

# **Conservative Party Leadership Strategy and the Legacy of Thatcherite Conservatism, 1997-2005**

A dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Doctoral studies are wasted on PhD students. It is a great privilege to spend three (or even four!) years of one's life in academic self-indulgence, an honour not fully appreciated until one re-emerges, slightly bleary-eyed, back into the real world. It is an even greater privilege to get paid for it. For that I am most grateful to the anonymous referees at the University of Sheffield, who deemed a proposal on contemporary conservatism of sufficient value to award me a University Studentship, ahead, I suspect, of much more worthy applications.

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*I conclude, therefore, that as fortune is changeable whereas men are obstinate in their ways, men prosper so long as fortune and policy are in accord, and when there is a clash they fail.*

Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

## Contents

Summary of Dissertation	vi
List of Figures and Tables	vii
Interviewees	viii
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction: The Conservative Party and Electoral Failure</b>	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The historical tradition	5
1.3 Thatcherism and the political analytical tradition	9
1.4 Contemporary analyses	13
1.5 Conclusion	15
1.6 Outline of Chapters	16
<b>Chapter 2 –The Strategic-Relational Approach</b>	
2.1 Introduction	20
2.2 Structure and agency: overcoming the dualism	21
2.3 Agency, rational choice and behaviouralism	23
2.4 The structure-agency interplay: the strategic-relational approach	25
2.4.1 Institutions as structures: the strategically selective context	29
2.4.2 Strategic action: making rational choices	31
2.5 An interpretive caveat	33
2.6 The ideational dimension	36
2.7 Operationalising the strategic-relational approach	37
2.8 Methodology	40
2.9 Conclusion	46
<b>Chapter 3 – Context: The Electoral and Ideational Problem</b>	
3.1 Introduction	48
3.2 The Electoral Problem	49
3.3 The Ideational Dimension	58
3.3.1 Anti-Thatcherites: The One Nation ‘wets’	60
3.3.2 Neo-Thatcherism: Markets and communities?	65
3.3.3 Post-Thatcherism: Conservatism undone?	70
3.4 Conclusion	75
<b>Chapter 4 – Leadership Strategy in Opposition, 1997-2005</b>	
4.1 Introduction	77
4.2 Strategic confusion: 1997-2001	78
4.2.1 A fresh start? The Hague leadership	79
4.2.2 The fresh future curtailed	86
4.3 The search for narrative, 2001-5	93
4.3.1 On the quiet: progress under Duncan Smith	95
4.3.2 Abandoning the search: Michael Howard and a third defeat	100
4.4 Conclusion: strategic failure	103

**Chapter 5 – The European Question**

5.1 Introduction	109
5.2 The European Problem	110
5.3 William Hague: Managing the European Question, 1997-2001	116
5.4 ‘Harder but quieter’: European policy 2001-5	120
5.5 Analysis: Conservative positioning and the salience of European integration	125
5.6 Conclusion: Space for Cameron-ism?	134

**Chapter 6 – National Identity and the English Question**

6.1 Introduction	137
6.2 Devolution: from opposition to acceptance	138
6.3 Nationhood and the politics of immigration	149
6.4 An English Party? The Conservatives and the politics of nationhood since 1997	161
6.5 Conclusion	167

**Chapter 7 – A New Moral Agenda?**

7.1 Introduction	169
7.2 Mods and Rockers: Conservative divisions over social and moral issues	170
7.3 Hague: Bandwagon Politics?	176
7.4 Duncan Smith: The rocker who modernised?	183
7.5 Cameron: The family man?	192
7.6 Conclusion	198

**Chapter 8 – Conclusion**

8.1 Introduction	200
8.2 Theoretical Implications	200
8.3 Leadership Strategy	202
8.3.1 The Parliamentary Party	205
8.3.2 The party membership	208
8.3.3 The electorate	210
8.3.4 Ideology	212
8.4 The Conservatives under Cameron	216
8.5 Conclusion	218

Appendix – Interviewee Biographies	221
Bibliography	225

## Summary of Dissertation

This research is a detailed analysis of the Conservative Party leadership's strategy between 1997 and 2005. Through an application of the strategic-relational approach to political analysis, it examines how the party responded to defeat, and seeks to explain why it struggled to return to a position from which it could effectively challenge for power. The particular focus is on how key figures in the leadership elite interpreted and understood the context they faced, how they sought to orientate their strategies towards it, and how ideology shaped their perspective.

Three dilemmas for contemporary conservatism are highlighted and considered in depth: European integration; national identity and the 'English question'; and social liberalism versus social authoritarianism. These were chosen as each presents a significant ideological challenge for contemporary conservatism. The thesis explores how the leadership handled each of these, and how they related to the party's efforts to develop a strategy for electoral revival.

The research exposes the inconsistent and uncertain nature of Conservative Party electoral strategy in this period. The strategic-relational analysis suggests that this stemmed not merely from the failure of key actors in the leadership, but from the need to address competing and sometimes contradictory contextual demands, and from difficulties inherent in dealing with the legacy of Thatcherism. The thesis argues that an appreciation of the 1997-2005 period is essential for an understanding of the trajectory of contemporary conservatism under Cameron.

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 2.1	From dualism to duality: the strategic-relational approach	27
Figure 3.1	Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat Support, 1992-2001	53
Table 3.1	Best party at managing the economy	54
Table 3.2	Conservative Party Image	55
Table 4.1	Conservative Party Image, April 1997 – May 2001	85
Table 4.2	Conservative Party Image, May 2001 – April 2005	98
Figure 5.1	The Saliency of European Integration to the British public, 1997-2007	121
Table 5.1	Best party on key issues, April 1997	129
Table 5.2	Best party on key issues, February 2001	129
Table 5.3	Best Party on Europe, amongst all voters mentioning the issue as important	130
Table 5.4	Best Party on Europe, all voters	131
Table 5.5	Best Party on Health, amongst all voters mentioning the issue as important	131
Table 5.6	Best Party on Health, all voters	132
Figure 6.1	Conservative vote share at General Elections, 1950-2005	144
Figure 6.2	The Saliency of Immigration to the British public, 1997-2007	154
Table 6.1	Immigration, emigration, and net migration from and to the UK, 1997-2005	155

## Interviewees

Unless otherwise stated, interviews were conducted face-to-face and ‘on-the-record’.

Ancram QC MP, The Rt Hon Michael	Portcullis House, 31 January 2007
Bercow MP, John	Portcullis House, 15 July 2008
Carswell MP, Douglas	House of Commons, 16 January 2007
Duncan Smith MP, The Rt Hon Iain	House of Commons, 27 June 2006
Green MP, Damian	Portcullis House, 24 January 2007
Howard QC MP, The Rt Hon Michael	Portcullis House, 23 May, 2006
Lilley MP, The Rt Hon Peter	House of Commons, 22 May 2006
May, The Rt Hon Theresa	House of Commons, 12 July 2006
Parkinson, The Rt Hon Lord (Cecil)	House of Lords, 22 May 2006
Penrose MP, John	Portcullis House, 31 January 2007
Portillo, The Rt Hon Michael	Private address, 31 May 2006
Rifkind QC MP, The Rt Hon Sir Malcolm	Portcullis House, 29 January 2008.
Streeter MP, Gary	Portcullis House, 9 July 2008.
Tebbit, The Rt Hon Lord (Norman)	House of Lords, 16 January 2007
Widdecombe, The Rt Hon Ann	1 Parliament Street, SW1 31 January 2007

A further four interviews were conducted ‘off-the-record’ with interviewees who preferred to remain anonymous. Where these interviewees have agreed to the use of specific (anonymously attributed) quotations, these are referenced using an agreed pseudonym (for example ‘Conservative MP’ or ‘former member of the Shadow Cabinet’) or simply as ‘anonymous interviewee’.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction: The Conservative Party and Electoral Failure

#### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the actions, perceptions and strategies of the Conservative Party elite leadership in opposition, between 1997 and 2005. At the heart of this research lies a simply stated question. Why has it taken the Conservative Party so long to get back into a position to challenge for power? After landslide defeat in 1997, why has it (apparently) been so slow to adapt, reposition itself and begin rebuilding its support? This becomes all the more puzzling when the adaptive record of the party is considered. It is the most successful electoral organisation in democratic European history, having governed (either independently or in coalition) for 91 of the 111 years of the ‘long Conservative century’ between 1886 and 1997 (Seldon and Snowdon, 2001: 27). Such was its dominance the party became known, and regarded itself, as ‘the natural party of government’. Yet, on any measure, the Conservatives’ performance since 1997 has been one of abject electoral failure. Having suffered a crushing defeat in 1997, they made little discernible progress in 2001 (and on some measures retreated further) and managed only a marginal advance in 2005. After three different leaders and eight years of opposition, the Conservatives still returned fewer MPs than Labour at their nadir in 1983.

Further to this, the 1997-2005 period is particularly unusual when compared to the other lengthy spells of opposition the party endured in the twentieth century. After the 1906 Liberal landslide the Conservatives were out of office for nearly a decade, but had recovered sufficiently to restore parity with the Liberals in the two general elections of 1910 (Coetzee, 2005: 103-6). Similarly after Labour’s landslide victory in 1945, the Conservatives recovered to cut the government majority to just five in 1950, and returned to office in 1951. The 1997 defeat followed eighteen years of Conservative government – an unprecedented period of electoral success built on Thatcherite statecraft. An appreciation of the ideological legacy of Thatcherism is important for understanding the

party in the years of opposition that have followed: paradoxically, as this thesis explores, this legacy may partly account for the failure of Conservative statecraft since.

This conundrum could be approached in a number of different ways. For example, one major external factor that clearly affected the Conservatives' electoral fortunes in the 1990s was the revitalisation of the Labour Party, particularly under the leadership of Tony Blair. By repositioning his party and changing its image Blair redrew the political map, leaving it barely recognisable compared to that of the 1980s. An explanation of Conservative Party failure could therefore be based around an examination of the creation of New Labour and how this altered the political terrain in which the Conservatives must operate. As one of the key architects of New Labour argued, 'without Labour as a demonic enemy, Conservatism lacks bearing and purpose' (Gould, 1999: xii).<sup>1</sup> An old adage of British politics is that oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them. Blair's electoral success can be partly attributed to the fact that he presented the electorate with a credible and attractive alternative to the dilapidated Major administration. Cameron may yet similarly benefit from the degeneration of the Brown government. Conversely, the electoral failure of the Conservative opposition between 1997 and 2005 must surely be assigned in part to the effectiveness of Blair's 'Third Way' as an electoral strategy, but this is not the focus of this research.

Building on the work of authors such as Ivor Crewe (1994), another approach could be to focus on external factors such as the behaviour of the electorate, and consider how class and party dealignment may affect Conservative Party support. An alternative external factor that could be made central to the analysis is the media, and how it has affected party image and voter choices. Linked to this is the question of political marketing, and how political parties should seek to effectively sell themselves in the media age.<sup>2</sup> A further alternative method, exemplified by McIlveen (2008), would be to focus on the internal difficulties the party has experienced in terms of formulating and implementing effective election campaigns. This approach highlights how tactical errors, poor planning, and even

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful summary and review of much of the literature on New Labour, see Ludlam (2000).

<sup>2</sup> A burgeoning literature exists in this area. See for example, Lees-Marshment (2001); Kuhn (2007); Savigny (2003; 2008).

the very structure of the party organisation undermined efforts to improve the Conservatives' general election performance.

The choice of research focus therefore inevitably influences the explanation that results from it. Research into internal party organisation and dynamics will point to the affect these have on party performance. Studies of New Labour will explain how it has impacted upon the political landscape. This is unsurprising (it would be odd if it were not the case), but is worth highlighting. Nor need this be problematic, as long as it is clear where the focus of each particular study lies, and if we recognise that each necessarily represents a partial and to some extent value-laden interpretation.<sup>3</sup> No explanation can hope to account for every possible variable to the exact degree. Indeed, the value of different research projects is often situated in the particular angle or emphasis that they take.

The focus of this thesis is the leadership of the Conservative Party between 1997 and 2005, and how the key strategic actors (namely the successive leaders of the party and other senior politicians) understood, and sought to address, the party's electoral failure. Through documentary analysis and elite interviews, it seeks to expose competing interpretations of this problem, and explain how these were translated into party strategy. A premise of this research is that the legacy of Thatcherite conservatism constituted an important aspect of this process. By exploring several notable sites of ideological dispute for Conservatives (Europe, national identity, and moral issues) the thesis seeks to uncover how party leaders were both ideologically influenced, and how they sought to manage competing ideological pressures. As such, this research is concerned primarily with internal party dynamics, and is not an all-encompassing explanation Conservative electoral failure. It considers how party strategy was devised and implemented, and whether (and why) sub-optimal electoral strategies were pursued. External, contextual factors – most obviously the electorate – are of course important, but the focus is not on these independently, but on how the key strategic actors interpreted and understood them, and sought to orientate strategy towards them.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see the methodology section in Chapter 2 (2.8).

This approach locates the research within a body of academic work which has documented the history and strategy of the Conservative Party. However, as the remainder of this chapter explains, this existing literature struggles to provide a satisfying answer to the puzzle of how such a successful electoral organisation, feted for its adaptive capacity, apparently lost its traditional strengths. In part, this is because there is not much of it: with the exception of the various sustained analyses of Thatcherism,<sup>4</sup> academic attention has tended towards Labour rather than the Conservatives. This propensity was understandably amplified in the 1990s by the rise of New Labour and the commensurate collapse of the Conservative Party as a governing force, although this academic trend is beginning to be rebalanced. This difficulty is compounded because for many years the primary task of students of the Conservative Party, whether working in a historical or political science tradition, was to explain its enduring success. Studies that did consider its periodic spells of opposition were, in the main, preoccupied with demonstrating how these were used to refresh Conservative ideas and organisation in preparation once again for government (for example, Ball and Seldon, 2005; Seldon and Snowdon, 2001).

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on the Conservative Party, with particular emphasis on how it has understood, and sought to account for, its electoral success and failure. It is grouped into two broad categories: a historical tradition which has emphasised the role of pragmatic elite leadership, and a Marxist-inspired analytical tradition which has emphasised the institutionalised sources of Conservative power. This characterisation is something of an academic conceit, for as we shall see, there is substantial crossover between these two clusters. However, it is useful as a means to highlight both the many positive aspects of the literature, and some of its limitations with regard to understanding contemporary Conservative politics.

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, Bevir and Rhodes (1998); Bulpitt (1986); Evans (1997 & 2004); Gamble (1994a); Gray (1994); Hall (1983); Hall and Jacques (1983); Jenkins (1989); Jessop *et al.* (1988); Kavanagh (1990); Krieger (1986); Letwin (1992); Riddell (1991). For an overview of much of the literature on Thatcherism, see Evans and Taylor (1996: 219-246), and Marsh (1995). Also see Chapter 3 for different Conservative perspectives on Thatcherism and its legacy.

## 1.2 The historical tradition

As Addison notes, despite the Conservative Party's status as the oldest surviving political party in Britain, for much of the twentieth century it was a neglected area of historical study: it was, quite simply, 'out of fashion' (1999: 289). This began to change in the 1970s when a number of historians, led by Robert Blake, subjected the Conservatives to serious academic study. There now exists a distinguished scholarly tradition, which has recorded Conservative Party history, with definitive works by Robert Blake (1970; 1998) and John Ramsden (1995, 1996, and 1998) at the forefront. Substantial contributions have also been made by Stuart Ball (1998), John Charmley (1996), Alan Clark (1998), Andrew Davies (1996), Brendan Evans and Andrew Taylor (1996), Anthony Seldon (1996), and Seldon and Ball (1994). It is not the intention of this chapter to systematically review this oeuvre, nevertheless, important themes (which recur in studies of the contemporary era) can be identified.<sup>5</sup>

Emblematic of this body of work is the title of Davies' *We, The Nation: The Conservative Party and the Pursuit of Power* (1996). The recurring theme is a fascination with the political success of the Conservative Party: its quest for power, and its aptitude for modifying itself in pursuit of that objective. As Addison comments, the Conservatives 'have long been renowned for their ability to adapt to new conditions while retaining something of their old identity' (1999: 289). This capacity for reform and reinvention is viewed with awe, not least because it has often revealed itself in unpropitious circumstances. In a typical account, for example that by Seldon and Snowdon, this takes on a cyclical character: after a lengthy period of government (they point to those that ended in 1905, 1945 and 1964) and facing an increasingly hostile climate, the party would be propelled into opposition. Once there, however, the Conservatives typically installed a new leader, renewed their popular appeal, and the party's 'organisation, membership, morale and funding all recovered'. At the heart of this was adaptability: 'the party's reconciliation to political, economic and social change often helped its return to power' (Seldon and Snowdon, 2001: 27).

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<sup>5</sup> See Addison (1999) and Turner (1999) for reviews of much of this historical literature.

Flexibility in the face of change was thus trumpeted as the key to Conservative electoral success, derived in substantial part from the party's willingness to change its leadership (Clark, 1998: 491). As the title of Ramsden's single-volume history would have it, the Conservatives had *An Appetite for Power* (1998). In this respect loyalty to the party and the resultant public unity was their 'secret weapon', the periodic absence of which led to defeat. Loyalty to the leadership was not unconditional, however, and on occasion was withheld from unsuccessful leaders. Reflecting on his own time at the helm Iain Duncan Smith wryly observed that: 'It's still the secret weapon of the Conservative Party, the trouble is it's just got so very secret, nobody can find it anymore!' (Duncan Smith Interview). Conservative leaders embody the party and its course, and failure is not treated kindly. As Bercow comments, the Conservative Party 'wants and expects to be led' (Bercow Interview).

Allied to this proclivity was the widespread idea, popular amongst Conservatives themselves, that theirs was a non-ideological party. Ramsden typifies Conservative history when he argues that where the party faced a choice between power and doctrinal goals, it generally favoured power (cited in Addison, 1999: 296). A weakness of Ramsden's work, Addison argues, is that the role of ideology 'deserves more systematic treatment' than he provides (1999: 295). However, in most Conservative history ideology only plays a secondary role and, where it is acknowledged, it is subservient to adaptability. Conservatism, if it is indeed an 'ideology', must itself be flexible. The primary function of ideology is as a tool, often used in opposition, to refresh and revive the Conservative appeal. For Barnes the fact that the Conservatives, unlike their opponents, were 'non-ideological' was the source of their adaptable nature and consequent success (Barnes, 1994).

The difficulty for contemporary work in this tradition is in explaining prolonged Conservative electoral failure. As it measures leadership against the criteria of electoral success, the conclusion has to be that since 1997 (or indeed since the last Conservative general election victory in 1992) the party has been condemned by devastatingly poor

leadership. In this respect, the Major premiership has been lambasted by a number of Conservatives who have compared it unfavourably with Thatcher's (Ridley, 1992; Tebbit, 2005). The agency-centred analysis of the historical tradition means that Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard must also be blameworthy. For example, for Collings and Seldon, Hague's leadership represented the 'most futile period in Opposition in the last one hundred years. It was an utterly bleak period that could have been largely avoided with a steadier hand and a clearer strategic direction' (2001: 624). If anything, the party's efforts between 2001 and 2005 were, given the more favourable circumstances of Labour's waning popularity, even less impressive. Having conceded that Hague had 'little room for manoeuvre', no such allowance is granted to his successors:

The finger of blame can be pointed far more clearly at Duncan Smith, and above all Howard. Had Duncan Smith stuck to his centrist beliefs, and had the personality to impose his will on the party, real progress would have been made. But the real culprit is Howard, who managed to be so tactically and strategically inept. Blair and New Labour were no longer the forces in 2003-5 they had been. Howard's singular achievement was to let them off the hook, and hand them victory. (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c: 741).

Howard's contribution to Conservative Party fortunes may yet be reassessed by contemporary historians, not least if events unfold in such a way that his tenure becomes seen as a precursor for a lengthy Cameron premiership. However, a more general problem for such agency-focused historical analyses is that the mechanism previously utilised to ensure Conservative success, namely the willingness to eject ineffective leaders, has been in regular (if ineffective) use since 1997. In a little over eight years the party changed leader on four occasions, but its general election performance remained historically poor, and only under Cameron has a substantial upward and sustained shift in the opinion polls been recorded. It also tends to overlook the fact that in certain respects and against some measures Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard were successful: Hague in reforming the party organisation reducing internal tensions over Europe, Duncan Smith in renewing policy, and Howard in uniting the party.

In 2005, Seldon argued that 'considering the poor choices the party has made since 1997, it must now muster the courage to elect the leader with the best chance of winning the next

election' (Seldon, 2005). This raises the obvious questions of why the party failed to do so in 1997, 2001 and 2003, and why doing so should require courage, rather than commonsense or self-interest. One answer could be the influence of ideology. From a political analyst's perspective, Heppell has persuasively demonstrated that ideology has been a key determinant of voting behaviour in elections to the Conservative leadership (Heppell, 2008; Heppell and Hill, 2008). However, for agency-centred historiographers, the ideational dimension is less easily accommodated. One way out of this difficulty is to claim, as Gilmour does, that since Thatcher the Conservative Party has not really been Conservative (or indeed small-c conservative) at all, but has fallen victim to alien dogma (Chapter 3: 60-65). Mark Garnett's contemporary history sits broadly within this perspective: whilst he does not go as far to claim that pre-Thatcher the Conservatives were un-ideological, he does imply that there is something particularly virulent and pernicious about the neo-liberalism which took hold in the party in the 1970s and 1980s (Garnett, 2003; 2004; Denham and Garnett, 2001; 2002; Gilmour and Garnett, 1997). Garnett's work represents a valuable contribution in no small part because of its sensitivity to and appreciation of the role of political ideas, and in this respect draws inspiration from the 'ideological turn' witnessed in relation to studies of the Conservative Party in the 1980s.

The move towards greater consideration of Conservative ideology was a response to the limitations of the historical tradition in accounting for the rise and nature of Thatcherism. In Turner's view, the result has been two sets of literature running in parallel – one emphasising the structural and societal changes that drove the emergence of the New Right in the UK and elsewhere, and an agency-focused historical interpretation. The latter 'concentrates on the disappointment felt in the party and in the electorate at the ineptitude of Labour government and the failure of Heath's Conservative Party to win elections, to oppose effectively after it had lost them, or to tackle the non-parliamentary resistance of the over mighty trade unions' (Turner, 1999: 286). In other words, this literature explains the emergence of Thatcher and her policy programme by reference to Heath's ineffective (or even incompetent) leadership, rather than as part of a broader ideological or political shift. For observers in the historical tradition, these events were essentially contingent and



agency-driven. However, the upsurge in interest from political analysts in Thatcherism prompted a search for a more encompassing interpretation, as discussed below.

### 1.3 Thatcherism and the political analytical tradition

The transformative effect of Thatcherism reached even into the realm of Conservative Party studies. Previously, Turner suggests, this field had suffered somewhat ‘from an excess of “engagement” among its historians’, who tended to be ‘active sympathisers’ if not actual party activists (1999: 276).<sup>6</sup> Thatcherism (itself a term first coined by the Left) brought rigorous academic study of the party from some of its fiercest ideological antagonists.

