earlier leader such as Heath. Perhaps as a result Conservative MPs first elected in 2005 were more likely to express the view that the state should provide only a minimal safety-net than more experienced Conservative MPs who were more inclined to state that their attitudes had changed somewhat since the 1980s. Whether this characterisation will apply to the 2010 intake of Conservative MPs is of course unclear.

Overall there are potentially significant divisions within the Conservative Party in the House of Commons. Even before Cameron's leadership there was a significant group of Conservative MPs who were keen to distance themselves from Thatcherite policies and who saw a role for the state in supporting individuals and communities. However, there is also a significant group on the right, who continued to believe in a minimal safety net and an emphasis on private provision. Many of these MPs were prepared to privately criticise the party's apparent commitment to social justice and some have been prepared to vote against the party whip in the Chamber. It may be that if the Conservatives win the next general election these MPs will feel less inclined to keep their reservations private. Of course some uncertainty remains, not least amongst Conservative MPs, as to whether Cameron's policies will represent a significant breach with Thatcherism, but if they do, then the dissenting voices within the parliamentary party may be unlikely to remain silent and will need to be accommodated.

The House of Lords

If Cameron faces significant potential opposition from Conservative MPs in the House of Commons, a Cameron government would face a new situation for the Conservative Party in the House of Lords, one where it is in a minority. Labour's 1999 reform of the House of Lords involved the removal of the bulk of the hereditary Peers, and with them the Conservatives' in-built majority in the Upper House. In May 2005, with the creation of 27 new life Peers, of whom 12 were Labour, the Labour Party became, for the first time, the largest party in the Lords, although still far short of an overall majority. As at 1 May 2009 the make-up of the Lords was: Conservatives 196 (including 48 hereditaries), Labour 214 (4 hereditaries), Liberal Democrats 72 (4 hereditaries), Crossbenchers 202 (33 hereditaries), Bishops 25, and 'others' 17. Whilst it might be acceptable for a new Conservative government to create a number of new Peers to enable them to be the largest party in the Lords, the convention that no party should have a majority in the Upper House has become established and, notwithstanding further reform, it is unlikely that a future Conservative government will enjoy an overall majority in the House of Lords.

Lacking a majority in the Lords may not seem to be too big an obstacle given the widespread view that the House of Lords has only played a minor role in the scrutiny of legislation and the work of the

executive in recent years. In addition, the Salisbury Convention means that major government Bills can get through the Lords even when the government of the day has no majority in the Chamber, because the Lords does not try to vote down at second or third reading a government Bill foreshadowed in an election manifesto.

However, in reality the Conservatives might be unwise to rely excessively on either of these viewpoints. With regard to the former, the Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major, and the Labour governments of Blair and Brown, have faced significant opposition, including defeats on major social policy legislation in the House of Lords, and have been forced to modify proposals. Moreover, since the reforms introduced by Labour in 1999, the Upper House has arguably become more prepared to challenge the Government. Research on voting behaviour in the Lords (for example, Russell and Sciara, 2006), and the attitudes of Peers (Bochel and Defty, 2007b) has revealed that the removal of the bulk of the hereditary Peers has enhanced the Lords' belief in its own legitimacy and as a result it has become more assertive. Moreover, research by Russell and Sciara (2007) has shown that around two-thirds of amendments introduced in the Lords are not reversed when Bills are returned to the House of Commons.

With regard to the Salisbury Convention, much may depend upon how clear the Conservative election manifesto is about their policy intentions, particularly when one considers the Party's current reticence about establishing clear and detailed policy. A failure to be clear about legislative proposals, particularly over controversial policies or in the event of a small majority in the House of Commons, might make a Cameron government vulnerable to defeat in the Lords; this might be even more likely should the Lords feel that their views chime with public opinion. Moreover, since 2005 the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have suggested that may not feel bound by the Salisbury Convention, on the basis of the enhanced legitimacy of the House of Lords, and what some have claimed is the questionable legitimacy of a Commons majority based upon a low turnout at the polls. In this context, and given that it will be the first opportunity for the Lords to inflict serious damage on a Conservative government, Labour Peers are unlikely to feel well disposed towards an incoming Cameron Government.

The particular challenge facing a Cameron government in navigating social policy legislation through the Lords is not simply based on a change in the balance of power in the Upper House, but also the range of Peers' attitudes to welfare, which are potentially much more significant given the lack of a majority in the House of Lords. In broad terms, there was much less cross-party consensus in the House of Lords when compared to the position in the House of Commons, and in many respects Peers' attitudes were much closer to the more polarised attitudes of MPs in House of Commons in the 1980s than to the current situation (Bochel, 1992). This suggests that Cameron could face significant opposition from all sides in the Upper House. In general the attitudes of Conservative Peers appear to be somewhat to the right of those of Conservative MPs in the Commons, whilst Labour and Liberal Democrat Peers appear to be somewhat to the left of their MPs, and consequently at some distance even from a more socially liberal agenda which Cameron may bring forward. For example, in many cases Conservative Peers hold very different positions on the role of the state in welfare from most of their colleagues in the Commons, and in particular from the party leadership, with 65 per cent of Conservative Peers believing that the role of the state should be to provide only a minimum safety-net and/or to support the extension of private provision, a view expressed by 84 per cent of Conservative MPs in the 1980s, but only 54 per cent of Conservative MPs today. This group suggested, for example, that the role of the state should be 'Minimal. The government is no good at running everything. The voluntary sector is better than the government and the private sector is better than the voluntary sector', and that 'The government should support those who can't support themselves and the rest would prosper in a lower tax regime'. Interestingly,

whilst there is some evidence that the attitudes of some former Conservative Ministers who remain in the Commons appear to have changed in recent years, perhaps as the Party's policies have shifted, many Conservative Peers who served in the Thatcher and Major governments appear to remain convinced of the value of the Party's approach to social policy in the 1980s and 1990s, and are somewhat dismissive of the idea that the Party needs to change direction, with one Peer observing 'little has changed since the 1980s, the state has a duty to provide a safety-net for those who can't sustain themselves' whilst another asserted that 'it's about encouraging single mums to work.'