As the historical tradition had been concerned with accounting for long-term Conservative electoral success, analysts of Thatcherism sought to explain its capture of economic, political and ideological debate. Pioneering work by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (1983) employed Gramscian Marxism to characterise Thatcherism as a hegemonic project. This ‘authoritarian populism,’ Hall argued, was a dangerous combination of ‘the resonant themes of organic Toryism,’ such as the nation, authority and the family, with the ‘aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism,’ primarily anti-statist competitive individualism (Hall, 1983: 29).

For Andrew Gamble, Thatcherism was an attempt to restore the conditions for Conservative hegemony. He argues that as a political project, Thatcherism had three key objectives: the restoration of the Conservative Party to electoral dominance; the revival of ‘market liberalism as the dominant public philosophy’; and the rejuvenation of state authority combined with a freeing-up of the market economy (Gamble, 1994a: 4). Jessop *et al.* (1988) also viewed Thatcherism as a hegemonic project: for them it was an attempt to ‘reconstitute the electoral base’ of the Conservative Party which was in long-term structural decline (1988: 86). They argue that Thatcher sought to reconstitute both the

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<sup>6</sup> The Conservative peer Lord Blake being foremost among them (Turner, 1999: 276; Blake, 1970).

economy (in the interests of international capital) and ideological discourse to sustain such a shift.

Evans and Taylor highlight the curious similarity of the critiques of Thatcherism offered by 'One Nation' Conservatives such as Gilmour (1992), and those from the Marxist-left such as Jessop, Gamble, and Hall, who share the opinion that Thatcherism was a clear ideological 'project' which divided the nation. Such critiques, they argue, are 'underpinned by their main mistaken judgement, that Thatcherism was a dogmatic ideological project which represented a departure from the party's traditions' (Evans & Taylor, 1996: 230). A more accurate interpretation, they suggest, is to see Thatcherism as simply the latest episode in the history of a party that has long-been ideologically conscious in its resistance to statism and socialism (1996: 240).

Evans and Taylor are right to stress the continuities of Thatcherism with Conservative Party history in terms of both its desire for electoral success, and its ideological unease with high levels of state intervention. However, it is possible to analyse Thatcherism as a 'project' whilst also recognising that it is part of a broadly defined Conservative tradition. There is a particularity to Thatcherism, as an interpretation of and response to the context of the late-1970s. The concern with that context, and the character of the response to it, are both derived from longstanding Conservative tradition. However, that response manifested itself as a more coherent and strategic political project than had previously been seen under a Conservative government. Gamble is therefore correct when he suggests that Thatcherism is best understood as a political project, the primary objective of which was the reversal of British national decline (1994a: 4).

These Marxist-inspired analyses share an interest (absent, as Turner noted, from much of the agency-focused historical literature) in locating Conservative electoral success in the wider social, economic, and political context. Consequently, they tend to exhibit a greater theoretical self-awareness and reflectivity. Like the historical analyses, they seek to account for the party's adaptive capacity, but they focus less on internal party machinations and attempt to situate this in relation to society as a whole. In this way they

are, broadly, much more structuralist than the historical tradition: party change is prompted mainly by external structural crises of the economy, state and society. Only through a consideration of these factors can the emergence and success of Thatcherism be understood.

As Bevir and Rhodes note, ‘there is no monolithic, unified notion of Thatcherism’, but various competing ‘narratives’, each of which is embedded in a wider ‘tradition’ (1998: 97-111).<sup>7</sup> They are correct in their assertion that there is no essentialist account of Thatcherism: rather a variety of interpretations exist. However, we can identify a shift in the way the Conservative Party was studied in the light of Thatcherism, bringing political science concerns to bear on the historical tradition. It would be wrong also to dismiss this turn as merely ‘structuralist’ because many of these accounts do consider agential factors and highlight the contingent nature of Thatcher’s electoral success. The Gramscian leanings of some also provide a welcome sensitivity to the importance of ideas. However, the concern of this mode of analysis is largely with explaining how ideology is used to provoke, explain, or sustain wider socio-economic shifts. It is useful, therefore, to characterise the dominant turn of the literature on Thatcherism as one of movement towards more structurally inclined modes of explanation, in contrast to the agency-focused historical narratives that preceded them. In many ways this was a welcome corrective, but brought with it the risk of underplaying the vital role of strategic actors and leadership.

This concern prompted arguably the most influential single contribution to the debate about Thatcherism, Jim Bulpitt’s statecraft thesis. Bulpitt reasserted the importance of leadership strategy for understanding Conservative Party politics. His approach ‘stresses the need to examine the activities of party leaders in terms of their statecraft – namely the art of winning elections and, above all, achieving a necessary degree of governing competence in office’ (1986: 19). Less emphasis is placed on the ideological particularity of Thatcherism: its distinctiveness lies in its statecraft (Bevir & Rhodes, 1999: 101-2). In short, Bulpitt viewed the historical concern of Conservative Party statecraft as the

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<sup>7</sup> See Bevir (1999) for a discussion of the concepts of ‘traditions’ and ‘narratives’.

preservation of an autonomous, centralised government with sole control over issues of ‘high politics’ (1986: 21-2).

The statecraft approach has much to commend it, and has been successfully applied by Buller (2000). It can be seen as an attempt to balance structure and agency, but has a number of limitations. It is somewhat imprecise, with a rather narrow conception of leadership motives, and has a tendency to underplay the important role of political ideas. This stems from Bulpitt’s juxtaposition of statecraft against modes of analysis that favour either ideology or policy (1986: 19). As Buller and James concede, ‘at times, Bulpitt’s language betrays an almost instrumental view of the role of ideas in politics’ which are ‘employed by politicians to put a “positive gloss” on the cruder notion of winning elections’ (2008: 23). Nonetheless, they maintain that a ‘careful reading’ of Bulpitt reveals a willingness to ascribe more importance to ideology than this would initially suggest, as ‘the implementation of ideas must be crucial to the task of [achieving] governing competence and political success’ (2008: 23). However, even on this reading, ideology effectively remains a means to an end and subservient to the statecraft imperative. Perhaps the most beneficial lesson we can take from considering the statecraft approach (aside from the importance of leadership itself) is that political leaders have multiple objectives against which to measure their achievements, but central to these is political success in terms of holding power.

Bulpitt’s work is best appreciated as a valuable corrective to the tendency, prevalent at the time it was published, to emphasise the particularity and novelty of Thatcherism. This was not only a feature of some Marxist analyses but was common amongst Conservative critics who denounced the new creed as foreign to conservatism (Gilmour, 1992). It is within this debate about Thatcherism that statecraft is most useful. It also highlights the value of explicitly incorporating both conduct and context into our analysis, which the strategic-relational approach (SRA) utilised in this thesis brings to the fore. Before the SRA is outlined in Chapter 2, however, it is worth considering the academic work that has focused on the Conservative Party in opposition since 1997.

#### 1.4 Contemporary analyses

With the fall of communism, Marxist political analysis waned. Aligned with a general decline of interest in the Conservatives following their ejection from office, the relatively sparse literature examining the party has lent more heavily on the historical tradition. As discussed above, much of this is agential in its approach and the focus of its analysis has consequently been on the (in)adequacy of Conservative Party leadership strategies, tactics and personnel since 1997.

Seldon and Snowdon use their historical perspective to draw parallels between the Conservative predicament in 1997 and that faced by the party in the mid-nineteenth century, after the repeal of the Corn Laws (2005b: 244). Paradoxically, a period of immense electoral success (1979-97) saw the Conservative Party lose its hunger for power and its adaptability: 'the two keys' which accounted for its hegemony. In this respect, Mrs Thatcher is personally liable: whilst she achieved 'much of lasting benefit for Britain', she also damaged the party by making it 'more of a right-wing, ideological force than it had traditionally been' (2005b: 245). In their explanation of Conservative failure, Seldon and Snowdon seek to combine internal factors such as 'ill-considered' organisational reform (p. 251) and confused policy-making and marketing (p. 252-5, 262) with external factors such as Labour's reputation for competence and effective opposition from the Liberal Democrats (p. 256, 263). However, beyond a stinging critique of strategic decision making by Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard, they struggle to link these together into a convincing explanation as to why such strategic errors were repeatedly made.

The edited collection by Garnett and Lynch (2003) provides the most comprehensive academic overview of the 1997-2001 period. To date, no equivalent text exists for the 2001 parliament. Quadrennial reviews are also provided by chapters in the various general election series texts, for example Butler and Kavanagh (2002); Cooper (2001); Cowley and Quayle (2002); Cowley and Green (2005); and Lansley (2001). These works provide useful overviews and insights into certain aspects of the period, such as the party's election campaigns. Other political scientists have turned their attention to particular issues and

areas of interest: notably Bale on Euroscepticism and the Conservative Party (2006a); Heppell and Hill on the ideological composition of the parliamentary party and its impact on leader selection (2005; 2008); Kelly on strategy under Hague (2001); Harris on the politics of nationhood under Hague (2005); Taylor on the failure to develop a new narrative (2005); and Quinn on the need to change party-image in order to regain the centre-ground (2008). These and other works are drawn on throughout this dissertation. This research complements and builds on the existing literature by considering party strategy over eight years of opposition and in relation to particular dilemmas for conservatism (see chapter outlines below).

As well as the academic studies, the Conservatives' troubles have been the subject of much journalistic comment. Newspaper sources are drawn upon throughout this thesis, both to trace particular events and as a barometer of the party's success or failure in winning-round public opinion. One book length study worth mentioning at this juncture is Simon Walters' *Tory Wars* (2001). Based on an extensive range of interviews and his insider access as a Westminster correspondent, Walters explores the fratricidal conflict between modernisers and traditionalists during the 1997-2001 parliament. He provides a fascinating account of internal party politics, up to and including the extraordinary series of events that led to the election of Iain Duncan Smith as leader in September 2001. Whilst the drama is worthy of a Brazilian soap opera, Walters' attention is almost exclusively on the personalities of those involved, limiting his analytical purchase and appreciation of wider contextual factors. Jo-Anne Nadler's biography of William Hague (2000) is similarly insightful about the persona of her subject, but again does not seek to locate this within a broader political context.

To this can be added a voluminous outpouring by Conservatives themselves.<sup>8</sup> David Willetts has led the search for an intellectual revival of conservatism (1997; 1998a; 1998b; 1999). Contributions by Ancram (2007), Letwin (2003), and Streeter (2002) have also sought to address the question of what twenty-first century conservatism should look like. Ashcroft (2005), Philp (2006), and Tyrie (2001), have looked in detail at election defeats.

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<sup>8</sup> Competing Conservative interpretations of the context faced in 1997 are explore in Chapter 3.

These, and numerous politicians' speeches, provide a valuable source of information about how Conservatives understood, and sought to address, the challenge they faced.

This research concentrates on the 1997-2005 period for several reasons. Firstly, this period has received relatively little academic attention. Secondly, bookended and bisected by election defeats, it provides an excellent opportunity to explore the strategies that were deployed over an extended time in opposition, how these were developed, and where and how they failed. Thirdly, through analysis of key sites of ideological dispute, it allows us to consider the resonance of Thatcherism in the contemporary Conservative Party, and assess the ideological evolution and position of the party today. Finally, a comprehension of Conservative politics since 1997 is essential for understanding the emergence of David Cameron and his agenda for modernisation. What this period may tell us about Cameron's Conservative Party is considered in the conclusion to the research (Chapter 8).

## **1.5 Conclusion**

The fundamental purpose of political parties is to win elections and implement their agenda in office. Historically, no party appeared to validate this more strikingly than the Conservatives, and students of the party dedicated themselves to explaining this success. However, this overview of the literature, whilst highlighting its breadth and value, has also demonstrated that it has difficulty accounting satisfactorily for contemporary Conservative Party failure. In particular, the agency-centred historical tradition leads to explanations based on the shortcomings of individual leaders, lacking sufficient appreciation of vital contextual factors. Conversely, whilst the political analytical tradition has many strengths, its spotlight on explaining Conservative hegemony risks limiting its effectiveness in accounting for its subsequent collapse.

In short, this review suggests the need for a more nuanced theoretical approach, drawing on the strengths of both the historical and political science literature. Statecraft has much to commend it in this regard. Leadership is at the core of what any political party does. how it communicates with the electorate, how it interprets reality and how it defines its strategy.

As the agency-focused nature of its historiography shows, this is particularly so in the case of the Conservative Party. As Taylor has noted, ‘the importance of the leader and the style of leadership for the Conservative Party cannot, therefore, be underestimated’ (2008: xiii). Statecraft is limited, however, by its focus on governing and the Thatcher era.

Since Bulpitt’s (1986) article was published, a wider debate in political science over the nature and relationship of structure and agency has gathered apace.<sup>9</sup> This has been an important element of the movement towards more theoretically informed political analysis, and the preference for explicit consideration of methodological questions.<sup>10</sup> One more-generalised theoretical approach which seeks to overcome the dualism of structure and agency is the strategic-relational approach (SRA). This is not an approach that has been explicitly applied to party politics. However, by directing the focus of analytical attention to strategic action it offers a potentially fruitful new avenue for studies in this field, and appears particularly apt in the case of the Conservative Party, where elite leadership has played a central role throughout the party’s history. Applied with the notion of the strategically selective context, the SRA provides the framework for a mode of analysis which highlights the interplay between strategic action and the environment in which it takes place, and the importance of how that environment is interpreted and understood by political actors. The strategic-relational approach utilised in this thesis is outlined in the next chapter.

## 1.6 Outline of Chapters

### *Chapter 2: The strategic-relational approach*

Through a discussion of structure and agency in social and political analysis, this chapter introduces the analytical framework used in this thesis: the strategic-relational approach (SRA). The utility and relevance of the SRA for this research is then explored. The SRA is preferred as it leads us to focus on a number of key arenas, namely leadership, party,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Hay (1995), McAnulla (2002).

<sup>10</sup> See Marsh and Stoker (1995; 2002); Hay (2002).



electorate and ideology. In other words, it directs us towards an appreciation of the Conservative Party both as a strategic actor and as an institution. After a discussion of how the SRA will be operationalised to analyse the Conservatives in opposition, the chapter outlines the research methods used in this thesis.

### *Chapter 3: The Electoral and Ideational Problem*

The strategic-relational approach leads us to note the importance of the context in which actors operate. Chapter 3 considers the context faced by the Conservative Party at the beginning of the case-study period, in 1997. This is explored through the problems faced by the Conservatives on both the electoral and ideational dimensions. The electoral context is considered in terms of the party's opinion poll rating and public image, particularly with regard to the key issue of management of the economy. The works of three Conservative thinkers (John Gray, Ian Gilmour, and David Willetts) are used to consider the intellectual response of conservatism to the Thatcherite legacy. This ideological uncertainty over the direction of Conservative politics after Thatcher is an important frame of the debates in the party post-1997.

### *Chapter 4: Leadership Strategy in Opposition, 1997-2005*

The pivotal contribution of the SRA is to orientate our analysis towards strategy. Within the context established by Chapter 3, Chapter 4 provides an overview of the leadership strategy pursued by the Conservatives across the 1997-2005 case-study period. It contends that these have been sub-optimal in electoral terms, characterised by uncertainty and inconsistency. The chapter concludes that the strategies pursued by Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard were sub-optimal: they underachieved even within the inauspicious context that they faced. The three case-study chapters that follow explore in detail how the party leadership sought to manage the challenges posed by the key issues of European integration; national identity and the 'English question'; and social, sexual and moral policy. These three cases were selected for several reasons. Most importantly, they each represent a significant ideological challenge for Conservatives. European integration

caused the deepest divisions in the party since the Corn Laws, contributing to Thatcher's downfall and undermining the government of her successor. Since 1997, the ongoing debate over British membership of the European single currency, the Treaties of Amsterdam and Nice, and the proposed European Constitution, all ensured that Conservative leaders were unable to ignore the European question. Devolution and immigration present difficult questions for the Conservatives in the politics of nationhood, testing the viability of Thatcherite conceptions of national identity. The Conservatives' stance on social, sexual and moral subjects has also been the site of noteworthy intra-party disagreements. Forced to confront these issues by Labour's policies on the family and sexual equality, the party has again faced the question of whether Thatcherite positioning in this area can be translated into a viable electoral strategy. In short, all three cases offer the opportunity to explore significant issues in contemporary conservatism left unresolved by eighteen years of Conservative government, and to examine how the leadership sought to manage these.

#### *Chapter 5: The European Question*

European integration has long been one of the most controversial and divisive issues in British conservative politics. This chapter traces how this issue has been handled since 1997. Whilst most academic attention has focused on the intense divisions Europe caused in the Conservative Party during the Thatcher and Major governments, this chapter suggests that since 1997 this issue has largely been neutralised within the party. The Conservatives, it is argued, have settled on a broadly Thatcherite Eurosceptic position. In this respect, the 1997-2005 period is of great importance, as it was the actions of key actors during this time that shaped how this came about.

#### *Chapter 6: National Identity and the English Question*

Chapter 6 further explores the Conservative Party's conception of national identity in the contemporary context of the emergence of a stronger and more visible sense of Englishness. Intimately related to this are the key policy issues of immigration and

devolution, and the party's approach to these since 1997 is mapped out. In the light of these two areas, the chapter considers the Conservatives' reluctant drift towards becoming an English party. It concludes that the Conservatives currently betray a lack of confidence in their conception of nationhood, which is significant as traditionally it forms a central aspect of both their identity and their electoral appeal.

#### *Chapter 7: A New Moral Agenda?*

This chapter examines party policy and rhetoric on social, sexual and moral issues since 1997. It focuses on the Conservative approach to gay rights (notably the disputes over Section 28 and adoption rights for gay couples), and family policy (particularly with regard to attitudes towards marriage). The Conservatives were forced to consider their positions on these issues in response to the government's moves to equalise the age of consent, abolish Section 28, introduce civil partnerships, scrap the married couples tax allowance and introduce a system of tax credits not dependent on marriage. These debates are linked to the wider question of party modernisation, and the division between modernisers and traditionalists. It concludes that the most significant division in the Conservative Party is now along the social, sexual, and moral policy divide, and that this poses a significant challenge to David Cameron.

#### *Chapter 8: Conclusions*

The concluding chapter brings together the findings of the research, and considers the implications of the 1997-2005 period for the future of Conservative politics. It also reflects on the use of the strategic-relational approach to political analysis.

## Chapter 2

### The Strategic-Relational Approach

*I was less aware of the Prime Minister's power than the constraints upon his power.  
When you are in there, you don't feel you can do anything.*

Bernard Donoughue, Head of the Downing Street Policy Unit under Harold  
Wilson and James Callaghan, 1974-9. Quoted in Hennessy (1996: 169).

#### 2.1 Introduction

The focus of this research is on the elite leadership of the British Conservative Party since 1997, the way in which it has interpreted, debated, and sought to respond to the context they faced. As such, the research methods debate in political science is not the primary concern of this thesis. However, the epistemology an author adopts is inevitably reflected in the research that eventuates, so the trend in recent years in favour of rendering one's position explicit from the outset is welcome, not least because it saves readers from attempting to guess it. This also helps to promote a healthy pluralism amongst political researchers. The nature of social and political life means that no theory will ever offer us a complete explanation of the social or the political world, rather theories exist as a lens through which we can view the world to help us gain a better understanding of it. Consequently in political science 'diversity should be combined with dialogue' to the mutual benefit of all aspects of the discipline (Marsh and Stoker, 2002: 4).

This chapter outlines the epistemology that guides this research, and develops the variant of the strategic-relational approach (SRA) that will be utilised as its methodology. This method is particularly suited to the analysis of the contemporary Conservative Party, as it recognises the crucial role played by key political actors at the leadership level and the importance of their interpretations of their situation, as well as demonstrating how the 'contoured terrain' of the context actors face influences both the paths they choose and their success or failure (Hay, 2002: 129). The chapter's first section introduces the issue of structure and agency in social and political research, and briefly considers the pitfalls of fatalism. The major agential approaches in political studies – behaviouralism and rational choice – are introduced, before the strategic-

relational approach as developed by Bob Jessop (1990 and 1996), and expanded by Colin Hay (1995 and 2002), is summarised. Hay's seminal *Political Analysis* (2002) is the clearest exposition of this approach and it is this work which forms the baseline for this discussion.

The chapter then considers the nature of social structures, which are characterised as transforming institutions that are both derived from, and crucial in shaping, human interaction. The interpretive caveat notes that the version of the strategic-relational approach utilised here is classified as an interpretive rather than as a critical realist epistemology. I then briefly comment on the important place of ideology in this analysis. The relevance and utility of this approach to the research topic is considered in greater detail, and its application to the case study of the Conservative Party in opposition since 1997 is discussed. Finally, the advantages and limitations of research methods employed (primarily interviews and document analysis) are considered.

## **2.2 Structure and agency: overcoming the dualism**

Whenever we consider a political or social issue we are faced with the question of the extent to which change (or indeed, continuity) resulted from the actions of people (agency), or factors seemingly beyond human control (commonly labelled as structures). As Gamble notes: 'if social thought becomes 'fatalistic'... it succumbs to the belief that there is very little scope for human agency to change the world' (2000: 17). On the other hand it seems self-evident that a world without fate:

...would mean a world in which there were no constraints, everything could be imagined, and everything willed. Such a voluntarist view that human beings can achieve whatever they desire suggests they have no fate other than the one they individually choose. But a more sober appreciation of the human condition recognises the inescapable tension between agency and constraint and therefore between politics and fate. (Gamble, 2000: 17).

Although it is not always explicitly recognised, this inescapable tension is at the heart of all attempts at political explanation.<sup>1</sup> In examining *x*, to what extent did political actors bring about change (perhaps with results very different to those that they originally envisaged), and to what extent was it the result of 'fate' or 'structures'?

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<sup>1</sup> Smith (1999) effectively utilises the prism of structure and agency to examine the UK core executive.

Unfortunately for social and political theorists, ‘the agent structure-problem is not solved by deciding what proportions [of each] to put in the blender’ (Hollis & Smith, 1991: 393). Whilst ‘structuralism’ has become something of a term of abuse amongst political scientists (Hay, 2002: 102-3, 107), the discipline collectively retains a wealth of euphemisms that are employed to try and capture the apparent helplessness of political actors that we often observe in the face of a ‘sea-change’, the ‘tide of history’, ‘institutional pressures’ or ‘political forces’. This chapter will demonstrate how these forces (which from an individual perspective *can* seem to push us inexorably towards a certain fate), are in fact the direct result not of some invisible causal structures, but from the cumulative effect of human actions over time.

This approach entails the rejection of the idea of a distinct structural realm with causal effects at the ontological level, in contrast to the views of critical realist theorists such as Archer (1995) and McAnulla (2005). This also distinguishes it from Jessop, for whom ‘the SRA insists on the ontological distinctiveness of structure and agency’ (Jessop, 2005: 52).<sup>2</sup> It should be made clear from the outset that this is not to advocate a form of voluntarism. The fact that the constraints on our individual action are the result of the aggregated actions of many other members of our society – both past and present – does not make them any less serious to us, or indeed potentially any less powerful. Moreover, it does not mean that concepts of structure and agency (or, as will be developed below, strategic actors and strategically selective contexts) cannot be usefully employed at the analytical level. On the contrary, this chapter will show how such concepts can be used to help us make sense of the complex political world, without hardening this distinction into an ontological dualism with all the philosophical problems which that entails.

The mode of political analysis adopted in this thesis therefore emphasises the vital role of individual agents in the formation of political outcomes. Perhaps the key contribution of the SRA, certainly for this research, is to alert us to the behaviour of strategic actors. As Hay notes, it is the presence of ‘conscious and reflective subjects, capable of acting differently under the same stimuli,’ which ‘renders the social sciences

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<sup>2</sup> It might therefore be argued that the position advanced here is too far removed from that of the SRA’s original exponent for it to be regarded as ‘strategic-relational’. However, whilst the philosophical basis differs, the analytical mode is, I suggest, sufficiently similar to justify the use of the language of the SRA.

qualitatively different from the physical sciences' (2002: 50). This is the key difficulty that has thwarted the attempts to construct a 'science of the political' which can accurately predict social and political conduct or even add significantly to our understanding of such behaviour. Similarly, it is the inherently unpredictable nature of the agents that are central to processes of political change that has led most political scientists to regard purely structuralist explanations of politics that ignore this role as inadequate.

### **2.3 Agency, rational choice and behaviouralism**

Agency-based approaches have been preponderant in both British and American political science since the 1960s, when the behaviouralist movement rose to prominence in the United States. Behaviouralism applied the empiricist ideas of logical positivism to the study of politics, in probably the most successful attempt to create a 'science' of politics.<sup>3</sup> Studies such as the seminal *Who Governs?* by Robert Dahl (1961) attempted to find general principles of human behaviour through the aggregation of statistical data gathered by systematic observation. The intuitive appeal of the behaviouralist approach lies in this reliance on directly observable, 'factual' data.

Behaviouralism has been particularly influential in the field of electoral studies, where its proponents have considered the relationship between how people vote and an almost infinite number of variables. They have successfully identified many correlations between different factors and voting patterns. However, as Hollis notes, 'it is far from plain that prediction and explanation are two sides of the only coin' (1994: 65). Correlation does not equate to causation, and can at best offer us a partial explanation. As Hay notes, 'pure empiricism can establish no basis for adjudicating between relations of cause and effect on the one hand and mere coincidence on the other, save except for... a probabilistic approach, and... an appeal to arguments about the specific temporality of that sequence' (2002: 79). In short, behaviouralism has been incredibly helpful in highlighting what it is that political actors are doing, but has had much greater difficulty in explaining why they are doing it.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of logical positivism see Hollis (1994: 40-65); see also Sanders (2002) for a brief overview of the development of behaviouralism.

Rational choice theory has suffered from a similar affliction. Its theorists also take the individual as their primary unit of analysis, although their approach differs from that of the behaviouralists in that it is deductive rather than inductive. Abstract, parsimonious, behaviour-predicting models are constructed upon two key assumptions derived from neo-classical economics. These are firstly, that people are rational, self-interested utility maximisers; and secondly, that they have a clear, hierarchical set of preferences such that in any given context there is only one optimal ('rational') course of action open to them (Hay, 2002: 8-9). As one proponent of rational choice theory argues, 'it is inconsistent to believe that economic actors are basically self-interested but that political actors are not' (McLean, 1991: 496).

Anthony Downs (1957) applied these basic assumptions about human nature to voters and political parties in one of the most influential works of modern political science, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. In this text, Downs acknowledges that the rational choice model he utilises has only a narrow conception of rationality and human behaviour:

Thus we do not take into consideration the whole personality of each individual when we discuss what behaviour is rational for him. We do not allow for the rich diversity of ends served by each of his acts, the complexity of his motives, the way in which every part of his life is intimately related to his emotional needs. Rather we borrow from traditional economic theory the idea of the rational consumer. Corresponding to the infamous *homo economicus*... our *homo politicus* is the 'average man' in the electorate, the 'rational citizen' of our model of democracy. (Downs, 1957: 7).

Downs candidly admits that this simplification limits the 'comparability of behaviour in it [the model] to behaviour in the real world,' but regards this approach as being necessary as without it: 'all analysis of either economics or politics turns into a mere adjunct of primary-group sociology' (1957: 8). However, it is upon this *a priori* assumption that people are both rational and self-interested that his theory rests. This aspect of Downs's work came under attack soon after its publication. In a critique of Downs's work, W. Hayward Rogers (a behaviouralist) claimed that theorems that purport to explain political action in the real world must be derived from empirical study of political behaviour in that world, and that 'use of the deductive method,' must come after such investigation, not before (1959: 485).



Replying to this criticism Downs claimed that his model ‘is precisely a device for the creation of conclusions that can be tested in the real world’ (1959: 1096), defending his position that: ‘theoretical models should be tested primarily for the accuracy of their predictions rather than for the reality of their assumptions’ (1957: 21). Downs clearly recognises that for his model to have predictive power, a high degree of simplification and abstraction from reality is necessary. As Hay notes, although this is a refreshingly sanguine attitude to take, ‘what confidence can we have in a theory based on premises whose implausibility is freely acknowledged by its most prominent exponents?’ (2002: 34). It would appear that like behaviouralism, rational choice theory falls foul of the danger highlighted by Hollis of confusing prediction (however accurate) with explanation.

#### **2.4 The structure-agency interplay: the strategic-relational approach**

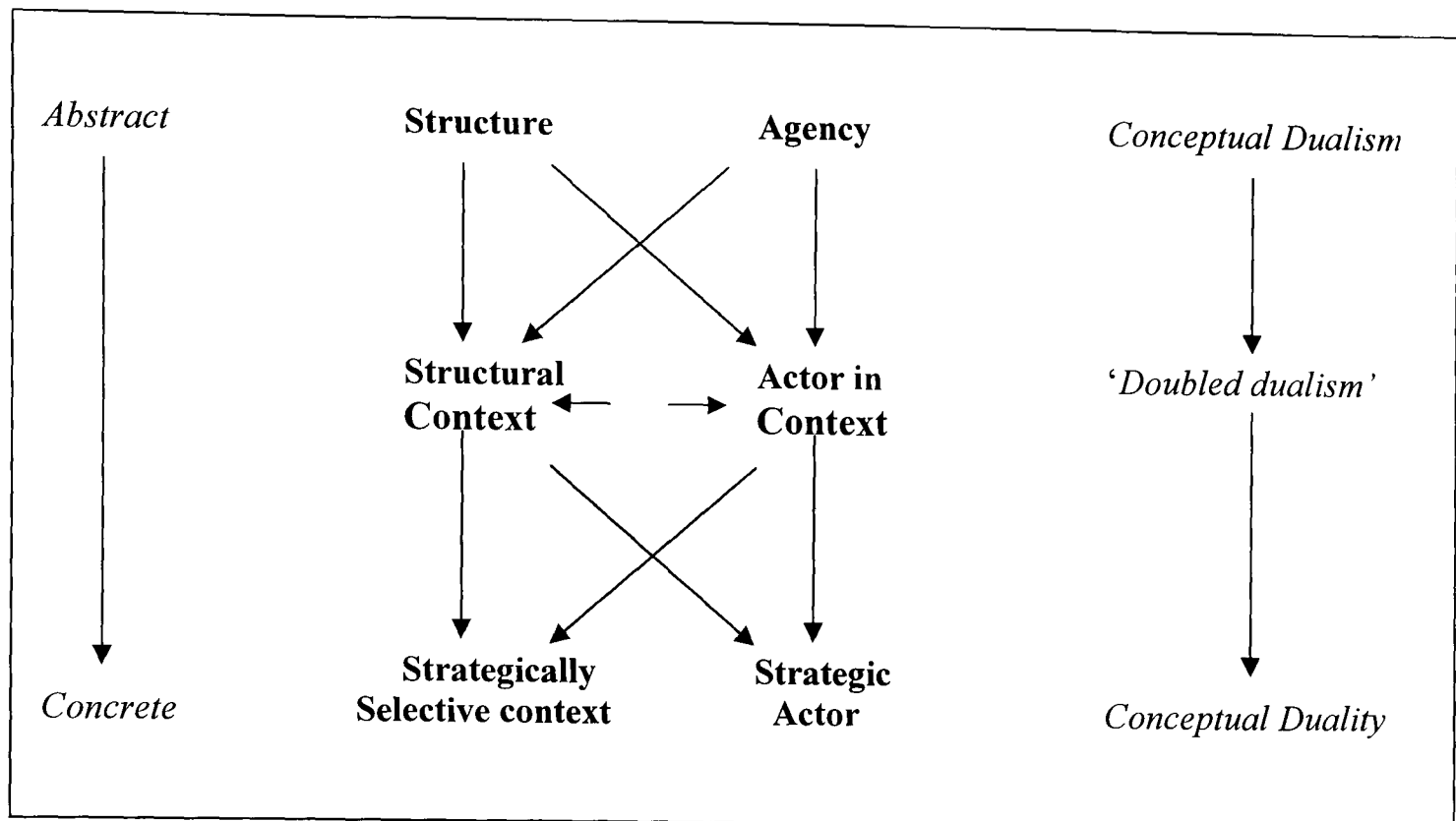
Experience tells us that no individual agent is ever totally free of all constraints, and our actions, although not *determined* by structural factors, are often influenced by the ‘structures’ of the context in which we find ourselves. Sometimes this context will enable us to take a certain course of action, whilst on other occasions it will inhibit, or even totally prevent, a course of action. This is hardly a novel observation. In one of his most oft-quoted passages, Marx noted that: ‘Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances that they themselves have chosen’ (Marx, 1852; quoted in Hay, 2002: 117). The strategic-relational approach outlined here aims to develop this truism into a more sophisticated analysis.

For this analysis to be effective, it is important to clarify what we mean by ‘structure’. The sense of powerlessness in the face of invisible constraints that Donoghue describes in the opening quotation will have been felt by all political actors at some time. The classic example of this is the perception that voting fails to make a difference. This is the justification many non-voters give when asked why they do not take part in elections. In a sense, they are correct: as a collective endeavour, politics is not (usually) susceptible to the preference expressed by a single voter. However, this feeling of powerlessness, whilst real for the individual, is a consequence of the vantage-point of the individual rather than a result of the existence of autonomous forces restraining (or, conversely enabling) them. As such, ‘the problem is a perspectival one’

(Hay, 2002: 125). Unlike in the physical world, where we are ultimately constrained by the laws of gravity and the vagaries of nature (which again may on occasion assist us in our ambitions rather than work to thwart them), there are no pre-existent, autonomous or causal structures in the social world. As will be discussed in greater detail below, social 'structures' exist only as a result of the action of a multitude of individual agents both past and present: as such they only exist *in relation to* (rather than independently from) human agency. The distinction between structure and agency is analytical not ontological, so 'the two must be present simultaneously in any given situation' (Hay, 2002: 127).

The strategic-relational approach attempts to highlight the dialectical nature of the interplay between structure and agency by concentrating on the interaction between the two in the 'real world' rather than in the realm of abstract theory that the two terms imply. To assist in this objective Jessop introduces the concepts of *strategic action*, which is that taken by conscious, reflective strategic actors, and the *strategically selective context* in which it is formulated and takes place (Jessop, 1996: 119-28; Hay, 2002: 126-134). Jessop reaches this pairing by first taking the dualism of structure and agency and, in a two-stage process, bringing each into the other. As Hay illustrates, this is best demonstrated diagrammatically (Figure 2.1). The first move brings agency into structure (producing a structured context), and structure into agency (producing a contextualised actor), thus moving closer towards a pairing more grounded in actual political contexts, rather than the realm of abstract theorising. The second move then brings the contextualised actor into the structured context (producing a strategically selective context) and the structured context into the strategic actor (producing the strategic actor). In this new conceptual pairing 'the dualism of structure and agency has been dissolved' (Hay, 2002: 128).

*Figure 2.1: From dualism to duality: the strategic-relational approach*



SOURCE: Reproduced from Hay (2002: 128).

This conceptual duality of the strategic actor and the strategically selective context has several advantages. Most obviously, it provides a terminology that more clearly describes the intertwined nature of structure and agency. Although these concepts can be separated for analytical purposes, the new terms remove the temptation to harden this distinction into an ontological one, and to attribute an independent causal role to abstract, apparently hidden structures that do not, in fact, have any existence independent from human agency. Even if such invisible structures did exist, it would be most presumptuous of us to claim that we had discovered the vantage point necessary to view them that had eluded political practitioners and observers for centuries. Indeed, if we were able to make such a discovery it would collapse in on itself, as politicians would be able to internalise this new structural information and nullify its causal effects by building it into their strategic calculations. The only way such an ontological distinction can be coherently maintained is if it retains a residual structuralism – to the effect that such structures can never be observed or (fully) understood by people; are ever present; and retain an independent causal role throughout the whole of human history. Unfortunately, such a position logically implies that independent social structures could both pre-exist society and exist without human society itself, which is

philosophically untenable if one accepts that society is a purely human, not an abstract, construct. As King rather more eloquently states:

[In] contemporary social theory... human social relations have been effaced by a dualistic picture in which structure confronts the individual. The infinite richness of shared human life is reduced to a mechanical model; structure imposes upon the agent, the agent reproduces the structure. Yet society is nothing but human social relations. Society consists precisely of the complex web of social relations between people. These social relations are the social reality. (King, 2004: 13).

The concept of the strategic actor also more closely depicts the conscious and reflective nature of human agents that was our starting point in differentiating the human, social world from the natural world. Unlike the narrow conception of human agency employed by more ‘scientific’ approaches to political studies such as rational choice, it deliberately denies that in any given situation the actions of a particular actor can be predicted according to a set of rules or principles that supposedly govern human behaviour, for example the self-interest maxim. As such, actors have the power to make choices, and their choices do shape political outcomes. Of course, in certain situations a particular actor may have very few options open to them, or feasibly only one apparently plausible course of action before them. Such constraints are not the result of some external meta-structural ‘forces’ somehow acting upon society from outside, rather they are the direct consequence of the actions, beliefs and interpretations of others members of that society both past and present.

This is not a particularly bold or radical claim, but it is certainly one that needs reasserting. Although political studies have seen a welcome revival of interpretive approaches in recent years, much of the discipline has been dominated by a residual structuralism.<sup>4</sup> Sociology has also come to be dominated by a dualistic ontology: ‘the dynamic power of social intercourse has been reduced to a deadening dualism’ (King, 2004: 5). This has been most prominent in the field of critical theory, which currently dominates social theory and is showing signs of crossing over into political analysis.<sup>5</sup> McAnulla summarises the ontology of critical theory as being constituted of three overlapping ‘realms’:

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<sup>4</sup> Recent ‘interpretive’ works include: Bevir (1999; 2005); Bevir and Rhodes (1998, 2003); Rhodes (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Greener (2005) is just one example of recent attempts to import Archer’s ‘morphogenetic social theory’ (Archer, 1995) into political studies.

- The *empirical* realm, which consists of experienced events;
  - The *actual* realm, consisting of events and experiences (not all events are experienced);
  - The *real*, which consists of mechanisms which may be unobservable.
- (McAnulla, 2005: 31).

McAnulla correctly identifies that it is the realm of the ‘real’ which distinguishes critical realism from other philosophies of social science, including both positivist empiricism and what he labels ‘interpretivist/post-modernist perspectives’ (2005: 32). Empiricism restricts itself to that which can be directly observed via our senses, so does not allow room for a realm of unobservable ‘real’ structures. Interpretive approaches focus ‘on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2002: 131). Contrary to McAnulla’s (2005) reading, some versions of interpretive theory do acknowledge that ‘there is a real world out there’ but deny that we have ‘unmediated access to it’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2002: 149). However, interpretive theory does deny that there is a structural realm somewhere beyond human society. It is curious that McAnulla chooses to label this the realm of ‘the real’, when in his conception it is ontologically distinct from real society itself. As the next subsection will attempt to demonstrate, it is the institutions of human society that structure our lives, not the structures of a ‘realm of the real’ somewhere beyond this.

#### 2.4.1 Institutions as structures: the strategically selective context

Institutions include any form of constraint that people devise to shape their interaction with each other. They can be either formal, such as written laws and constitutions; or informal, such as social norms and conventions. They can be either created anew, or simply evolve over time. As North states: ‘Institutional constraints include both what individuals are prohibited from doing and, sometimes, under what conditions some individuals are permitted to undertake certain activities. As defined here they therefore are the framework within which human interaction takes place’ (1990: 4).

In short, institutions play a crucial role in shaping the context in which all individuals, groups, and organisations operate. They can constrain or prevent action, provide

opportunities, or favour certain courses of action over others. The British electoral system, for example, tends to enhance the chances of election of prospective MPs standing for one of the two largest parties. Neither the formal institutions (such as the first-past-the-post electoral system), nor the informal institutions (such as the tendency amongst voters to back one of the two potential governing parties), prevent individuals from being elected MPs either as independent candidates or for one of the smaller parties; but they do reduce their chances. Consequently we can say that the context facing individuals wishing to enter parliament is strategically selective in favour of those choosing to stand for either the Conservative or Labour parties. Similarly this context will inform the strategic calculation that such individuals make when considering whether to stand for election at all, and if so, for which party.

North differentiates between institutions and organisations. Organisations are groups of individuals ‘bound by a common purpose to achieve objectives’, and include political parties, firms, trade unions, and political bodies such as the House of Commons (North, 1990: 5). The Conservative Party is an organisation: the people that comprise it share the common aim of gaining political office in order to implement conservative policies (whatever they may be at the time), but it also acts as an institution for those within it. The formal rules of the party govern, for example, how the leader is selected; and its many informal rules, norms and traditions can both enable and constrain actors within the party. The most vivid illustration of this in recent times has been the difficulty faced by successive Conservative Party leaders in balancing the competing ideological demands of MPs and the wider party membership with electoral considerations, particularly over the issue of Europe.

The SRA characterises the way in which our situation at a certain point in time can appear to favour (or enable) a particular course of action with the concept of the strategically selective context. This states relatively simply that our environment will facilitate certain strategies over others. ‘The context itself presents an unevenly contoured terrain which favours certain strategies over others and hence selects for certain outcomes while militating against others’ (Hay, 2002: 129). Yet it also captures the dialectical nature of the relationship with agency: the context is never fixed, but is constantly being transformed through the actions, interpretations and beliefs of the actors from which it is forged. Over time however, the strategic selectivity of the

contoured context will ‘throw up a series of systematically structured outcomes’ (Hay, 2002: 130). The result of this will be that whilst any single strategic intervention is unpredictable, over a longer period regularities may be detectable: that is the context could be said to have certain regular characteristics. These are the institutions that emerge from human social and political interaction, and that come to structure our environment. For *analytical* purposes then at least we are able to refer to ‘structures’, by which we mean institutions, that have emerged from and influence human interaction, quite different from the abstract unobservable structures in McAnulla’s realm of the real.

#### 2.4.2 Strategic action: making rational choices?

What exactly do we mean when we refer to *strategic action*? The concept is based upon the notion of reflective individuals capable of some form of interpretation of the world around them and the identification of their own goals (which they will devise a strategy to pursue). Hay states that the notion of strategic action (and indeed the whole strategic-relational approach) is premised on the assumption that ‘all action contains at least a residual strategic moment’ (2002: 132). He suggests that two strands of strategic action can be identified: the intuitive and the explicit, which in practice are combined in most actions (2002: 131-4).

Intuitive actions are those which are not generally rendered explicit, but which can still be regarded as strategic ‘insofar as such practices are orientated towards the context in which they occur’ (Hay, 2002: 132). Explicit strategic action occurs when actors consciously analyse and interrogate their strategy for achieving their objective in relation to the context they face, for example a politician attempting to gain office. This is similar to the concept employed by rational choice theory in the sense that actors have a preference set – they know what they would like to achieve – although it differs in that it does not assume that this preference is necessarily informed by pure self-interest: it could, for example, be ideologically motivated. Hay is thus arguing that ‘all actions contain at least a residual strategic moment though this need not be rendered conscious’ (2002: 132).

This is problematic in that if the strategic element of the decision making process occurs subconsciously it is difficult for us to know about it, analyse it, or interpret it – indeed the subject themselves may not be aware of it, or may have a completely different interpretation of it. Therefore:

[T]o make sense, beliefs, desires, and actions must in general be rationally connected. In other words, without presupposition that agents are rational the enterprise of interpreting the meaning of their activity – and thus the point of describing their behaviour as intentional activity – would be undermined. (Fay, 1996: 110).

Hollis agrees that for the most part people act rationally and that the social sciences depend on this belief. However, people's reasons for action are so various that Hollis doubts 'whether there can be any single account of practical reason for all species of rational action or single definition of rationality for all purposes of social science' (1996: 1). To avoid the difficulty associated with attempting to make sense of irrational acts this research assumes that all political action is rationally informed in the broadest sense of the term. In short, I assume that actors are strategic.

However, this research rejects the overly simplistic notion that actors are motivated purely by narrow self-interest, and instead consider them to have a range of complex, competing, and often contradictory beliefs and desires which they try to reconcile in each 'strategic moment'. Their self-interest, therefore, can be interpreted as the pursuit of all the things that they regard as important, so may include a multitude of ideological preferences, as well as the desire to have a ministerial car or not to go out in the rain to vote. Political ideas will be analysed empirically in subsequent chapters by reference to the writings and public statements of the actors under analysis, and through semi-structured elite interviews. Of course this inherently complex picture means that actors may be unsure of which strategies they should pursue, or indeed which of their competing objectives to accord priority. Our lack of unmediated access to the world around us exacerbates this problem, as beliefs, prejudices and ideologies inevitably colour our interpretation of the context and influence the strategic choices actors make. This complex picture is in contrast to the parsimonious models of rational choice, but more accurately reflects social and political reality. Rather than build abstract predictive models this research will attempt illuminate more clearly part of the political world in which we live.



## 2.5 An interpretive caveat

The strategic-relational approach uses the language of *strategic action*, as performed by *strategic actors* within a *strategically selective context*. These concepts are much more useful than those of structure and agency as the term ‘structure’ implies something that is pre-existent, independent and causal; whilst ‘agency’ risks being misinterpreted in an overly intentionalist manner which fails to take account sufficiently of the contoured context faced by actors in the real world. As such, the duality of structure and agency has been dissolved, ‘from our vantage point they do not exist as themselves *but through their relational interaction*’ (Hay, 2002: 127, emphasis added). In other words, as Hay has reiterated elsewhere, our attention is focused on this interactional process, not on either ‘structures or agents as real (and as potentially generative of specific outcomes)’. Therefore, whilst denying ‘the existence of underlying [social] *structures* which may be unobservable’ Hay does not deny ‘the existence of underlying *mechanisms* (structure-agency complexes) which may be unobservable yet causally effective’ (Hay, 2005: 43, original emphasis). Furthermore, he does ‘not deny the analytical utility of appealing to such structures *as if* they were real’ (2005: 44, original emphasis). The justification for using the strategic-relational approach in this thesis is, therefore, primarily analytical. It is not an attempt to assert the superiority of a particular set of ontological assumptions. Where the terms ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ are used, they are an analytical device only. The SRA offers the prospect of an analytical mode sensitive to the complexities of the social world and to the contingent nature of individual human action, hence its great value for the research undertaken in this thesis.