Whilst there were considerable divisions across parties, there were a considerable number of Peers from across the House whose views coincided around the idea of an active welfare state helping people into work, and providing to support for those who cannot. This included a group of Conservative Peers whose commitment to social justice stems from ideas about 'one-nation' Conservatism which pre-date Thatcher but also closely resemble the statements about social justice made by Conservative Ministers since.

TABLE 4. Peers' views on the role of the state in welfare, 2007-8 (percentage of valid responses by group)

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Cross-bench	Total
Safety-net only for those in most need	0	47	0	14	15
To support the extension of private provision	0	18	0	0	4
Beyond a safety-net to work with individuals and the private and voluntary sectors to improve lives in a range of sectors	0	24	10	29	15
Beyond a safety net to provide a mechanism to enable others to lift themselves out of poverty/into work	30	0	30	19	20
High national minimum level of services/universal provision	39	12	40	33	31
Redistribution of wealth	30	0	20	5	14
Number	23	17	10	21	71

There was amongst both Labour and Liberal Democrat Peers considerable support for universal provision and indeed for a redistributive role for the state. Moreover, in the past it was often argued that most Crossbenchers tended to sympathise with the Conservatives. However, the evidence suggests that in recent years the Crossbenchers have become a more diverse group, particularly since the creation of the House of Lords Appointments Commission. The idea that there has been something of a shift on the Crossbenches was supported by a number of those interviewed, and among the eight Crossbenchers interviewed who had been appointed through HOLAC, their views ranged from support for a limited safety-net, similar to that expressed by many Conservatives, to a rigorous redistribution of wealth, closer to the views expressed by some Labour Peers.

The diverse and arguably more polarised attitudes of Peers towards social policy issues raises potentially significant questions about the likely ability of a Conservative government to successfully navigate its social policy legislation, through the House of Lords. Any attempt to make significant cuts to state provision, whilst likely to attract strong support from some Conservative Peers, will be opposed by the majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat Peers. To further complicate matters for the Conservatives, Cowley (2005) and Bochel and Defty (2007b) found evidence that the Labour government's difficulties in each chamber were effectively reinforcing each other, with opponents of legislation co-operating across chambers, and at the same time the perceived legitimacy of opposition also being increased by its existence in both Houses. With no in-built Conservative majority in the Lords there would appear to be no reason why such a phenomenon should not be repeated in the future. Moreover, even if Cameron attempts to introduce more socially liberal legislation on the basis of some cross-party consensus in the House of Commons, there is no guarantee that this will gain support in the Lords, and may well meet opposition from a combination of right-wing Conservative Peers, and left-wing Labour, Liberal Democrat and Crossbench Peers.

Conclusions

At present it remains unclear what the social policies of the Conservatives will look like at the general election. However, under David Cameron there has been a significant shift in rhetoric and a greater interest in social issues, as well as a recognition that there is a role for the state in responding to social problems, and in that sense the Conservatives do appear to have shifted away from Thatcherism. At the same time, this is not something that has simply emerged under Cameron's leadership, with elements of such changes foreshadowed under both William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith, with the latter's efforts in particular, seen by many Conservative MPs as having had a lasting impact. Yet, whilst perhaps serving to make the Conservative Party more palatable to the electorate, and bringing them more into line with public opinion, which has itself hardened in some respects, policies based upon such approaches would be likely to be much less attractive to Thatcherites, who still constitute a considerable bloc within the Parliamentary Party, both in the Commons and the Lords.

Whilst a Conservative government in 2010 may be likely to be able to command quite high levels of support amongst its MPs, particularly given the inevitably high proportion who will have been selected since Cameron's leadership, and who would also to some extent 'owe' their election to him, the rump of Thatcherite MPs may find greater resonance for their ideas in the Conservative Party outside Parliament. This group could provide significant pressure for more radical right-wing policies, and, in the event of a hung Parliament, a small overall majority, or a decline in public support for the Conservatives, could prove to be a major irritant for a Cameron government.

Recent years have seen arguments about whether the 'transitional' House of Lords has become more assertive, or whether its apparently increasing willingness to challenge and even to defeat government legislation have been a result of Labour's weakness. A Cameron government, and particularly one which sought to implement radical or significantly rightward change, particularly in relation to the reform of public services, would test these views. Such policies could generate opposition within the Conservative Party, but particularly from the opposition parties, and the lack of a majority in the Lords could, in such circumstances, prove a major challenge for the government.

In reality, for an incoming Conservative government, much would be likely to depend upon the strength of its mandate, as measured in terms of share of the vote and the number of seats in the House of Commons, and upon public support, or lack of it, for their policies. Given the need to

navigate through the different topographies of public opinion and both chambers of Parliament, a Cameron administration may have to maintain a difficult balancing act to develop meaningful new directions in social policy, particularly in the event of anything less than a resounding election victory. Should the Conservatives fail to win the general election, then the future shape of their social policies would, of course, come even more into question.

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