However, perhaps the foremost lesson to be drawn from the (often vigorous) debate about these issues is that in matters ontological, clarity is everything.<sup>6</sup> It is worth therefore making my own ontological position clear, and by way of doing so make a brief comment on that of Hay (2002). As already intimated, by denying the existence of autonomous social structures (a ‘realm of the real’ as McAnulla would have it) my own epistemology is interpretivist. This is the logical position that Hay does not quite seem to arrive at, perhaps because of the critical realist heritage from which the SRA

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<sup>6</sup> See for example the debate between Bates and Jenkins (2007a; 2007b), Furlong and Marsh (2007), and Hay (2007b).

emerged. Hay criticises Archer's morphogenetic theory on the grounds that its insistence that structure must temporally pre-exist action leads to an ontological dualism that implies 'a residual structuralism punctuated only periodically yet infrequently by a largely unexplicated conception of agency' (Hay, 2002: 126). As King argues in his eloquent critique of Archer, the 'structures' that appear to surround us all are formed by other individuals, collectively. Indeed Hay quotes King on precisely this point:

The key error which Archer makes in her derivation of social structure is to draw the sociological conclusion of the existence of social structure from the perspective of a single individual... if she had decentred her perspective to see that the constraint which I face is other individuals – and no less serious for that – just as I form some of the social conditions which mutually constrain others, she would not have fallen into ontological dualism. (King, 1999: 217, quoted in Hay, 2002: 125).

However, Hay then departs from King's stance. It is worth quoting Hay's position at length:

While the structured nature of social and political reality is indeed the product of human agency, it is not simply reducible to it (as King here seems to imply). The relationship between actors and their environment is an organic one. As such the product of human action is, in key respects, greater than the sum of its component parts. It is this that gives structures what Archer terms 'emergent properties'. (Hay, 2002: 125).

However, as King demonstrates, if one accepts that the 'structured nature' of the social and political world is the result of human agency, it is not possible to give those structures 'emergent properties' that are not ultimately derived from human agency. To attribute them with any properties beyond this risks going beyond the solely analytical distinction that Hay wishes to utilise, and back towards the ontological duality that he wishes to avoid. By appealing to structural emergent properties 'greater than the sum of their component parts' Hay is shying away from the interpretive ontology that follows logically from his position, perhaps as a result of a desire to avoid an anti-foundationalist standpoint.

In practical terms however, this does not have a profound effect on the use of the strategic-relational methodology for political research. For as King notes, the interpretive position is not incompatible (as Hay perhaps fears) with the use of the

analytical concept of structure, nor does it necessarily lead to a purely intentionalist account.

This reduction of society to individuals – to other people – in no way gives individuals free reign to do what they will. It does not in any way imply an individualistic libertinism. The interpretive tradition fully recognises the constraint which society places upon the individual but the interpretive tradition does not hypostatise this constraint into certain structural properties but insists that social constraint stems from the relationships between individuals which necessarily limits the kinds of practices which any individual can perform. ... practically, a heuristic concept of structure can be usefully maintained. (King, 1999: 223).

This conception of ‘structures’ as a result of relational interaction by people over time would seem to be entirely compatible with Hay’s claim that structure and agency ‘are in practice completely interwoven’ and that beyond a purely analytical distinction we cannot effectively separate one from the other (1995: 200). Perhaps a final clarification is needed here. This interpretive conception of structure is categorically *not* saying that any social constraint is purely the result of other members of society *currently* living in that society. Rather it acknowledges that all individuals are born into a society with pre-existing norms and traditions, and that as such many constraints or social structures are inherited, and so *from the perspective of one individual* could be regarded as pre-existent. However, the interpretive conception of structure is arguing that these social constraints are the result of ‘meaningfully produced social relations between (now dead) individuals which have an impact on the present through the actions and interpretations of living individuals’ (King, 1999: 204). So contrary to Hay, society *is* reducible to human agency, in the sense that society was formed (and is sustained) by human beings interacting with each other and their natural environment, but is not reducible simply to the human agency present at any one particular moment. To argue otherwise is to risk contradicting the self-evident truth that without people there would be no society, by attributing to it some properties that are somehow separate or ‘emergent’ from the people that constitute it (and constituted in the past).<sup>7</sup> As social relations have been built-up over a great length of time and many generations, we can now effectively identify (for analytical purposes) ‘emergent properties’ such as the institutions discussed above, without ascribing them an ontologically separate ‘realm’.

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<sup>7</sup> This debate comes down to what can and cannot be labelled critical realism, and McAnulla’s definition utilised here is contestable. As Hay has more recently commented, it is no longer a moniker he aspires to (2005: 42).

## 2.6 The ideational dimension

In his review of the various positions in the structure-agency debate McAnulla argues that ‘the role of the ideational in social and political life remains under examined’ (2002: 291). Ideas can both inform strategic action and form part of the strategically selective context in which it takes place. However, how such ‘ideological factors’ should be analysed is a contentious subject: the relative importance or otherwise of ideas in politics has been the subject of perennial debate, and remains highly contested (Hay, 2002: 205, McAnulla, 2002: 285). Ideologies and their effects are difficult to measure, which has made some political analysts reluctant to accord them any causal role in the formation of political outcomes. The Downsian model, for example, explains the presence of ideologies as the result of their development by political parties as ‘weapons in the struggle for office’ (Downs, 1957: 96). This view of ideologies simply as tools used by politicians in their efforts to gain more votes does not allow for the possibility of them influencing the actions of the politicians themselves. Traditional Marxist political analysis has often been characterised by a similar inflexibility. For Marxists, it is materialism – or our economic condition – that defines our social and political existence. They accordingly tend to have a pejorative understanding of ideology as a product of material conditions and the class system, opposed to true consciousness (Freeden, 1996: 14-5).<sup>8</sup>

Hay and Jessop have attempted to resolve the position of ideas in political analysis by deploying the notion of *discursive selectivity*, alongside the concept of strategic selectivity (Hay, 2002: 209-215). Actors fashion their strategy in a ‘contoured’ or strategically selective context, which favours some strategies over others: that is, some strategies will be easier to pursue in that context than others. Unfortunately actors never have unmediated access to the ‘real world’, but view it through the fog of their own interpretation and understanding of it. Such ‘world views’ are inevitably heavily influenced by our personal prejudices, experiences and ideologies. It is thus between the strategically selective context and our cognition of it that discursive selectivity comes into play. This is not a one-way relationship. The context imposes a discursive

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that more contemporary Marxist political analysis is much more varied in its view of ideology; for example Gramscians have stressed the concept of hegemony, and tend to have a more positive view of ideology (see Vincent, 2004: 65-72; Gamble, 1994a: 174-206).

selectivity that favours some ideas and narratives over others, which in-turn affects the strategic calculation and action of actors, and consequently impacts upon the 'real' context (Hay, 2002: 212-4).

The role of the ideational dimension in politics remains under-theorised. McAnulla (2002: 284) has criticised the work of Hay and Jessop for not making explicitly clear the relative status of structure, agency and discourse in their analysis, but this criticism may rather miss the point. Precisely because these are purely analytical distinctions these concepts do not need to be ranked in order of precedence: rather they should be identified and considered in specific contextualised situations. As such, this research will consider ideology as a mechanism that both influences the context and how it is understood by actors, and is influenced by the context and strategic actors.

## **2.7 Operationalising the strategic-relational approach**

Academic study of the British Conservative Party has traditionally been dominated by an agency-centred historical approach, emphasising pragmatic elite leadership. The task of explaining Thatcherism brought about a phase of more theoretically-aware critical analysis, which has waned somewhat with the party's electoral fortunes. As Chapter 1 discussed, together this literature is a rich and indispensable resource. Bulpitt's statecraft thesis in particular pointed the way forward to an analytical mode which recognises the centrality of leaders to an understanding of Conservative Party politics, whilst also being sensitive to the structured context within which they must operate. However, statecraft is limited by its treatment of ideology and its focus on governing in the Thatcher era. This section outlines how the SRA may help us understand Conservative politics since 1997.

As explored above, the key contribution of the strategic-relational approach is to do away with the structure-agency dichotomy, and to shift our analysis instead into the field of strategy – that is, behaviour orientated towards context. It directs us to see the Conservative Party both as a strategic actor, and as institution, constraining and enabling actors within it. For example the party provides the leader with institutionalised resources, such as a public platform, supporters and a campaigning organisation, but also acts as a constraint, as a leader must retain the confidence of their

parliamentary colleagues and (to a lesser extent) party members. The SRA is, in a sense, a heuristic device for exploring how the Conservative Party uses strategy in pursuit of its goals, and how that strategy affects, and is effected by, the strategic context. By placing strategic leadership at the centre of our analysis, the SRA is well suited to this research, which focuses on the strategy of the Conservative Party as an organisation with the objective of gaining and holding political office, and on the role of leaders within it in directing party strategy.

The SRA thus directs the focus of our analysis into a number of different arenas, towards which leadership strategy is orientated. Most notably these are the parliamentary party, the wider party (membership), the electorate, and ideology. An appreciation of this multi-layered context is needed to understand Conservative Party strategy in the 1997-2005 period. Strategic decisions which may appear ‘irrational’ if measured against only a restricted contextual variable, for example the pursuit of the median voter position, can be better understood when placed in this wider framework. Rather than trying to ascribe particular causal weighting to various factors, however, the SRA concentrates on the process of formulating, implementing and understanding strategy. Thus, later in the thesis the focus is on noteworthy dilemmas for the leadership, and traces strategy regarding these over time. In short, we should not see ‘strategic success’ as agential victory over structure, or strategic failure as agents being ‘defeated’ by structures. Apparent failure in one area might indicate the higher priority ascribed to other dimensions: for example at certain times, party unity may take precedence over developing an inclusive electoral appeal.

This is not to claim that previous work on the Conservative Party has ignored either the role of strategic actors or of the strategically selective context. As previously discussed, much of the literature closely examines the actions of leading figures in the party, and by doing so provides a detailed history. The research presented here is not drastically removed from this elite-historian tradition, but by being theoretically reflective aims to build upon it. For example where agency-focused accounts do consider ‘structure’, it tends to be when it restricts what actors can do or inhibits their strategic objectives. What the SRA aims to do, however, by focusing on the structure-agency relationship, is to highlight how structure not only curtails action, but enables, shapes, and is transformed by it. By considering this over a significant length of time, we also reveal

the importance of path-dependency as the context is altered over time. Thus, we can see how the handling of an issue by one party leader shapes how it is dealt with by their successors. The SRA thus helps us to *anticipate* how strategy might be shaped by context, assisting our effort to explain why something happened as it did, as well as how it happened.

The analytical work on Thatcherism, much of it derived from a Marxist tradition, highlighted the structured nature of Conservative hegemony. However, by stressing the institutionalised sources of electoral dominance, it risked presenting a somewhat static view of history insufficiently sensitive to historical contingency. For example, Gamble very usefully identifies the pillars of Conservative hegemony as ‘state, union, property, and empire’ (1995: 8), and the decline of each of these played a part in the Conservative Party’s fall in the mid-1990s. However, explaining events since 1997 needs to go beyond this: whilst further electoral failure in 2001 and 2005 might be accounted for by the continuing absence of these pillars, apparent revival under David Cameron cannot.<sup>9</sup> The context is changing and responsive, so even where it might appear inauspicious it is not fixed but is susceptible to strategic action. Outcomes are not predetermined, so even in difficult circumstances a range of strategic options present themselves. Again, this highlights the benefit of considering a lengthy spell of opposition. Faced with an unfavourable context in 1997, should the Conservatives have acted differently, for example by pursuing a more consistent effort to change party image over a two-term strategy, even if this risked (further) short-term unpopularity?

As the previous section explored, the SRA also turns our attention to ideology. That ideology has performed an important role in Conservative Party politics over the past thirty years is a widely recognised fact, most clearly illustrated by divisions over European integration. Ideology has played a significant part in determining the outcome of leadership elections (Heppell, 2008), but also in shaping party strategy beyond this. Disagreement over strategy not only betrays ideological disparities in terms of the direction in which different actors would *like* to see the party move, but also ideologically-informed variation in terms of how the context (and competing strategic choices) are understood. This is illustrated by the surprisingly widespread

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<sup>9</sup> See Hay and Wincott (1998) for an analysis of the ‘latent structuralism’ (p. 952) of historical institutionalism.

view amongst Conservative politicians that a huge swathe of the electorate (often referred to as the ‘forgotten’ or ‘silent’ majority) would flock back to the party if only it were more vigorously right-wing.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning what Hay has recently referred to as ‘the significant, and often neglected, performative/spectacular dimension of political action, especially in public settings (Hay, 2008: 6). Here, the terminology of the SRA is particularly apt, as politicians are indeed actors on a public stage, even if their view of the audience (the electorate) is somewhat blurred or even erroneous. Politicians assume a variety of positions on the stage in an effort to address different parts of the audience, although they can never be absolutely sure that their messages will be transmitted in the way they would like. The performative dimension is a vital part of politics, a fact better appreciated by politicians than academic analysts. The period under examination here is case in point: William Hague used his superlative performances at Prime Minister’s Questions to rally his backbenchers and secure his position as leader at a time when they had little else to cheer about. Iain Duncan Smith, by contrast, was armed with arguably a much better strategy for Conservative electoral revival, but as a relatively weak Commons and media performer was unable to convince his own colleagues, let alone the public, of the merit of his approach. In short, a good strategy, well-suited for the strategically selective context is not enough: it needs to be executed effectively.

## **2.8 Methodology**

The final section of this chapter discusses the research methods used in this thesis, considers their advantages and limitations, and briefly outlines how these relate to the SRA.

This research utilises two major qualitative methods: document analysis and interviews. In places, it also uses descriptive statistics (such as opinion poll data) to corroborate the research and illustrate key points, primarily relating to voting and party support. Qualitative methods form the bulk of the research, as they are highly appropriate for

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<sup>10</sup> Just such a view was expressed by Lord Tebbit (Tebbit Interview).



both the primary concern of this thesis – namely how strategic actors in the Conservative Party elite leadership perceived and sought to respond to the party's electoral failure – and for the theoretical approach utilised. Document analysis and interviews also complement each other well – each can be used to support the other and to seek confirmation of findings. In other words, the research can be triangulated.

A wide range of documentary sources are available for analysis. These can be classified into three main groups: primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. In this categorisation, primary sources are 'evidence that was actually part of or produced by the event in question'; secondary sources are made up of 'other evidence relating to and produced soon after the event'; and tertiary sources consist of 'material written afterwards to reconstruct the event' (Burnham *et al.*, 2004: 165). In this research, primary sources include the transcripts of politicians' speeches, and party documents such as manifestos and other campaign literature. Secondary sources include newspaper articles and reports (and those from other media outlets such as BBC News online), and commentary and reports in other journalistic periodicals. Tertiary sources encompass a wealth of scholarly work, namely academic books, academic journal articles and unpublished PhD theses. Tertiary sources also include books such as diaries, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies by key political actors or other commentators (often journalists). As such, we can distinguish between academic and non-academic tertiary sources.<sup>11</sup>

Speeches and party literature are used throughout this thesis. They are particularly useful as they are the public, authoritative statements that politicians have chosen to make. Although politicians cannot control the reaction they receive or the media attention they are given, they alone have the ultimate say over the content of their speeches. Speeches thus remain a vital means by which politicians attempt to communicate with the public, and can be analysed to discover what messages and images they wish to project. Election manifestos and other publicly available party documents, and speeches by the party leader and other sanctioned spokespeople (for example members of the shadow cabinet), also represent the official party position at

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<sup>11</sup> Although, reflecting the nature of Conservative historiography discussed in Chapter 1, this distinction is sometimes blurred. For example Alan Clark combined his role as a politician with that of historian, producing a notable history of the Conservative Party (Clark, 1998). As a general rule, I classify those produced by politicians as non-academic (for example Willetts, 1994; 1998a; 2002).

the time they are given. Consequently they can be used to track how policies evolve over time. For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, compared side-by-side the 1997 and 2001 general election manifestos illustrate how far the Conservative position on devolution had shifted. Sometimes speeches also reveal internal party debates, disagreements, and changes of direction and strategy. In this research a key example of this was the R. A. Butler memorial lecture given in 1999 by the then deputy leader, Peter Lilley. As Chapter 4 notes, this speech was initially approved by William Hague, but the reaction to it contributed to a change in party strategy. A final advantage of primary sources such as speeches is that they are accessible, with transcripts available on the websites of newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, as well as on the Conservative Party's own site.

Secondary sources such as newspaper articles were also beneficial for this research. Most obviously, they can be used to trace the way in which particular events unfolded. For example, where interviewees were unable to accurately recall the chronology of events, these were crosschecked against newspaper reports. This is one advantage of a research topic which receives a lot of media coverage. Secondary sources also provide a record of how political strategies were interpreted and presented at the time, and whether they were viewed as effective. This is important as most voters do not meet politicians, listen to their speeches or read manifestos, but form their impression of politicians and political parties via media sources.

As noted above, this research draws extensively on tertiary sources. The academic literature provides a valuable range of materials to draw upon. The theoretical perspective taken in this research recognises that we do not have unmediated access to 'the facts', but that the real world is observed and understood through numerous competing interpretations. The academic literature (including this thesis) can be viewed in this way. It is not possible to generate a perfect explanation of any social phenomenon, all interpretations are necessarily partial and value-laden to some degree. However, this recognition does not mean they are worthless (far from it), and would only be a fundamental problem were we to assert the absolute truth of one claim or interpretative view over all others. Instead, we can attempt to build a convincing interpretation by using a variety of sources to crosscheck and triangulate data, by being aware that no interpretation is entirely objective (and that some are heavily value-

laden), and by avoiding over-generalisations from the data we have. It is not possible, for example, to make generalisations about Conservative parties across the world from the research conducted here.

Semi-structured elite interviews with Conservative politicians were also conducted as part of this research. A list of interviewees can be found at the start of this dissertation, and short interviewee biographies can be found in the appendix. Elite interviewing is a key research technique for political researchers interested in decision-making processes, and can be one of the most effective means of garnering information about such processes (Burnham *et al.*, 2004: 205). Elite interviewing involves questioning people who may offer a unique perspective on the research subject. In contrast to survey interviewing, it is not standardised across the interviewees: rather, a semi-structured format is used to ensure that key issues are covered, whilst also allowing the ‘world view’ of the interviewee to emerge. Accordingly, this technique is particularly suited to this research, which is concerned with how key actors understood their political environment, and sought to formulate strategies in response to it. Elite interviews provide the researcher with a unique opportunity to understand ‘the theoretical position of the interviewee; his/her perceptions, beliefs and ideologies’ (Richards, 1996: 199).

Another advantage of interviews, especially for a researcher concerned with relatively recent events, is that they can provide up-to-date information where documentary evidence may be lacking (Seldon, 1996: 358). For example, most of the interviewees in this project are still active politicians, so have not yet laid down their ‘version of events’ in a memoir or published diaries. Also, whilst the typical political memoir might cover events going back several decades, the interviews in this project took place within a relatively recent time-span relative to the events under investigation, reducing (although by no means eliminating) the risk of interviewees colouring their accounts in the light of history.

The value-laded nature of the data generated by elite interviews is one of their limitations. Two accounts of the same event may differ substantially. We cannot be certain that the line of causality implied by a particular interview is an accurate representation of what actually occurred, even if the interviewee sincerely believes it to

be the case. For this reason it is important that interviews are not the only source of data, but are used to support and develop findings from other techniques such as document analysis. However, the fact that each interviewee has their unique version of events is of value to this research, as it aims to explore these different perspectives, and how they came to influence party strategy. By exploring these different narratives we can gain a better understanding of the mindset of key actors than through document analysis alone.

Other key issues involved in elite interviewing are access and selection. During this research, nineteen interviews were conducted, all with leading Conservative politicians. A further seventeen potential interviewees were approached, but declined to be interviewed.<sup>12</sup> As this research is concerned with leadership strategy, the most significant interview targets were the three Conservative leaders themselves: William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith, and Michael Howard. Interviews were secured with Duncan Smith and Howard. However, despite several approaches, Hague declined to be interviewed. This demonstrates one of the difficulties of research into leading national figures, who undoubtedly receive many requests for their time. It also illustrates the importance of not relying solely on interviews for research data.

The lack of an interview with Hague was compensated for in several ways. Firstly, as the Hague leadership covers the earlier half of this case-study (1997-2001), more secondary and tertiary documentary sources are available than for the latter half (2001-5). In short, analysts have had longer to study this period, providing more material for this thesis to draw upon. Notably a biography of Hague covering most of his period as leader had been published (Nadler, 2000), and Walters' (2001) study of the Conservative Party during the 1997 parliament drew on extensive insider access. Further to this, in early 2008 BBC4 screened a documentary by Michael Portillo on the state of the Conservative Party between 1979 and 2007. This included interviews with a number of leading figures who had declined to be interviewed for this project,

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<sup>12</sup> Most interview targets responded relatively promptly to an initial approach by letter. Where no response was received within two weeks, a follow-up letter or e-mail was sent. This generated a response (either accepting or declining) in most cases. Where it did not a third and final letter was sent, but with little effect.

including William Hague, Kenneth Clarke, and David Cameron.<sup>13</sup> Where appropriate, quotes from these interviews have been used. Further to this, a number of interviews (including one with Hague) were carried-out by Harris (2005) in her study of the Conservatives and nationhood between 1997 and 2001, providing another valuable source of data.

Selection of interviewees is also important. Elite interviewing involves targeting interviewees with privileged access or a potentially unique perspective on the events being investigated. In this case, this meant central leadership figures, and other figures who had been involved in, or had a distinctive standpoint in relation to, key issues of interest to the research. For example, Peter Lilley was interviewed as he had not only been deputy leader of the party under William Hague, but because the document analysis had identified his R. A. Butler memorial lecture as an important turning point in the direction of party strategy. Lord Parkinson was interviewed as he played a central role in reforming the party organisation as Hague's first Party Chairman. Kenneth Clarke was targeted as although he had declined to serve in the shadow cabinet, he was the leading alternative candidate in the 1997 and 2001 leadership elections. John Bercow was interviewed as he resigned from the shadow cabinet over the issue of adoption rights for gay couples (explored in Chapter 7). Gary Streeter was interviewed not only as he served in the shadow cabinet, but because of his leading role in developing Conservative perspectives on social and moral issues through 'Renewing One Nation' policy group. Theresa May was similarly interviewed not merely as she served in the shadow cabinet, but as she had publicly identified the need to tackle the Conservatives' image problem, famously telling the 2002 party conference that the Conservatives were viewed as the 'nasty party'. Michael Portillo was interviewed as the leading advocate of 'modernisation' in the party for most of this period. In short, interviews were specifically targeted in the light of findings from the document analysis. As such they were designed to support, rather than replace the documentary research.

The final part of this methodology considers how we can evaluate the status of the data generated during the research. Bryman suggests that qualitative data should be assessed

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<sup>13</sup> Revealingly, Portillo noted during this programme that this interview was the first time he had spoken to William Hague since the 2001 election.

against four ‘trustworthiness’ criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bryman, 2004: 272-276). Credibility is concerned with the accuracy of data generated, for example documentary findings or the claims of an interviewee. As discussed above we cannot trust any single source, hence the importance of crosschecking and triangulation. For example, multiple documentary sources can be used, and compared to statements made by interviewees. Transferability refers to whether or not findings can be applied to other settings. To return to an earlier point, this research is a single case-study so the empirical arguments and conclusions cannot be applied elsewhere. However, this does not make them invalid, nor does it preclude the possibility of ‘analytic generalisation’ (Yin, 1994: 10). So whilst the empirical focus is particular, the theoretical utility of the research, namely the use of the SRA, is generalisable to other cases.

Dependability asks whether the findings are reliable: could another researcher repeat the research to find similar conclusions? In this case, the documents used in this research are virtually all publicly available, so could be easily checked by others. The interview data would be harder to reproduce, and in keeping with the wishes of the interviewees, the transcripts are not publicly available. However, most interviewees were happy for their participation to be acknowledged, so this could be confirmed by other researchers. Finally, confirmability is concerned with whether subjective personal values have intruded excessively on the research process. The above discussion noted the value-laden nature of interview data, and cautioned that no document or piece of academic research can be regarded as absolutely impartial. The SRA acknowledges that different, competing interpretations exist. However, by offering an explicit theoretical framework, triangulating both documentary and interview evidence, and clearly referencing all sources, we can control for the subjectivity of the research and provide readers with the opportunity to assess its trustworthiness for themselves.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated how political actors make strategic choices based on their interpretation of the context that they face. It has shown that context is strategically selective – it favours some strategies over others – as a result of the structuring effect of institutions that have emerged from human interaction overtime.

As such, it has sought to transform the abstract dualism of structure and agency into a method of political analysis grounded in social reality, which accounts for the role of ideological interpretations in shaping political outcomes. It has also considered how the SRA can be applied to this particular case-study, and discussed the techniques employed during the research. The following chapters apply this method to the contemporary Conservative Party, with particular reference to its electoral and leadership strategies, and to its interpretation of the role of conservatism in the twenty-first century.

## Chapter 3

### Context: The Electoral and Ideational Problem

*It was a totally no win situation.*

Lord Parkinson (Interview).

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the context faced by the Conservative Party upon entering opposition in 1997. This is important, as the strategic-relational approach (SRA) emphasises the contextualised nature of all strategic political action. The strategically selective context encompasses the ideational as well as the material dimension. Consequently, putting this research into context involves both locating the Conservative Party in relation to the intellectual debate over its future and purpose after Thatcher, as well as in relation to the economic and political circumstances that affected the party's popularity and electoral performance in this period. Dual crises can therefore be identified: an internal ideational crisis, over the purpose of conservatism and what the Conservative Party stands for; and an external, electoral crisis, of the politics of support. Whilst these can be distinguished for analytical purposes, the two are inextricably linked. They are two sides of the same coin.

This chapter thus has two distinct but interrelated parts. Firstly, it considers the nature of the electoral problem that the party has faced since 1992. This incorporates an analysis of how the Conservatives' electoral base has been challenged by the rise of New Labour. It also includes an overview of the poor opinion poll ratings, public image, and election results that the party has suffered since shortly after the 1992 election, and which culminated in the landslide defeat of 1997. In other words, the electoral situation faced by the party at the beginning of the case-study period is laid out, providing important background for the remainder of the thesis.



Secondly, the chapter considers the ideational problem faced by contemporary conservatism. This forms the other key component of the context in which the analysis of the Conservative Party in opposition is situated. The ideational dimension is assessed through a consideration of the place and purpose of conservatism post-Thatcher, by reference to three key conservative intellectuals: John Gray, David Willetts and Iain Gilmour. All three present both a normative dimension (of what conservatism should be) and a pragmatic dimension, in terms of how it should be articulated. Gray has argued that conservatism has been ‘undone’ by Thatcherism; Gilmour regards Thatcherism as an anathema to conservatism, a variant of doctrinal neo-liberalism alien to the British Conservative way; and Willetts, by contrast, sees Thatcherism as merely another chapter in a consistent and developing conservative tradition. Gray (2004: 47-8) has recently acknowledged that the party survives (and may again prosper), but maintains that conservatism is dead, whereas Gilmour (1992; 2001; and 2005) has argued that to be electorally successful the party needs to return to the ‘One Nation’ tradition. Since the early 1990s Willetts (1992; 1994) has consistently argued for a Conservative vision for communities, which he regards as compatible with a free market position. These differing perspectives provide a backdrop to the debate amongst Conservative politicians over the party’s recent intellectual and strategic direction, which has not been fully resolved since 1997. For example, the contributions of prominent Conservatives such as Peter Lilley and Michael Portillo to this debate (and the responses to them), have been a key part of the party’s attempt to interpret and respond to the strategic context of opposition.

### **3.2 The Electoral Problem**

This section outlines the electoral problem the Conservative Party has faced since shortly after re-election in 1992. The increasingly difficult electoral context for the Conservatives in this period can be illustrated through an analysis of a number of key events, most notably the ERM debacle of September 1992. Underlying this it is argued that a more fundamental reshaping of the strategic terrain occurred, as the shape of the political landscape post-Thatcher was revealed. The Thatcherite project was successful in forging a new economic consensus: the Labour Party was forced to accept the end of Keynesian demand management, and the doctrine of free markets gained intellectual ascendancy over

that of the mixed economy. However, as Marquand notes, whilst by the end of the Thatcher era the British people were no longer for Keynes, they were still for Beveridge. 'They want a welfare state, but they also want a market economy' (Marquand, 1991: 16; see also Crewe, 1993: 18-25). The consequence of this for Marquand is that the political competition between the major parties begins to turn into 'a struggle over management rather than over purpose and direction' (1991: 16-17). Writing in 1991, Marquand correctly foresaw that this was a battle that the Conservatives were best placed to win at the next general election. As will be seen, however, the odds in this battle over competence would change dramatically after Black Wednesday. The continued public demand for welfare – despite (or perhaps because of) a decade of Thatcherism – is a key factor in the strategic context that the Conservatives would struggle to respond to over the next decade and a half. Whilst the Labour Party successfully forged a narrative of the 'Third Way' to balance free market economics with this demand, the Conservatives have struggled to reconcile the logic of Thatcherism with the fundamentally incompatible ideas of Beveridge. Failure to respond to this dilemma in a convincing way has exacerbated the electoral problems faced by the party since its reputation for economic competence was shattered in 1992.

Notwithstanding the accurate predictions of a number of political scientists (notably Sanders, 1991), the result of the 1992 general was regarded as something of a surprise, as it contradicted the prevailing trend of the opinion polls (King, 1993: 244). The Conservatives won a fourth successive victory in spite of the ongoing economic recession – the second in thirteen years of Conservative rule – and so defied the predictions of the opinion pollsters, and the expectations of much of the media and political classes. Garrett (1994) attributes this success to the electoral legacy of Thatcherism, namely 'popular capitalism'. His quantitative analysis revealed 'discernable popular capitalism effects in the 1992 election', which 'were large enough on their own to have allowed the government to retain its majority'. These effects included council house sales, privatisation and de-unionisation, and enabled the 1979-1992 government to 'denude the Labour electorate and to attract some of the dislocated voters to the Conservative Party' (1994: 121).

Leadership effects were also important at the 1992 election. John Major's greatest asset was perhaps the fact that he was neither Margaret Thatcher nor Neil Kinnock. As Crewe and King (1994: 125-147) highlight, Major's public rating was significantly better than Kinnock's, and had a positive effect on the Conservatives' standing compared to that under Thatcher. Major had effectively diffused public anger over the poll tax by appointing Michael Heseltine to devise a replacement, and divisions over Europe had apparently been healed by Major's deft handling of the Maastricht Treaty negotiations, successfully completed in December 1991. Indeed, Europe scarcely featured in the 1992 election as both parties accepted the broad framework negotiated by Major, with the minor exception of the opt-out from the social chapter that Labour wished to sign (King, 1993: 230). Conservative unity over Europe proved ephemeral however, and divisions concealed before the election soon re-emerged over the incorporation of the Treaty into law. Major's 'triumph' at Maastricht was soon forgotten in the Conservative Party when it became apparent that the treaty would restrict further the government's ability to stimulate an economic recovery within the constraints of the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) (Thompson, 1996: 188-9). By enshrining in law a commitment to European Monetary Union (albeit with an opt-out from the final stage), the possibility of fiscal-loosening to offset the effects of the high interest-rates required to maintain sterling's position within the ERM was effectively closed-off.

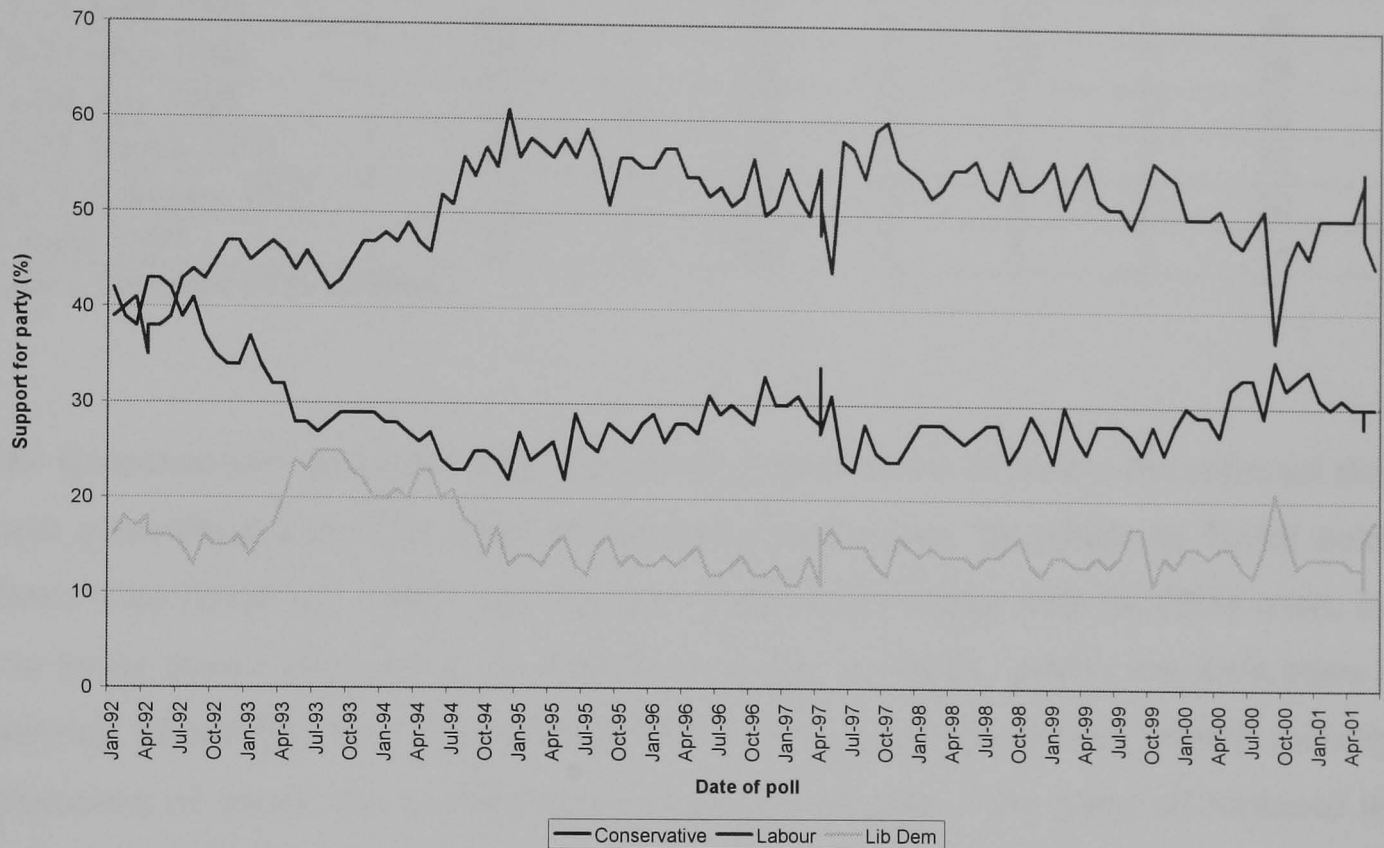
Major was thus partly responsible for setting the trap which sprung on 'Black Wednesday', 16 September 1992. The farcical series of events that day have been well documented (see Thompson, 1996: 189-214; Lamont, 1999) and need not detain us here. Needless to say that the government's inability to defend sterling's value within the bounds it itself had set less than two years previously (despite spending £11 billion in the attempt), constituted a political crisis of gargantuan proportions. Three major consequences can be discerned in relation to the Conservative Party, each of which affected its popularity. Firstly the Conservatives' reputation for competent economic management was lost, the corollary of which was a decline in their opinion-poll standing. Secondly, divisions in the party over the issue of Europe were vividly reopened. Thirdly, the crisis helped create the political space that would come to be occupied by New Labour.

The 1992 election, Morgan argues, took place ‘in a mood of public doubt, against a background of uncertainty about both the economy and policy towards Europe’ (Morgan, 2001: 513). In April 1992 the electorate decisively backed the Conservatives as the party best able to handle this uncertainty: within six months the prevailing opinion had been comprehensively reversed. The point of this reversal – when these issues reached crisis point – can Morgan, suggests, be pinpointed with remarkable precision, to 16 September 1992, when they ‘exploded’ (2001: 513). Evans similarly traces the ‘roots of the disaster’ in 1997 directly to this date, ‘the blackest day in the history of post-war conservatism’ (1999: 163). The Eurosceptic John Redwood similarly blames the failure of the government firmly on its policy toward the ERM, which was an ‘unmitigated disaster’ (2004: 121). He suggests that, ‘the fateful decision to enter the ERM began the long period of troubles and the turmoil within the party’ (2004: 109).

The crisis certainly did hit the Conservatives in the polls. Between April and September 1992, the Conservatives’ poll rating fluctuated around 42 percent, the level achieved in the general election. At their lowest they were placed at 38 percent, and at their highest 46 percent (MORI, 2006a). This period did see a change in Labour’s position however, which improved from the 34 percent received in the general election to approximate parity with the Conservatives (MORI, 2006a). Following Black Wednesday, the Conservatives’ poll rating began to slide, whilst Labour’s strengthened further. By November, the Conservatives had sunk to the low-thirties in all polls, Gallup placing them on 29 percent to Labour’s 52 (MORI, 2006a). This position deteriorated further throughout 1993 and 1994. In 1994, forty-four national opinion polls were conducted, only once did the Conservatives scrape to 30 percent support. A Gallup opinion poll conducted for the *Daily Telegraph* in January 1995 gave Labour an astonishing 43.5-point lead: 62 percent to the Conservatives’ 18.5 (MORI, 2006a). Whilst the slide in Conservative support can therefore be dated to September 1992, other factors were clearly at work which worsened the position over the following few years. The opinion poll slump precipitated by Black Wednesday was intensified by the by-election and local election humiliations of 1993, and by the election of Tony Blair as leader of the Labour Party in 1994 (Crewe, 1996: 419).

This slump in Conservative support persisted up to and beyond the 1997 general election, and is most clearly illustrated graphically (Figure 3.1).

*Figure 3.1: Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat Support, 1992-2001*



Source: Data from MORI (2006d).

The ERM debacle also damaged the Conservatives' reputation as the party best able to manage the economy (Table 3.1). At the time of the 1992 election, 36 percent of those polled regarded the Conservatives as the most effective economic managers, compared to 31 percent who thought that Labour would do a better job. By 1993, Labour had established a 2-point lead on this issue, a lead which they maintained and increased until July 1996. Interestingly, this lead actually disappeared in early 1997: polls in February and April gave the Conservatives a 4-point and a 7-point lead respectively on the management of the economy. These figures vindicate John Major's decision to delay the 1997 election for as long as possible, and reflect the improving state of the economy at that time. When placed alongside the 1997 election result, they also indicate that the public's perception of the parties' respective abilities to manage the economy is only one variable informing voter choice.

*Table 3.1: Best Party at Managing the Economy*

<b>Date(s) of Poll</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	<b>None/ Don't know</b>
30 March 1992	36	31	11	21
15-20 Sept 1993	23	25	13	38
19-23 May 1994	25	33	12	29
21-24 July 1995	22	33	4	40
22-25 March 1996	24	33	6	35
21-24 February 1997	34	30	5	30
8 April 1997	33	26	5	34

*Source:* Data from MORI (2006b).

The Conservatives' problems were not merely related to the economy, but reflected their more generalised loss of an image of governing competence, for which, as Taylor notes, 'there is no substitute' (2002: 96). The loss of this image began with the ERM crisis, but was by no means restricted to it. A series of further problems, notably the difficulties in ratifying Maastricht, the botched privatisation of the railways and the mining industry, allegations of sleaze, and a challenge to Major's leadership of the party, all furthered the impression that the government was 'in office but not in power' (Lamont, quoted in Morgan, 2001: 513). The general decline in the public image of the Conservative Party is illustrated by Table 3.2. On virtually all measures, the public's view of the party worsens significantly in the first year after the party's re-election in 1992. The percentage of respondents agreeing that the Conservative Party keeps its promises, understands the problems facing Britain, represents all classes, has a good team of leaders, sensible policies, and a professional approach all drop sharply in this period, and similar views persist until the following general election in 1997.

*Table 3.2: Conservative Party Image*

Percentages of respondents agreeing that the Conservative Party...	1992 General Election	April '93	April 1997
<i>Keeps its promises</i>	20	5	5
<i>Understands the problems facing Britain</i>	38	18	20
<i>Represents all classes</i>	20	9	10
<i>Looks after the interests of people like us</i>	21	8	9
<i>Is moderate</i>	19	12	11
<i>Is extreme</i>	16	10	10
<i>Is concerned about the people in real need</i>	18	10	8
<i>Has a good team of leaders</i>	35	13	10
<i>Will promise anything to win votes</i>	41	47	40
<i>Is out of touch with ordinary people</i>	51	57	50
<i>Has sensible policies</i>	31	12	14
<i>Is professional in its approach</i>	42	16	10
<i>Is divided</i>	14	30	13
<i>No Opinion</i>	2	10	44

Source: Data from MORI (2006c).

The Conservative government had been re-elected on probation in 1992, and rapidly lost any semblance of a positive public image and its reputation for governing competence. The ERM debacle contributed to this loss, but was by no means the only contributing factor. It was this general loss, combined with the emergence of a viable alternative government in the form of New Labour, which led to the Conservatives' crushing defeat in 1997. As Sanders *et al.* (2001: 789) note:

New Labour's political triumph after 1994 under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown was to convince voters that Labour was now the party of fiscal responsibility and competent macroeconomic management. Their success in this regard severely impaired the Conservatives' ability to benefit electorally from the rising sense of economic optimism among voters that the Chancellor delivered in the 18 months or so prior to the 1997 election.

As Sanders notes elsewhere, the ERM crisis 'crystallised a number of important doubts that voters already entertained about the Conservatives as competent economic managers' (1999: 251). As such, it was important in creating the political space that came to be occupied by New Labour. Sanders interprets this in terms of the economic voting model: the crisis, he suggests, 'opened up an electoral space that allowed *politics* to affect voters' electoral preferences on a scale not encountered since 1979' (1999: 251, original emphasis). More subtly, the crisis facilitated the discourse of globalisation that came to

characterise New Labour's economic policy. It exposed quite brutally the apparent powerlessness of governments to control the economy in the face of global economic forces, and highlighted the need for the economy to be competitive in the global market.

New Labour, some critics have argued, has invoked this discourse of globalisation to justify its embrace of neo-liberalism. Hay (2002b) draws a parallel between this discourse and the 'overload' thesis propounded by Thatcherite Conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s. Both, he suggests, leave room for only one 'sensible' course of action, which in both cases is making control of inflation the central tenet of economic policy. The difference between the two discourses lies in their location of the constraints that necessitate such action: for the globalisers it is the externally imposed imperative of the world economy, whereas for the Thatcherites it was the domestic failure of successive governments. This acceptance, Hay argues, means that Britain is now a 'one-vision polity' (1997: 372). Stuart Hall makes a similarly withering attack on Labour's accommodation of Thatcherite economics. In contrast to the rightward shift of the political centre-of-gravity he identified in 1983, he characterised New Labour as 'the great moving nowhere show', failing to embrace radical reform, largely for reasons of electoral expediency (1998: 9-14; see also 1983).

The globalisation discourse invoked by New Labour implies that there is no policy space realistically available for a more radical economic strategy of the left. They cite as evidence for this the disastrous failure of Mitterrand's attempted 'alternative economic strategy', which rapidly became unsustainable and abandoned for the *plan de rigueur*.<sup>1</sup> Yet the work of Giddens himself implies that a range of alternative strategies exist that can be broadly classified under the third way umbrella. Referring to recent or current social democratic governments in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and France, as well as to the 'New Democrats' and New Labour, Giddens notes that they are all part of 'a single broad stream of third way thinking' (2001: 31). Such governments have pursued a variety of policies with varying degrees of deference to the neo-liberal demands of the market. For example as Clift notes, the French PS reject 'the assumption that "there is no alternative" to neo-liberal orthodoxy... a significant degree of voluntarism [they argue],

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of this u-turn, see Ludlam (2001: 28); Callinicos (2001: 27-8); Callaghan (2000: 49, 102-8).



remains possible, despite constraining global forces' (2001: 63). Wickham-Jones (2000, 2002) also suggests that it may be possible for social democrats in Britain to develop a more ambitious reformist programme, however, he tempers this possibility with a crucial caveat. It would only be possible if such a reformist party (presumably Labour) enjoyed 'sufficient electoral strength and political power' (2000: 22, also 2002: 475).

The international economic situation of the 1990s was radically different from that of the 1960s and 1970s. The transformation of the context in which policy is formed explains in part the different policy positions taken in the different periods – as Gamble and Kelly highlight, national economic protectionism is simply 'no longer politically or economically viable' (2000: 182). However, political considerations seem to have taken primacy in New Labour's repositioning. The discourse of globalisation invoking the dangers of attempting to counter the market (with the ERM crisis as a prime example of the dangers) has been most useful to the party as a justification and explanation for this shift. This shift was also largely accepted by the electorate in 1997, and has, its proponents would argue, been justified by the subsequent strong economic performance under Labour. The repositioning of the Labour Party in the changing global economic context hit the Conservatives in the 1997 election, as did the ongoing social transformation wrought by popular capitalism. Nevertheless, as Cowley (1997: 48) argues, more banal political factors were also at work:

The transformation of the Conservative Party from dominant party to English-based rump has its roots in three perceptions of the Party: that it was incompetent; that it was disunited; and that it was sleazy. All three perceptions had some validity, but all were exaggerations... However, perception is more important than reality and as a result by May 1997 the British public had decided that it was time for a change.

Regardless of whether or not it was an exaggeration, the sleazy, incompetent, disunited image of the Conservative Party in the mid-1990s was hugely damaging for the party at the 1997 election. Responding to the changing social and economic context, the challenge of New Labour and recasting the image of the party formed a formidable task for the party leadership upon entering opposition in 1997.

### 3.3 The Ideational Dimension

The difficulties faced by British conservatism in the 1990s, whilst characterised by the malaise in John Major's government, were not solely caused by it. Rather as Willetts notes, 'the problem is much deeper and it is ultimately an intellectual one. It is a dangerous uncertainty about the nature of modern conservatism' (1994: 7). This uncertainty was one of the unintended consequences of Thatcherism and has continued into the twenty-first century. The New Right provided conservatism with a clear purpose and direction in response to the crisis of the 1970s. Since then, it has undermined the efforts of some Conservatives to reinvigorate conservatism over the past two decades, and struggled to adapt to the new strategic terrain that it helped to create.

The ideational dimension of the strategically selective context for both conservatism and the Conservative Party since 1990 has therefore been defined by Thatcherism. The Thatcherite legacy has shaped and constrained Conservative political thinking, communication, policy-making and statecraft. The party has struggled to reconcile itself with the Thatcher's regicide, which overshadowed her successor's tenure even after he had won his own mandate at a general election. It has also impaired attempts to modernise the party in opposition, inhibiting the Conservatives' famed ability to adapt in order to prosper electorally, the 'statecraft' of which Bulpitt regarded Thatcherism as the latest instalment. The 'art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence' (Bulpitt, 1986: 21) has, Michael Portillo suggests, been undermined by the party's fixation with Thatcherism:

During the period of tremendous success for the Conservatives, during the early-1980s particularly, very large numbers of people came into parliament for the first time, they were typically then young, white, middle-class men from the southeast of England (by the way I was one of them); and many of them are still in Parliament today. And they are Thatcherites, but in this very limited and perverse sense, that they have frozen Thatcherism in time, forgetting that one of the key ingredients of Thatcherism was that it was revolutionary, it was cutting-edge, it was new. Thatcherism now of course is retro, it is twenty years past its sell-by date. A new Thatcherism today wouldn't be an old Thatcherism, because it would have to be new and cutting-edge. So these rather boneheaded old Thatcherites occupy a lot of the positions in the party, and that's another reason that has stopped the party changing. (Portillo Interview).

Yet the effect of Thatcherism on the configuration of the political context runs much deeper than the politics of personality within the Conservative Party. If the Conservative Party has been paralysed by Thatcherism, the Labour Party was – eventually – galvanised by it. The creation of New Labour can, it is suggested, be traced directly to Thatcherism (Heffernan, 2000). Hay suggests that the end of the Conservative Party's electoral hegemony 'may be seen as a direct consequence of New Labour's acceptance of the neo-liberal political and economic paradigm that is the sole vision animating contemporary British politics' (1997: 372). On this reading, Britain has become a 'one-vision polity' based on a 'neo-liberal post-Thatcher settlement' (Hay, 1997: 373), which has swept away the post-war consensus and the last vestiges of social democracy with it. The Conservative Party, therefore, has been a victim of its own success – in helping to forge this consensus it has robbed itself of its primary purpose and electoral appeal: its opposition to socialism.

How conservatism reacted to this post-Thatcher settlement is considered here through the work of John Gray, Ian Gilmour, and David Willetts; who represent three important intellectual trends in recent Conservative thought. Willetts represents a neo-Thatcherite position. He justifies Thatcherism in the context of the 1980s, but argues that it forms just one instalment in a consistent Conservative tradition, which, whilst not repudiating or rejecting Thatcherism, needs to adapt itself again for current times. Gilmour represents an anti-Thatcherite position. A leading Conservative critic of the Thatcher governments, he has consistently maintained that Thatcherite neo-liberalism is fundamentally at odds with what he regards as true British conservatism. Of the three, Gray has shifted his position most significantly. He rose to prominence in the 1980s as a political thinker in the Hayekian mould, but his more recent work has been heavily critical of the flawed rationalism of the New Right (Gamble, 1999: 117). Gray represents a post-Thatcherite position. Whilst his stance is far from that of most contemporary Conservative politicians and intellectuals (arguably it has much more in common with New Labour), it is derived from a right-of-centre rather than a left-of-centre perspective, and is inherently conservative in its anti-rationalism.

### 3.3.1 Anti-Thatcherites: The One Nation 'wets'

Gilmour's account has the advantage of consistency. It regards Thatcherism as inherently un-conservative, as it involved the application of alien New Right monetarist 'dogma' which took precedence over the pragmatic statecraft traditionally associated with Conservative governments. The dogmatic nature of Thatcher and her followers caused them to stick to their ideological guns even when the results became disastrously apparent. By the time of the 1981 budget, he claims, 'evidence had by now accumulated to prove that the monetarist slaughter had been performed in the name of a false god,' but the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Geoffrey Howe) 'only moved faster in the wrong direction' (Gilmour & Garnett, 1997: 312-3). As Gamble notes, Gilmour explains the seemingly bizarre attachment to monetarism as the result of the government being 'in the grip of an ideology which blinded it to the practical realities of managing the economy' (1993: 121).

Gilmour's conservatism is part of the 'One Nation' strand of Conservative thought that fears social conflict, and prioritises the preservation of order and social harmony. He echoes Burke in his anti-rationalism and reveals a traditional Conservative suspicion of intellectual reasoning. 'Harmony' he states, can only be attained 'by policies which are based on practical wisdom and judicious generosity, not on the cold abstractions of the dogma of discord' (Gilmour, 1992: 279). He seems bemused as to how the Conservative Party fell prey to what to him is such patently absurd, doctrinal thinking, and his explanation as to 'why the moderates lost' (1992: 30-44) is rather unsatisfactory. He dismisses the explanation that the crises of the 1970s left the moderates bereft of alternative ideas, preferring instead the answer that the power of Thatcher's personality rode roughshod over the opposition. The moderates (including himself) were therefore 'guilty of a grave dereliction of duty' in their failure to force the Prime Minister to back down (1992: 32).

Yet the idea that the Conservative Party would so easily fall victim to such a 'foreign' doctrine, even one conveyed through a character as powerful as Mrs Thatcher, is ultimately inadequate. Whilst Thatcher and her style of leadership were vital for Thatcherism, they

did not constitute it in its entirety. Context was crucial, and was strategically selective in the New Right's favour. The u-turns and failure of the Heath government provided the political space within the Conservative Party for a different approach to economic policy to gain the ascendancy. An alternative had for some time been enunciated within the party by Enoch Powell, who Thatcher later praised as 'absolutely right about the economy' (quoted in Heffer, 1998: 928); an alternative that would later be vigorously expounded by Keith Joseph (1976; 1979). Thatcherism also drew strength from the traditional Conservative attachment to the nation, and the patriotic concern to reverse the long-run relative decline of the British economy. The context of economic decline, or at least the perception of decline, has been widely cited as a crucial factor in the emergence and formation of Thatcherism by many writers. Amongst others, Krieger (1986), Marsh (1995), Gamble (1994a) and Jenkins (1989) have highlighted the centrality of British decline to Thatcherism. Thatcherism is best understood as an attempt to reverse this decline, and in certain respects was 'as radical an attempt as any that has been made this century' (Gamble, 1993: 127). As Kavanagh (1997: 50) notes, the politics of consensus came to be seen as the politics of decline, and consequently became the subject of Thatcherite vitriol. Un-conservative measures would be required in the pursuit of the higher Conservative objective of national recovery – not only of the economy, but of the nation's social and moral virtues.

The Winter of Discontent played a vital role in persuading voters of the accuracy of the diagnosis by the Right, rather than that of the Left, of the cause of British decline. The neo-liberal explanation of Britain's economic difficulties (particularly 'stagflation'), 'was elegant in its simplicity and in its simplicity lay its persuasive capacity' (Hay, 2002b: 199). The New Right argued that the problem was one of political overload, as irresponsible politicians attempting to 'buy' their re-election precipitated fiscal crises (Hay, 2002b: 198-202; see also King, 1975). The solution, therefore, was to reassert the primacy of economic imperatives over political ones. Monetarism was seen as the best way to impose the necessary discipline on both the government and the economy. This discourse has been compared by Hay to the (in his eyes, equally spurious) discourse of hyper-globalisation

that has been used by New Labour to justify the prioritising of the interests of capital (2002b: 202-3).

Gilmour's critique of Thatcherism lacks sufficient awareness of the political and economic context to provide a powerful explanatory framework. As Gamble comments, the weakness in Gilmour's account is his inability to explain 'why Thatcherism was so successful for so long if it was so flawed from the outset... Why should such a malign ideological bacillus have inexplicably seized on the party and been so hard to expel?' (1993: 121-2). Mark Garnett (the co-author with Gilmour of *Whatever Happened to the Tories?*) provides a more sophisticated explanation of this apparent hijack of the party in his own later work. Garnett identifies in the twentieth century Conservative Party two competing ideological strands – free market liberalism and One Nation conservatism. According to this account, the free market tradition, whilst always present, was for most of the twentieth century the junior partner to the One Nation Conservatives. This position was reversed in the years following Thatcher's election as leader in 1975, as she and her ideological bedfellows exploited the panic about decline to mount a takeover of the Conservative Party. This victory has been so complete that 'today's Conservative Party is a liberal organisation, with a nationalistic twist' (Garnett, 2003: 112). This forms a coherent post-hoc explanation of the Thatcher effect and of the party's electoral difficulties since 1992. If conservatism equals adaptability and electoral success, and if the Conservative Party has abandoned conservatism, it will, by Gilmour and Garnett's logic, be bound to suffer electorally. However, this approach fails to track the changing strategic location of conservatism, or offer a satisfactory explanation as to why it was apparently abandoned by the party.

For Gilmour then, Thatcherism was damaging not only for the country but for conservatism and the Conservative Party. But for all his lamenting at the disastrous consequences of Thatcherism, his is also a positive message. Whereas for Gray, the possibility of a return to traditional form of conservatism has been closed-off by the unintended consequences of Thatcherism, for Gilmour the path back to One Nation conservatism remains open. The damage done to conservatism can be undone. Indeed if

the Conservative Party is once again to become an election-winning party, it must be undone, through a return to One Nation conservatism. However, he is sceptical about the likelihood of the Conservative Party regaining the electoral dominance it enjoyed for much of the twentieth century, as he sees it as unlikely to choose to readopt his favoured conception of conservatism (1997: 382-5). Such is the power of the ‘dogma’ that has captured the party.

The continued adherence to ideological dogma has caused the Conservative Party in opposition to reinforce the mistakes made in government. The party has failed to take the pragmatic and politically sensible course. This trend is contrasted by Gilmour to the rapid recovery that the party made after landslide defeats in 1906 and 1945. ‘On both occasions the party soon made a dramatic recovery. After the similar defeat in 1997 no such recovery has happened. Instead the party has made almost every conceivable mistake, and now looks likely to continue that record’ (2005). The decision not to elect Kenneth Clarke as leader in 1997, when he was ‘unquestionably the best of the candidates and indeed the only one who was unquestionably qualified for the job’, was ‘suicidal’ (2001). The same mistake was made in 2001, and Gilmour urged readers of the *London Review of Books* to vote for Clarke again in 2005, thereby redeeming the last eight years and once again becoming ‘a serious party’ (2005).

Clarke was, as Gilmour suggests, by far the best qualified of all the available candidates in the last three contests for the leadership of the Conservative Party. He also had the advantage of being the most popular with the general public, although an alternative with at least the potential for wide public appeal emerged in the form of David Cameron in 2005. The decision not to elect Clarke – the responsibility of Conservative MPs in 1997 and 2005, and party members in 2001 – can only be explained by his views on Europe, which clashed with the prevailing ideology in the party. As Gilmour (2001) vividly puts it:

The trouble is that, not merely in the Parliamentary Party but in the Party in the country as well, there are many Far-Right Little Englanders who, as the old American saying goes, ‘would rather be right than President’, which is the political equivalent of a death wish.

The ‘little-Englander’ mentality derives from the Thatcherite conception of national identity. Whereas Gilmour associates himself with the inherently *British* One Nation tradition (in which the stability of the British state and the maintenance of the Union are paramount), for Thatcherites such as Shirley Letwin, politics begins with the people. As Gamble (1993: 125) states:

She [Letwin] does not identify the nation with the historic Conservative state as Gilmour does, because that would mean accepting and approving of the way in which the state has developed. There is much in the way that this state has developed in the twentieth century that Thatcherism repudiates. Preserving the Union and ensuring social peace through policies that make citizens dependent, and suppress the vigorous virtues, ends by threatening the special national character of England.

Gilmour mocks the ‘Conservative Europhobes’ who seem to ‘regard England (not even the United Kingdom) as a latter-day Kingdom of Mercia... cowering behind an Offa’s Dyke, in the form of the English Channel, that will keep the Europeans at bay and enable it to remain a satellite of the United States’, and ‘bleat in Mercian style about national sovereignty and national independence’ (Gilmour, 2001). The Mercian tendency that he identifies is an integral part of the Thatcherite ideology to which many Conservatives subscribe, although most baulk at the logical conclusion of English independence to which it leads (Chapter 6). Conservative scepticism towards Europe and the single currency has, ironically, been one of the party’s most popular policies since 1997, which also helps explain the unwillingness to follow Gilmour’s advice and pursue a more centrist line. Thatcherism, he suggests, has never been popular with the general public: Thatcher’s three general election wins can be explained by the ‘divided opposition, her own qualities, and the failure of Old Labour to appear a credible alternative’ (Gilmour, 2001; see also 1992: 271-4). After the 1997 general election, as it became clear that ‘New Labour was but old Thatcherism writ large’, even a ‘modestly competent opposition could have made itself popular by adopting centrist policies’ (2001). This apparently obvious and pragmatic course for the Conservative Party upon entering opposition in 1997 was not followed. To explain this, a more sophisticated understanding of the party’s struggle to adapt to the post-Thatcherite context than that provided by Gilmour is required. Gilmour is right to acknowledge the importance of the Conservative Party as a strategic actor, but his account



is not sufficiently contextualised. He implies that the party's position and electoral fortunes could be relatively easily transformed by the actions of the leadership, irrespective of the strategically selective context, leading to bewilderment about why they have not.

For a time, the One Nation approach that Gilmour advocates was a great electoral success, as it meshed neatly with social reality and public opinion. Thatcherism achieved a similar concordance in the 1980s, as did New Labour in the late-1990s. The Conservatives' efforts in opposition can only be understood in an adequately contextualised analysis, not simply as an autonomous agent as Gilmour implies.

### 3.3.2 *Neo-Thatcherism: Markets and communities?*

Like Gilmour, Willetts maintains the consistency of his position. However, whereas Gilmour finds constancy in his opposition to Thatcherism, Willetts attempts to place Thatcherism within a harmonious Conservative tradition, dating from Burke and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century, via Salisbury and Spencer in the nineteenth and Oakeshott in the twentieth (Willetts, 1992: 3-17). The use of the term 'Thatcherism' suggests a coherence or strategic direction not typically associated with Conservative governments. Willetts acknowledges that it 'implies that a clique of free market ideologues managed in the mid-1970s to launch a coup and capture control of the Conservative Party' (essentially Gilmour's position) but denies that this was actually the case (1992: 47). Whereas for Gilmour free market 'dogma' was anathema to conservatism, for Willetts 'the principles of free markets aligned with a strong sense of community are fundamental conservative principles... very little of what she [Mrs Thatcher] said could not have been found in a typical One Nation Group pamphlet of the 1950s' (1992: 51-2). Free markets have been at the centre of conservatism 'since Edmund Burke went into politics as a follower of Adam Smith', and the tendency of 'some Conservatives' (presumably the likes of Gilmour) to downplay their role in Conservative thought is 'bad history' (Willetts, 1994: 9). The distinctive features of Thatcherism then can be found not in the content of its political programme but in the personal qualities of Mrs Thatcher herself, and the style and tone

that she brought to politics (1992: 51-4). Crucially for Willetts, ‘it was still conservatism that she was expounding’ (1992: 47).

Nonetheless, Willetts concedes that ‘there is more to conservatism than the free market’ (1994: 9). For him, the aim of modern conservatism is to ‘reconcile free markets (which deliver freedom and prosperity) with a recognition of the importance of community (which sustains our values)’ (1992: 92). Further, ‘conservatism is at its finest and its most distinctive precisely when it integrates a commitment to the free market into the core values and institutions which hold our country together’ (1994: 9). This is a call not just for Conservatives to seek to neutralise the worst effects of the market, but to use market mechanisms to strengthen communities and social institutions. The Thatcherite reforms are therefore welcomed not only as necessary for economic reasons – to ‘sort’ the trade unions, curb inflation and reverse decline – but by reasserting the value of the market they also offer the chance of social and political enrichment. The problem for Conservatives in recent years is that they ‘have become wary of relying as heavily on the free market as we appeared to do in the 1980s’ (1994: 7). Willetts believes that Conservatives should not be afraid to make the case for free markets, which he sees as integral to the British tradition and way of life. ‘The tension between markets and communities is resolved because they help to sustain each other’ (1992: 186). However, Conservatives also need to be at pains to highlight *how* markets and communities help to sustain each other, as much of the language of Thatcherism implied that the party was only interested in free markets and economics.

This neo-Thatcherite position is distinct from the moderate One Nation position articulated most clearly and effectively by the Conservative MP (and shadow minister) Damian Green, which, whilst accepting the need for Thatcher’s medicine to treat the sickness in the economy left by the 1970s, would now like to advocate less distasteful remedies for current problems such as inadequate public services. Nevertheless, it leads to similar recommendations as to how the contemporary Conservative Party should proceed. As Willetts (2005a) told the Social Market Foundation:

It would be a failure of imagination for a political party to say to the British people that they could only have half of what they want – either personal freedom or a strong society. Our aim must be to not just to make the British economy stronger but British society better. Surely this long promised debate about the future of Conservatism should be about how these two great principles of a dynamic economy and social cohesion come together.

Green similarly emphasised social cohesion and communities in his Tory Reform Group Macmillan lecture in March 2000. A One Nation Conservative government would, he suggests, ‘seek to use the tools at its disposal to encourage individual responsibility and the building of communities. It would take a pragmatic attitude to public services, asking how they can be improved before it asks who should be providing them’ (Green, 2000). However, Green offers a different conception of conservatism. Both Green and Willetts like to advocate the pragmatic rather than the ideological nature of their respective conservatisms – Willetts claims that to label Thatcherism as ‘ideological’ is simply a term of abuse – but the free market does not play such a central role in Green’s One Nation conception:

We can happily proclaim victory on the economic argument and move on. A successful modern conservatism will need not just a new style, but will also need to recognise which of its traditional purposes is most important. The main purpose of a One Nation Conservative is to create *a good society for all*. In the 1970s this was correctly identified as making the main priority the reduction of the size of the state... Where in the 1970s the state was largely seen as the enemy, now life is more subtle... our absolute core purpose must be to deliver practical improvements. Any hint that we have a different agenda will make it impossible for us to deploy new policy ideas effectively. (Green, 2000, *emphasis added*).

Green’s position is derived from the same intellectual tradition as Gilmour’s, and consequently shares the overriding desire for social harmony. However, Green has incorporated the Thatcher governments into his narrative of conservatism: they are part of the Conservative desire to ‘create a good society’ by responding to the challenges of the time. As such, monetarism was not dangerous alien ‘dogma’ as Gilmour suggests, but a tool utilised by pragmatic Conservatives to tackle the particular problems of inflation and an overly burdensome state sector. Different tools are required to respond to the problems the country now faces, particularly in terms of improving the public services. As Green explains:

The idea that making the state smaller, having individualism as the main spoke of everything, was clearly a necessary corrective to where Britain had got to in the mid-1970s. But, precisely because the product was relatively successful, both intellectually and practically, meant that you don't, in my view, need to continue in that direction as the main spring of Conservative policy. That is what I mean when I say that its time has gone – it is not that it was false, but I think that the true Tory belief is that any Tory government will seek to maintain a proper balance between the interests of the individual, the interests of the wider community and the interests of the state. (Green Interview).

This accommodation of Thatcherism represents a convergence of the One Nation and neo-Thatcherite perspectives, as both (illustrated by Green and Willetts), justify Thatcherism as a response to the crisis of the 1970s and argue that conservatism now has to move beyond Thatcherism to respond to current electoral and social challenges.

This convergence may enable the Conservatives to develop effective responses to the salient issues at the next general election. However, a tension between the neo-Thatcherite/David Willetts position and the Damian Green/One Nation position still exists. This revolves around the role of the state, and the capacity of the state for nurturing and protecting communities. For unswerving neo-Thatcherites, it is the state, not markets, that represents the biggest threat to communities, and as far as they acknowledge social breakdown, it is generally blamed on state-led progressive politics. This view is derived from their general abhorrence of socialism, which they equate with statism, and which was blamed for everything from accelerating economic decline to social rot (Thatcher, 1993: 6-12; see also Letwin, 1992). In simplistic neo-Thatcherite conceptions, the British left (in its desire for equality) remains wedded to statism, as the state is 'the representative of *all*' (Kruger, 2006: 32, *original emphasis*). Whilst congratulating themselves on defeating socialism, the neo-Thatcherite suspicion of the state therefore remains deeply ingrained. The One Nation position propounded by Green, however, subordinates its view of the state to 'values' – so it is possible to regard centralised state planning as appropriate for the Conservative governments of the 1950s, and at the same time argue that policies to 'roll back' the state were appropriate for the 1980s (Green, 2000). A more proactive view of the role of the state in the twenty-first century can therefore be countenanced.

In his 2005 speech to the Social Market Foundation Willetts has acknowledged this potential difficulty, and has been at pains to acknowledge that the state may be able to play a role in strengthening communities. This represents a compromise in his position, from that of 1997 when he wrote that ‘the real threat to civil society comes not from the market but from the state’ (1997: 3). Better government, rather than less government, is the new mantra:

[I]t is not just a matter of rolling back the state. Of course government can’t do everything, but that doesn’t mean it must do nothing. We Conservatives recognise that often the state fails but we shouldn’t react with glee when it does. Instead we should believe in effective government. Too often government seems to be in the way when you don’t need it but not there when you do. So yes, the state needs to be reformed and indeed rolled back but not because we hate it like some libertarians who have taken to the hills of Montana. (Willetts, 2005a).

A potential escape from the Conservative markets-communities dilemma can also be found in institutions that are neither market nor state-based, for example charities, voluntary bodies and ‘not for profit’ organisations. Willetts hopes that these will be the basis for the ‘new idea of community’ that conservatism needs (2005b: 73). The key institution for Conservatives in this regard was formerly the established church, with that symbol of the nation – the monarch – at its head. Religion has continued to be at the heart of conservatism in America. George W. Bush’s ‘compassionate conservatism’ attempts to use the glue of religious morality to bind together a society dominated by the free market. Obligation to others is placed on the shoulders of individuals, families and communities, not onto the state. Willetts (2005a) quotes President Bush in support of this point:

I leave you with this challenge: serve a neighbour in need, because a life of service is a life of significance. Because materialism ultimately is boring, and consumerism can build a prison of wants. Because a person who is not responsible for others is a person who is truly alone. Because there are few better ways to express our love for America and to care for other Americans. And because the same God who endows us with individual rights also calls us to social obligations.

But Willetts recognises that if it ever existed, such a strong Christian morality no longer exists in Britain’s increasingly secular society, and cannot therefore form the basis of contemporary conservatism on this side of the Atlantic (2005b: 74). Other institutions between the state and the market need to be found and nurtured. The recent Conservative

interest in localism is one attempt to do this, which has attracted the interest of David Cameron (Kruger, 2006: 36; see also Direct Democracy, 2005). Oliver Letwin's (2003) vision of a 'Neighbourly Society' is another, as was Iain Duncan Smith's reassertion of the importance of social justice (Duncan Smith, 2002b; 2002d; see also Streeter, 2002). This intellectual activity has not, however, been translated into electoral success, as later chapters of this thesis will consider in greater detail.

Willetts makes an eloquent case for the centrality of both free markets and communities to the British conservative tradition. However, as he occasionally acknowledges, and despite his efforts to dispel it, a tension between the two still remains. The resolution of the tension that he suggests is firmly on Thatcherite ground. He claims that the wets, who enjoyed periods of dominance between 1958 and 1965, and between 1971 and 1975, have finally been defeated by Thatcherism. Whereas previous Conservative governments succumbed, Margaret Thatcher and John Major both held firm to their pledges to 'hold inflation down and intervene less... The party's dangerous flirtation with corporatism and loose money is now finally over' (1992: 49). Willetts is right of course to note the 'intellectual victory' (1992: 49) of neo-liberal economic theory in the Conservative Party – this consensus now extends across the political spectrum. However whilst New Labour (at least in its early years) successfully appealed to the electorate on the basis of accepting the neo-liberal economic settlement *and* developing a better society, the Conservatives have failed to do the same. Regardless of whether or not the perception is correct, the Conservatives have become associated in the public mind with free market economics and little else. a perception that became particularly damaging after the ERM debacle destroyed their reputation for economic competence in 1992. Contra Willetts, the problem was perhaps the Conservatives over-willingness to rely on the free market, certainly in their public pronouncements.

### 3.3.3 Post-Thatcherism: Conservatism undone

Gray delights in irony. He revels in the 'unintended consequences' of neo-liberalism. rather ironically in a manner not dissimilar to the Gramscian left. As Colls comments,

Gray's paradoxes come in all sizes, but 'as a general rule, the bigger the better' (Colls, 1998: 67). One of the biggest is that neo-liberalism, which in the 1970s and 1980s was 'a compelling response to otherwise intractable dilemmas' has turned out to be 'a self-undermining political project' (Gray, 1994: 7). Neo-liberalism's success was, Gray contends, dependent on the cultural and social fabric that it inevitably undermined. 'In an irony that will delight historians in years to come, the political effect of the ephemeral intellectual hegemony of the New Right in Britain, and similar countries, has probably been to accomplish the political destruction of conservatism: it may have rendered conservative parties unelectable, perhaps for a generation' (1994: 8).

This pessimism about both neo-liberalism and the electoral prospects of the Conservative Party marks a significant shift for Gray, who in the early 1980s was one of the foremost intellectual advocates of the New Right and a supporter of Thatcher's Conservative government. He is now better known for his critique of neo-liberalism, his environmentalism, and, perhaps, his fatalism. He is disillusioned with modernity, but sceptical about humanity's ability to transform things for the better: indeed, any rationally inspired attempt to do so will almost certainly make things worse (one of his many paradoxes). Nonetheless, consistent reasoning underpins Gray's intellectual journey – his position has not shifted 'qualitatively' (Gamble, 1999: 118). Unusually for a critic of globalisation and neo-liberalism, he is an Oakeshottian pessimist, inspired in his approach and method by Hayek. As Kenny notes, 'Gray remains an intellectual standard bearer for selected aspects of the conservative philosophical tradition, which he combines with a deep commitment to the value-pluralist aspect of liberalism' (1998: 84).

Gray's early position shares some similarities with that maintained by Willetts. In his essay 'A Conservative disposition' (in *Beyond the New Right*) Gray defended the policies of the Thatcher government in extending the market, and called for this agenda to be carried further forward:

There is much farther to go in extending market institutions into hitherto sacrosanct areas, in reducing taxation, inflation and government expenditure, and in privatising industries and services. There is a strong case for introducing market choice in many social and welfare

services. In all of these areas, the achievements of the past decade will provide a sound base. (Gray, 1993: 62).

However, he saw the potential danger in this programme. If Conservative policy became solely associated with marketisation, it risked provoking public ‘revulsion’, the result of which would be the loss of the ‘traditional Tory concerns for the health of the community’ to ‘egalitarians and collectivists’ (1993: 63). Consequently he advocated a reassertion of traditional conservatism of the One Nation ilk. The free market, whilst vital for individual freedom, ‘is only one dimension of society’. Furthermore, free markets can only operate successfully and be preserved within a strong social framework. As such, ‘only a reassertion of the traditional Tory concern for compassion and community’ could safeguard the achievements of the Thatcher era (1993: 63).

Soon after the publication of *Beyond the New Right* (1993) Gray became a vocal critic of the marketisation agenda that he had previously advocated (see Gray, 1994, 1997 and 1998). This moved him closer to Gilmour’s position, but was not a complete volte-face on his part. Gray continued to maintain that free markets could only operate successfully within a strong social framework. However, he had come to the conclusion that the effect of neo-liberal economic policies was to weaken communities and social bonds – neo-liberalism was therefore a self-undermining and self-limiting political project (1997: 1-10). This process had been carried so far that a reassertion of the paternalist and communitarian Tory tradition (of the kind he had previously espoused) was no longer a possibility. Conservatism had been undone. The resultant political consequences are (of course) ironic. The agent of the modernisation of Britain in the 1980s, the Conservative Party, forced the modernisation of the Labour Party but struggled to modernise itself. The ‘capture’ of the Conservative Party by neo-liberal ideas has ‘all but destroyed the social base of conservatism’ (1994: 47) by ‘hollowing-out’ Tory England, whilst the ‘economic constituency that gained most from early Thatcherism has been most savaged by its longer-term effects’ (1997: 3). Thatcherism encouraged voters to ‘question their loyalties’ through rapid economic and social change. This process initially worked in the Conservatives’ favour as socially mobile former Labour voters (the fabled C2s) switched their support. However, over time it ‘corroded Tory support in the middle classes’ and made



Conservative rule 'impossible to sustain' (1998: 32). The processes of class and party dealignment identified by psephologists can be seen as part of this broader trend.

This forms part of a wider anti-rationalist critique by Gray of the Enlightenment and all the major ideologies that are associated with it. None can offer satisfactory solutions to dilemmas posed by the death throes of modernity. The single global market is the 'Enlightenment's project of a universal civilization in what is likely to be its final form', a self-undermining rival to democracy, the 'natural counterpart' to which is 'the politics of insecurity' (1998: 3, 17). Radical policies are therefore required to meet the human need for security, community and personal fulfilment that used to be addressed by conservatism. Market processes, 'which neo-liberalism has emancipated' must now be re-embedded in communities (1997: 10). Such a project would be 'little short of revolutionary in its implications', and is of a magnitude that 'no form of conservative thought today is willing to contemplate' (1997: 10).

Upon entering opposition in 1997, the strategic terrain for the Conservative Party as defined by Gray was most unpropitious. Armed only with a redundant ideology, it could offer no solution to the economic and social problems that their New Right policies had helped to create. New Labour under Tony Blair initially filled this void, by offering the electorate a palliative promise of measures to promote social cohesion and reduce the worst effects of neo-liberalism, such as pensioner poverty, higher crime and anti-social behaviour. Alas New Labour's attachment to a 'neo-liberal model of modernisation' means that the effect has been to give 'Thatcherism a new lease of life' (2004: 39-40), and after some initial enthusiasm for the Blair government, Gray quickly became disillusioned. If the Conservative Party was able to renew itself electorally (as he acknowledged that in time it probably would), lacking a relevant intellectual tradition it would struggle as Labour has to respond to these challenges. 'Tory England, which it existed to conserve, is already no more than a historical memory', which leaves the party without a purpose beyond technocratic management (1997: 10).

Robert Eccleshall counters Gray's pessimistic outlook for both conservatism and the Conservative Party, suggesting that Gray 'underestimates the capacity of conservatives for self-renewal' (2000: 275). He also contends that the fortunes of the party are not necessarily linked to the intellectual conservative tradition. 'There is little correlation between intellectual purity and electoral success because conservatism in its various forms has always been something of a patchwork' (2000: 277). This patchwork, Eccleshall suggests, has always contained competing and often contradictory strands, 'whose consistency, either internally or in relation to one another, does not necessarily match standards of intellectual rigour' (2000: 276). The current 'crisis' in conservatism is perhaps then not quite as new or as apocalyptic as Gray (and others) suggest. Rather, the dominance of Thatcherite ideas in the contemporary Conservative Party is somewhat more banal. It is simply the latest chapter in a long-running debate within the party over the extent to which free market policies should be pursued – a debate that has swung for a time in the neo-liberal direction. It does not therefore represent a major break with conservatism, which Gray wrongly presents as a cogent One Nation tradition which was rather suddenly contaminated by an alien doctrine. As such, Gray's position is 'weak on historical perspective' (2000: 277).

Denham and Garnett consider Gray and Eccleshall's rival theses through a case study of the politics of Sir Keith Joseph. They argue that Joseph's career 'provides persuasive evidence in support of Gray's view that contemporary British conservatism is hollowed-out' (Denham and Garnett, 2002: 57). Eccleshall's primary criticism of Gray's position is, they suggest, that he is wrong to claim that New Right ideology is incompatible with conservatism, 'saying, in effect, that British conservatism can survive in contemporary conditions provided that we can accept that it is now synonymous with nineteenth century liberalism' (2002: 60). For Denham and Garnett, the neo-liberalism of the New Right runs so contrary to their understanding of conservatism that it cannot be regarded as a competing strand within that tradition. Whilst ideologies require the capacity to change in order to renew themselves and survive, 'there must be limits' to the extent of that change (2002: 60). Yet whilst claiming that neo-liberalism is alien to *conservatism*, they acknowledge that it has been an important position within the Conservative Party for over

a century: ‘Since Peel, the party has been split between devotees of two different – indeed deeply antagonistic – ideologies’. This division has now – finally – been all but resolved as ‘one of these has left the stage of practical politics’ (2002: 73). As Garnett has argued elsewhere, this means that the contemporary Conservative Party is not conservative at all, rather it is a liberal nationalist party (Garnett, 2003: 112). The essence of their analysis – that neo-liberalism is, as Gray suggests, alien to conservatism – does not form a devastating critique of Eccleshall’s position. In the end they come to a similar conclusion – that neo-liberalism is in the ascendancy in the British Conservative Party. Whether this is part of conservatism or is a rival ideology is of limited practical concern. Their primary difference seems to be over the definition of conservatism.

Denham and Garnett, Eccleshall, and Gray agree that the Conservative Party may (indeed probably will) revive its electoral fortunes, whatever the status of ‘true’ conservatism. However, whether or not the party can ever re-establish Conservative hegemony in Britain is perhaps dependent on whose interpretation of the ideational dimension is most accurate. If Gray is right in his assessment that the intellectual basis of conservatism is now obsolete, it is difficult to conceive of a sustained Conservative revival. If Gilmour is correct a return to electability is possible on a One Nation platform, but the prognosis for a party so wedded to Thatcherism is not good. The party’s best hope lies in the Willetts interpretation. If the Thatcher legacy can be reconciled with a new Conservative narrative that responds to the challenges posed by the neo-liberalism of the past three decades, a new Conservative hegemony may be possible.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Lord Parkinson commented that when William Hague became leader of the Conservative Party, he faced ‘a totally no win situation’ (Parkinson Interview). The strategically selective context faced by the Conservatives upon entering opposition was certainly inauspicious. This chapter has located the problem faced by Hague along two fronts. On the electoral dimension, Hague inherited a party that had lost its reputation for governing competence, had a poor public image, and had suffered its worst election defeat in over a

century. As Chapter 4 explores, Hague needed to somehow devise a strategy that would both unite the party and begin the long process of recovering its image and repositioning in a position to once again challenge for power.

However, perhaps the most fundamental problem facing the Conservative Party at this time is illustrated by the analysis of the ideational dimension. What was the Conservative Party actually for? The future purpose and direction of conservatism was far from clear, whether considered from a neo-Thatcherite, post-Thatcherite or anti-Thatcherite perspective. Differences of opinion over the causes of defeat led to confusion and disagreement over strategy in opposition, as explored in later chapters. The party lacked a vibrant intellectual tradition upon which it could draw in its efforts to develop a new narrative of conservatism to appeal to a twenty-first century electorate. Ideological differences within the party over issues such as Europe (Chapter 5), national identity (Chapter 6) and moral issues (Chapter 7) would shape the debate about how the party should move forward, and impact upon efforts to modernise party image and strategy.

## Chapter 4

### Leadership Strategy in Opposition, 1997-2005

*Leadership is hugely important. If the leader is giving you momentum there's a clear sense of direction and you tend to be following, you are moving. It is when you are static that people are standing around looking at each other and thinking "where the hell are we going?"*

Gary Streeter MP (Interview).

#### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 contextualised the period of Conservative opposition between 1997 and 2005 through an analysis of differing interpretations of the party's strategic terrain post-Thatcher. Three different positions were characterised: anti-Thatcherite, neo-Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite. This analysis of the ideational dimension demonstrated the difficulty proponents of conservatism have had in formulating an electorally appealing ideology since 1992, not least because of their disagreements over the direction of conservatism post-Thatcher. Related to this ideational problem was an unfavourable material context, which was explored through the electoral difficulties faced by the Conservative Party since Black Wednesday. The party's poor public image, loss of reputation for economic competence, and the rise of New Labour's 'Third Way' narrative and electoral strategy combined to create a serious electoral problem for the Conservatives, which was spectacularly verified at the 1997 election. It is in this context that the case-study of this thesis – the Conservative Party leadership strategy between 1997 and 2005 – is based.

In contrast to the contextual chapter 3, this chapter is explicitly agency focused. It provides an overview of the strategies of the Conservative Party leadership between 1997 and 2005, and contends that these have been sub-optimal in electoral terms. characterised by uncertainty and inconsistency. In part this is a reflection of the unfavourable context, both electoral and ideational, that the party faced. The chapter will analyse the Conservative reaction to landslide defeat in 1997, and consider how the competing interpretations of defeat influenced the strategies pursued by the party leadership. The SRA has particular utility in this regard, as it places the focus of

analysis on the key strategic actors and their interpretation of, and interaction with, the strategically selective context. The strategies of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith, and Michael Howard are examined through key speeches, such as keynote conference addresses. Speeches are considered in this way because they provide authoritative statements of the position that politicians would like to project, even if they attract limited public interest. The chapter concludes that the strategies pursued by each were sub-optimal: they underachieved even within the inauspicious context that they faced.

#### **4.2 Strategic confusion, 1997-2001**

The context faced by William Hague upon his election as leader of the Conservative Party could not be described as favourable. Tony Blair's New Labour government enjoyed an extended political honeymoon, and the Conservatives faced an unsympathetic media and public. The parliamentary party also remained divided on the issue of Europe. In spite of this Hague was enthusiastic about his task: he maintained that the Conservatives could win the 2001 election and never articulated a two-term strategy (Nadler, 2000: 289-292; Parkinson, 2003: 217-220). Ashbee suggests that in the aftermath of the 1997 defeat, 'the need for a policy rethink was widely accepted' (Ashbee, 2003: 43). Whilst this need may have been apparent to most outside observers, no such consensus existed amongst Conservatives themselves. Disagreement over the reasons for defeat led to muddled and ineffective attempts to tackle its causes. Seldon and Snowdon suggest that in opposition, the Conservative Party 'has traditionally avoided recrimination, has changed the leader, rejuvenated the party organisation to reconnect with its supporters, and adapted its policies to appeal again to the middle ground' (2005a: 244). Between 1997 and 2005, the Conservative Party changed its leader on four occasions, and frequently attempted to reinvigorate its organisation and refresh its policies, but largely failed to renew its appeal to voters. Seldon and Snowdon explain this failure as the result of the loss to Labour by the Conservative Party of its 'two secret weapons', its hunger for office and adaptability (2005a: 244). This transition, they argue, occurred during the Thatcher and Major governments, when the Conservatives metamorphosed into an 'ideological and sectional' party, the role previously occupied by Labour. The transformation of the then opposition into the 'non-ideological party' in the shape of New Labour sealed the Conservatives' fate (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005: 245).

However, this analysis is problematic. Firstly, it implies an overly simplistic inverse relationship between success at British general elections and the vigour of a party's ideology, despite the obvious counter examples such as Labour's landslide victory in 1945, or indeed, the Conservatives under Thatcher. Secondly, it subscribes to the 'puzzlingly long-lived notion' that the Conservative Party before Thatcher was non-ideological (Green, 2002: 2). Whilst the party was arguably more successful at *portraying* itself as non-ideological (perhaps as a result of the tradition of pragmatism and suspicion of abstract theorising in Conservative thought), this does not mean that Conservatives lacked an ideologically informed view of the world. Moreover, the more avowedly ideological rhetoric under Thatcher did not lead to electoral disaster for the Conservatives. However, the task facing the new Conservative leader in 1997 was not to purge the party of ideology, but to reconnect the party's ideological outlook and policies with a greater mass of public opinion, a challenge that remained unmet by May 2005.

#### 4.2.1 *A fresh start? The Hague leadership*

William Hague's success in the 1997 leadership election was due in no small part to the fact that he was 'the candidate with the least number of enemies' in the party (Lansley, 2003: 221). It is telling that this was a key factor in his election, against a candidate whom the polls suggested was much more likely to appeal to the floating-voters who had deserted the Conservatives in 1997. He also benefitted greatly from the failure of the right-wing of the parliamentary party to unite behind one individual, support being split between Michael Howard, Peter Lilley and John Redwood. Hague's campaign sought to present him as the candidate best able to both unify and revitalise the party, and made much of his popularity amongst the new intake of Conservative MPs (Alderman, 1997: 9). Despite his unholy alliance with right-winger John Redwood, Ken Clarke was defeated in the final run-off with Hague because of his pro-European views (Walters, 2001: 13; Nadler, 2000: 37-40). The Clarke-Redwood pact was part of an effort by Clarke to seize the unity mantle from Hague, who hardened his stance on the single currency in an effort to shore-up his support on the right (Alderman, 1997: 11). Redwood, however, could only deliver a small proportion of his supporters to Clarke, who lost some of his own, disapproving, original backers (*ibid*: 13). Lord

Parkinson recalled how when he telephoned Margaret Thatcher to inform her of this link-up she was initially disbelieving, telling him ‘John Redwood would never do that, he was a member of my political office’. Once confirmed, however, it was instrumental in her decision to appear with Hague and urge MPs to support him (Parkinson Interview).

In his history of the Conservative Party Alan Clark claimed that the preoccupation of Conservative MPs with ‘the balance of probability in their retaining their seats’, combined with the ruthless treatment of their leaders, accounts for the party’s ability to ‘sleepwalk the path to whichever tactical decision will keep it in power’ (Clark, 1998: 491). The vote for Hague over Clarke can be interpreted either as the victory of ideological dogmatism over traditional Tory pragmatism or, more charitably to Conservative MPs, as another example of Conservative Party statecraft, with Clarke rejected as a divisive figure unable to provide a convincing narrative of what conservatism is for.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Clarke’s leadership bids (in 1997, 2001 and 2005) were the late casualties of the bitter ideological wrangling over Europe that consumed the party in the early-1990s (see Gamble, 1996; and Buller, 2000). However, as Heppell and Hill convincingly demonstrate, Hague’s ideological acceptability over Clarke extended beyond the issue of Europe to Hague’s ‘drier’ economic stance and more socially conservative disposition. The end result was that ‘the necessary processes of adaptation, and the reconfiguring of the Conservative narrative, would be delayed by a decade’ (Heppell and Hill, 2008: 64).

As a youthful, fresh figure, Hague had the opportunity to present a different tone of conservatism. As Theresa May commented, ‘what William was able to do, by being a younger person, a fresh face, with new thinking, was to start a process of thinking about change in the party’ (May Interview). He was as well placed as anyone to unite the party, being regarded as a ‘non-ideological figure’ who had avoided the factional infighting of the 1990s (Taylor, 2003: 230; Nadler, 2000: 243-6). The change of leadership thus offered some hope of ‘A Fresh Start’ (Hague’s campaign slogan) to Conservatives. Hague scored an early success with his clarification of the party’s policy

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<sup>1</sup> On Conservative statecraft see Bulpitt (1986); and on the need for narrative, see Bevir and Rhodes (1999).



towards Europe in general and the single currency in particular. His decision to rule out British membership of the Euro in the event of a Conservative general election victory for at least one parliament provoked disquiet amongst the few remaining pro-Europeans on the Conservative benches, but was overwhelmingly endorsed in a ballot of party members (Garnett, 2003: 56). This tactical success, whilst not resolving the European question for the Conservatives, despatched it into the long grass for the remainder of his term of office and beyond.

Hague's early speeches demonstrate his desire to develop a more inclusive brand of conservatism. In his first speech to the party conference as leader, he declared his wish to 'tell you about an open Conservatism, that is tolerant, that believes in freedom, is about much more than economics, that believes freedom doesn't stop at the shop counter' (Hague 1997: 3). He went on: 'I'd like to tell you about a democratic, popular Conservatism that listens... that has compassion at its core... which is rooted in its traditions, but embraces the future' (1997: 3). However, when he attempted to describe in greater depth this new kind of conservatism, Hague returned to more traditional Conservative themes. He highlighted freedom, enterprise, education, self-reliance, obligation to others, and the nation as his core beliefs and as the core values of this variety of conservatism (1997: 7-15). Of these, the inclusion of education and 'obligation to others' represents an attempt to counter the claim that the Conservatives were interested in little more than tax-cuts and economics, and to prove that the party had a 'compassionate' edge (Chapter 7). Compassion, Hague claimed, 'is not a bolt-on extra to conservatism. It is at its very core' (1997: 12). However, even these two themes were discussed in terms familiar to Hague's Conservative audience. Choice, he suggested, 'lies at the heart of a good education' (1997: 9), before condemning the new government's decisions to scrap grant-maintained schools and the Assisted Places Scheme, which subsidised the cost of private school fees.

By stressing the importance of 'obligation to others', Hague aimed to refute those who 'labelled conservatism as being just about individualism, or even selfishness' (1997: 12). However, he discussed social obligation in terms of local groups, charities, and voluntary organisations; using similar language to Willetts (see Chapter 3), and was keen to emphasise the limited role for the state in facilitating obligation towards others. Contrasting his Conservative approach to Labour's, he argued that a compassionate

society ‘is one where more and more over the years people and communities take on more responsibility... Making moral choices, not just assuming that the authorities will do it all for them’ (1997: 12). The purpose of the speech was therefore much more about changing the language, tone and emphasis of the Conservative Party’s message than about any radical reassessment of policy or content. It therefore effectively demonstrated the duality of Hague’s message, which was directed at both the party and the electorate.

Hague hoped that changes of tone and language would improve the party’s image, and help to distance himself from the Thatcher-Major era. As Nadler noted, ‘throughout his leadership campaign and first years as leader, Hague’s reforming rhetoric was bold and extravagant’ (2000: 206). Much of this boldness was directed towards the internal organisation of the Conservative Party, which Hague attempted to rejuvenate, promising a ‘democratic revolution’ in his first speech as leader (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005: 250). Hague hoped that by reforming the party organisation he could demonstrate to the public that the Conservatives were renewing themselves for government once again. He enlisted Lord Parkinson as his first Party Chairman and gave him a brief to pilot the reform process. As Parkinson explains:

That was how William was going to demonstrate to the country that the party had changed. We were going to become a one-member one-vote party, we were going to have a governing board in which all strands of the party were represented. He was going to make the Conservatives a democratic party. He thought that was a change that would bring home to people that we weren’t just satisfied with the past, but that we were planning to be a different party in the future. (Parkinson Interview).

For May, these internal reforms were Hague’s most significant achievement, as they began the process of change in the party, however incrementally. She regretfully acknowledged, however, that they were not accompanied by ‘much policy change in terms of the issues that we campaigned on’ (May Interview).

As well as the policy on the Euro, Hague put his own leadership, and his package of party reforms (labelled *The Fresh Future*) to votes by party members.<sup>2</sup> These ballots, and the new electoral system for subsequent party leaders contained in *The Fresh*

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<sup>2</sup> An all-party ballot was also held by Hague on his draft manifesto in October 2000. For a breakdown of the results from all of these ballots see Kelly (2003: 88).

*Future*, represented an unprecedented extension of democracy for the Conservatives, which would resist attempts to unpick them by the outgoing Michael Howard in 2005.<sup>3</sup> However, this extension of ‘one member, one vote’ (OMOV) has been criticised as coming from a more centralised, less democratic party management. On this reading, Hague used the facade of democracy to strengthen his own position and his control over the party (Kelly, 2003: 82-106). This was an astute strategy on Hague’s part, clearly inspired by the success of the New Labour project. Faced with a party out of touch with mainstream public opinion, it offered the opportunity for Hague, with the endorsement of party members, to stamp his own message on the Conservative Party and offer a genuine ‘fresh start’.

Kelly argues however, that far from revitalising Conservative Party organisation, Hague’s reforms actually weakened it. Whilst the new structures cannot be held responsible for the 2001 election defeat, they ‘clearly failed to mitigate it’ (2002: 38). He goes as far to suggest that in electoral terms they arguably made things worse, ‘by demoralising, and thus diminishing, the party’s constituency membership’ (2002: 38). This is a damning critique: Hague had sold the reforms to party members as a package aimed at enhancing intraparty democracy, and with it the membership organisation. For Lees-Marshment and Quayle however, the rationale driving the organisational changes was not primarily democratisation, but one of political marketing. They claim that the reforms were ‘part of an overall strategy to make the Conservatives more market-orientated and put them in a stronger electoral position’ (2001: 206). Their analysis leads to a more positive appraisal of Hague’s efforts. Whilst these failed to yield results in the opinion polls or the 2001 general election, Hague did make ‘significant headway in undertaking subtle but significant changes that have the long-term potential to heighten the Tories’ market orientation and electoral prospects’ (2001: 206).

The key issue here (as Lees-Marshment and Quayle acknowledge) is whether any extension of internal party democracy is compatible with the development of a more effective marketing strategy and organisation. For example, if such reforms had the effect of making the party leadership more responsive in policy terms to the wider

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<sup>3</sup> After the 2005 election defeat, Howard immediately announced his intention to resign the party leadership, but not until a review had been conducted into the rules for selecting the next leader. Party activists rejected the eventuating plan to return the choice of leader back to MPs (*The Guardian*, 2005a).

membership, would this leave them less able to orientate themselves to their primary ‘market’, namely the electorate at large? Lees-Marshment and Quayle suggest a way out of this difficulty: ‘the introduction of reforms that increase individual membership power may in practice serve to strengthen the leadership’ (2001: 208). This line of reasoning suggests that by devolving power to all party members (who are more likely to support the leadership) leaders can sideline radical and/or dissenting party activists. This supports Kelly’s (2003) accusation, noted above, that Hague centralised power. From a political marketing perspective, however, this was a prerequisite for electoral recovery: Hague’s failure was not his changes to party structure, but his inability to utilise these to market the Conservative brand effectively.

Hague’s deputy, Peter Lilley, understood party strategy at the time to be about decontaminating the Conservatives’ tarnished image, and engaging with the current concerns of the electorate. As he explains:

Instead of being seen as the party which dealt with the problems of the 1980s, we had to identify ourselves with the problems of the next decade. Hence our ‘Listening to Britain’ effort to identify new challenges – not going to listen to people to ask them what the solutions were, so much as to ask them what the *challenges* were. Once we knew that we could identify ourselves with solving those problems. So that was the first part of our strategy. The second part of our strategy was recognising that we were seen as being nasty and looking at how to change that aspect of the image, which has taken until Cameron to really set about doing in a thorough and comprehensive way. (Lilley Interview).

Such change was certainly required if the Conservatives were to make a substantial electoral recovery. In April 1997, MORI found that 50 percent of the British public felt that the party was ‘out of touch with ordinary people’, and 40 percent believed that it would ‘promise anything to win votes’. Only 11 percent regarded it as ‘moderate’ and a mere 8 percent believed that it was ‘concerned about the people in real need’ (MORI, 2006). In the early days of his leadership, Hague and his team appeared to grasp the need for an image as well as a policy makeover for the party. However, attempts to portray Hague as a man of the twenty-first century people were the subject of embarrassment and ridicule, and looked unprofessional alongside those of the new Prime Minister (Nadler, 2000: 211-214).

Hague completely failed to rebrand the Conservative Party (Table 4.1). By May 2001, the public's perception of the Conservative Party was largely unchanged from that of four years previously. The party was now regarded as 'out of touch' by 36 percent, and opportunistic by 46 percent. Less than 1 in 5 respondents agreed that the party 'understand the problems facing Britain', and only 11 percent thought that a future Conservative government would look after their interests. Over the four-year period, little tangible advancement can be discerned. Most of the indicators have shifted only **within** the standard margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent, whilst those which have shifted by more than this indicate either a greater degree of public cynicism, or perhaps more seriously, public indifference.

*Table 4.1: Conservative Party Image, April 1997 – May 2001*

Percentages of respondents agreeing that the Conservative Party...	April 1997	May 2001	Change +/- %
<i>Keeps its promises</i>	5	5	-
<i>Understands the problems facing Britain</i>	20	18	- 2
<i>Represents all classes</i>	10	8	- 2
<i>Looks after the interests of people like us</i>	9	11	+ 2
<i>Is moderate</i>	11	12	+ 1
<i>Is extreme</i>	10	12	+ 2
<i>Is concerned about the people in real need</i>	8	9	+ 1
<i>Has a good team of leaders</i>	10	7	- 3
<i>Will promise anything to win votes</i>	40	46	+ 6
<i>Is out of touch with ordinary people</i>	50	36	- 14
<i>Has sensible policies</i>	14	15	+ 1
<i>Is too dominated by its leader</i>	10	13	+ 3
<i>Is professional in its approach</i>	13	13	-
<i>Is divided</i>	44	30	- 14
<i>No Opinion</i>	9	10	+ 1

Source: data on Conservative Party image from MORI (2006b).

In a revealing statement after his resignation Hague acknowledged the strategic errors that he had made: 'I got this Parliament the wrong way round. I should have spent the first year or so shoring up the base Conservative vote and then reached out later on'

(quoted in Walters, 2001: 111). The context of a party shaken by defeat, with a new leader at the helm, gave Hague the opportunity to style a new more inclusive (or ‘compassionate’) form of conservatism with wider appeal, and use the authority gained by his election and endorsement by party members to impress this on his party. The implication of the above quotation is that there was a successful ‘core vote’ strategy that could have then been built upon. However, the second half of his period as leader did not shore up the core vote. At the 2001 election, the Conservatives received 8.35 million votes, over 1.25 million fewer than in 1997. On a substantially reduced turnout, the party’s share of the vote advanced by one percent, but the polls suggested that a higher turnout would have worked against the Conservatives (Butler and Kavanagh, 2002: 251-264; Tyrie, 2001: 5).

#### 4.2.2 *The fresh future curtailed*

Two key events marked the shift in strategy away from ‘reaching out’ to ‘shoring-up’ the base Conservative vote. The first was the 1999 R. A. Butler Memorial lecture given by the then deputy leader Peter Lilley; the second was the Conservative victory in the elections for the European Parliament later the same year. The events surrounding Lilley’s speech and how it was handled by Hague are a potent illustration of the confusion amongst the party’s high command about the strategy they were attempting to pursue. The speech was cleared by Hague, and was meant to elucidate the philosophy of ‘Kitchen Table Conservatism’ (Walters, 2001: 116). Whilst not a repudiation of Thatcherism *per se*, it was a call for a rhetorical shift by Conservatives to a narrative that recognised the value of welfare as well as the value of free markets. Lilley recognised that being associated solely with free market doctrine was damaging the party, as it served to ‘reinforce people’s concern that we were planning to convert public services into profit making businesses... that we nurse some nefarious plans to privatise health, education and almost everything else...’ The free market, he argued, has never been the sole belief of Conservatives, rather ‘a sense of obligation is the most fundamental Tory value of all’ (Lilley, 1999).

In content, this was not a hugely radical claim. Amongst others, David Willetts had been arguing for years in favour of ‘civic’ as well as free market conservatism (Willetts, 1992; 1994). This places a greater emphasis on society and communities as a

natural extension of the free market agenda of the 1980s, which is regarded as having been essential for securing the prosperity of the country but not as an end in itself. It sees no great inconsistency between Thatcherism and traditional conservatism, and rejects Gray's (1994) notion that conservatism has been 'undone' by free market zeal. Lilley's call for a more prominent Conservative advocacy of the importance of public services also appeared consistent with Hague's desire to forge a new identity outlined in *Kitchen Table Conservatism* only six months earlier. This internal party document had called for a new Conservative narrative, 'which is about much more than economics', addressing issues such as the future of the public services. It called for a series of '10,000 volt initiatives' that would demonstrate in a very public way that the party was changing, and generate media attention (Conservative Party, 1998: 4-7).

Lilley's lecture was an attempt to meet this challenge. He saw it as taking forward the findings of 'Listening to Britain', although 'you didn't actually need, or shouldn't have needed, that exercise to realise that the focus had turned to improving public services, rather than the economic and industrial problems of the 1980s' (Lilley Interview). He also saw it as seeking to counter the 'unfair caricature' that the Conservatives had little interest in the public services beyond a desire to privatise them. He was warned by Nick Wood, Hague's press secretary, that the media would not admit they had previously caricatured the party inaccurately, rather 'the best you can hope for is that they will say you have changed, and abandoned these policies'. Lilley thought that was 'fair enough' and telephoned Hague to see if he was happy with that: 'he said yes, as long as you emphasise choice'. He also cleared the speech with eleven colleagues (Lilley Interview).

The reaction to the speech suggested the Conservative Party was far from ready for the kind of shocks *Kitchen Table Conservatism* had called for. The lecture was 'one of the most incendiary in history' (Taylor, 2005: 146). Thatcher's aides informed Hague that she had 'gone ballistic' over the speech, which ironically coincided with the twentieth anniversary celebrations of her first general election victory in 1979 (Walters, 2001: 117). Rather than play it down, party spin doctors initially portrayed the speech as a radical new departure for the Conservatives, similar in scale and importance to Labour's abandonment of Clause 4 (Walters, 2001: 116; Taylor, 2005: 145-7). Lilley was surprised by the reaction, he had 'thought it would be jolly difficult to get any

coverage' and saw the speech more as 'an educational resource' to 'try and teach people in the party to talk a language that didn't lend itself to being caricatured' as the party had been in the past (Lilley Interview).

At first Hague attempted to weather the storm, after all, he had cleared the speech before it was given. However, the outrage amongst the shadow cabinet, parliamentary party and local activists proved too strong, and Lilley was sacked in June (Taylor, 2005: 146). Lilley's departure was 'more or less' a direct consequence of his lecture (Lilley Interview). Walters suggests that Hague was 'seared' by the experience: 'Having tried, tentatively, to take one-step out of the towering shadow of Margaret Thatcher, he had been forced to go running back to mummy. He was too scared to step out of line again' (2001: 118).

The furore over the Lilley's lecture weakened Hague, and made him wary of further attempts to forge a more 'inclusive' narrative of conservatism. If the key fault line in the Conservative Party was now between liberal modernisers and traditionalist reactionaries (or 'mods and rockers' as *The Times* (1998) put it), the context facing Hague was transformed in favour of the rockers by Lilley's speech.<sup>4</sup> It was the key moment in his decision to side with the rockers, 'despite his own sympathy for a more "inclusive" approach' (Garnett and Lynch, 2003: 258). This shift was reinforced by the results of the 1999 elections to the European Parliament.

Campaigning on a Eurosceptic manifesto entitled *In Europe, not run by Europe*, Hague led the Conservatives to a dramatic victory in the first nationwide test of the government's popularity since the 1997 general election. Despite the threat of the breakaway 'Pro-European Conservative Party' (that failed to win a single seat) and the resurgent United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) the Conservatives won the greatest number of seats (36) and the highest share of the vote: Labour saw its vote share slump to 28 percent. Hague hailed the victory as 'a major breakthrough' for his party, but more cautious voices pointed to the 23 percent turnout and Labour's

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<sup>4</sup> *The Times* borrowed the 'Mods and Rockers' analogy from the conflicting 1960s youth subcultures. The rockers were associated with heavy drinking and 1950s rock and roll, whilst the mods experimented with recreational drugs, rhythm and blues, and psychedelia. In the case of the Conservative Party, *The Times* saw the mods as liberal modernisers, and the rockers as authoritarian traditionalists. This is discussed at greater length in Chapter 7. See also Denham & O'Hara (2007a).



continued lead in the opinion polls (BBC News, 1999). Nonetheless, the electoral success did secure Hague's position as leader, and he used the opportunity to reshuffle his shadow cabinet and evict his deputy Peter Lilley. It reinforced Hague's position as leader and consolidated the hold of the right on power (Shrimpsley, 1999).

The Conservative campaign had been fought on the core vote messages of 'save the pound', and 'In Europe, not run by Europe'. The manifesto claimed to be that of 'a proudly British party' and promised to 'oppose all new European directives on tax harmonisation', 'oppose any extension of qualified majority voting', to protect the British rebate, and 'resist any attempt to develop a common immigration policy for the EU' (Conservative Party, 1999: 1; 16; 27). Whilst these themes played well with Conservative Party members, they lacked the appeal to form the basis of a successful general election campaign. Theresa May saw this election as a key moment for the party, as 'we took the wrong lessons from them. Having done reasonably well in those Euro elections we decided that the way forward was to adopt a core vote strategy, and that was a mistake'. Ultimately, she suggests that was 'a collective decision' (May Interview).

However, the twin issues of Europe (Chapter 5) and immigration (Chapter 6) came to characterise the public face of the Conservative Party, not least because of the amount of media attention that they received. Europe in particular dominated the Conservatives' 2001 election campaign. Gary Streeter, who was a member of the shadow cabinet, claimed that this change of strategy was not discussed beyond Hague's close circle of advisers. However, he noted that 'the election campaign that we ran took me slightly by surprise and wasn't quite what I thought we were preparing for. It did become a little bit of a core vote strategy, playing to our core support' (Streeter Interview).

In Parkinson's view, Hague had little option but to pursue the core vote: reaching out beyond that was simply not a feasible possibility, as anti-Conservative feeling remained too strong:

I'm not sure William could have broadened the party's electoral base much beyond the core vote, to be blunt. It was only four years after this horrendous defeat, and there was

a real reaction against the Conservative Party. He took over a party with the smallest parliamentary representation in living memory, with no money, totally demoralised. Whatever William had done he was never going to appeal to more than the core vote. I couldn't see any floating voters coming back to us after just four years when we'd previously been in power for eighteen... I think William just decided to go after the core vote because it was the only vote that was likely to come his way. (Parkinson Interview).

In one sense, it would have been perverse for the Conservatives *not* to campaign on Europe and immigration – opinion polls suggested public support for the Conservative positions, particularly compared to other policy areas such as the public services. However, the focus on these issues reinforced the negative image of the Conservative Party, and failed to provide a convincing narrative about the purpose of the party. As the pollster and political adviser Stan Greenberg commented: ‘The people who raise these issues, and presumably agree with the Conservative position, still think that the Conservatives are backward looking, negative and intolerant. There is no narrative to link these concerns, and that is required in modern elections’ (quoted in Butler and Kavanagh, 2002: 248).

In her study of Conservative strategy in the 1997-2001 period, Harris commented that: ‘when he first became leader of the Conservative Party, Hague placed his emphasis on Britain’s multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity but during his leadership this emphasis dissipated and he reverted to the more traditionalist rhetoric’ (2005: 29). This shift can be clearly seen in Hague’s speeches. His conference speech in October 1998 attempted to associate the Conservative Party with the ‘character of the British people’ through the idea of the ‘British Way’ (Hague, 1998: 4; 6). Through repeated references to Britain and the British people, Hague tried to link the Conservative Party with the idea of the nation, and by implication, national identity. Conservatives, Hague suggested, reject the ‘abstract theories of purists and ideologues’ and prefer instead to draw inspiration ‘from the character of the British people’ (1998: 4). He went on:

Our character is the character of the people. Our beliefs, the beliefs of the people. Our purpose the defence, the advancement, the elevation of the people... It is my profoundest belief that if the Conservative Party is not in touch with the identity and values of the British people then it cannot be authentically Conservative (1998: 5-6).

Whilst the election results suggested that the Conservatives were far from in touch with the identity and values of the people, the notion of a ‘British Way’ gave Hague some

scope to tap into the ‘One Nation’ Conservative tradition: the speech contained references to Pitt, Wilberforce, Disraeli and Joseph Chamberlain, as well as the *de rigueur* nods to Churchill and Thatcher. But by linking the Conservatives to an apparently deep-rooted and enduring Britishness, it risked excluding the those who lacked an affinity to such an idea, in stark contrast to the big tent of New Labour’s ‘New Britain’. Contrary to Hague’s claim that ‘the Conservative way is the British Way’ (1998: 19), the ‘British Way’ appeared as a rather narrow *Conservative* way.

The ‘British Way’ slogan did not survive for long, but its spirit was transferred to the ‘Common Sense Revolution’ (CSR) which became the dominant theme of Hague’s speeches and campaigning.<sup>5</sup> Launched at the 1999 conference, the CSR ‘was ostensibly based upon the public services and Europe’ with inclusion as its major theme (Harris, 2005: 273). However, as Harris noted, these themes ‘were submerged by Hague’s vociferous appeals to those who shared his common sense values, whom he believed to constitute the “mainstream majority” of the British people’ (2005: 273). There is a clear parallel here with Keith Joseph’s advocacy of the ‘common ground’ in the 1970s. Joseph contrasted the common ground, which he regarded as ‘the common ground with the people and their aspirations’ with the ‘middle ground’, which is simply an unprincipled compromise between the shifting positions of politicians (1976b: 19). He argued that attempts to stay on the middle ground, in the hope of attracting the median voter, had left the Conservative Party dangerously out of touch with the people, and led to a ‘left-wing ratchet’ (1976b: 19). More than twenty years later the CSR was premised on a similar belief – that the politically correct liberalism of the metropolitan elite did not represent the ‘real’ people, who would much prefer a dose of ‘common sense’. However whilst Joseph’s prescription for curing the British disease in the 1970s – primarily tackling inflation and the ‘union problem’ (Joseph, 1976a; 1979) – chimed with the electorate and hit upon salient issues, Hague’s call for a Common Sense Revolution did not. In 1979 the Conservatives’ agenda was assisted by the Winter of Discontent, which helped to justify Joseph’s thesis and tarred the Labour government with responsibility for the apparent crisis of governability and economic decline. Twenty years later, by contrast, it was the Conservatives who were held largely responsible for the problems in the public services, which the CSR proposed to solve.

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<sup>5</sup> For a systematic analysis of the CSR strategy, see Harris (2005), particularly chapters 6 & 7.

The Conservatives' language and campaigning grew gradually more hysterical as the parliament dragged on, culminating in Hague's notorious 'foreign land' speech in March 2001. In this speech Hague invited his audience to imagine the 'foreign land' that Britain would become if Labour were to be re-elected, and claimed that the Conservatives would 'give you back your country' (Hague, 2001). The forthcoming election was, he suggested, 'the last chance' the electorate had 'to vote for a Britain that still controls its own destiny' (Hague, 2001). The themes covered in the speech – Europe, tax, health, education, and asylum – were simply a continuation of the CSR strategy, but the language used was a deliberate attempt to mobilise the Conservative core vote, and caused something of a furore as Hague was openly criticised by 'One Nation' Conservatives such as Michael Heseltine (Watt, 2001).

Harris claims that the CSR 'was narrow yet inclusive: it was inclusive to all Britons as long as they shared traditionalist values and a traditionalist approach to, for example, Europe and the issue of asylum. The mainstream majority was in direct contrast to the liberal elite' (2005: 248). This seemingly oxymoronic conclusion sums up the failure of the CSR – it *was* narrow, as it was 'inclusive' of only a certain section of the electorate, and was far from ever constituting a mainstream majority. Although it was never presented in overtly racial language, its openness only to 'all Britons' who shared certain traditionalist views implicitly excluded ethnic groups such as those Hague had flirted with at the Notting Hill Carnival. Hague's decision to target the core vote was clear when he told the party conference in October 1999: 'when local councils spend more money looking after bogus asylum seekers than after old people in homes, Britain needs a Common Sense Revolution' (Hague, 1999). The narrow and sectional nature of this appeal left the Conservatives bereft of an over-arching narrative with any widespread appeal. The Conservatives lost the 2001 election as they lacked such a narrative, they lacked a reputation for governing competence, and because the public image of both the party and its leader were poor. The focus on core vote issues such as Europe reinforced the negative image of the party. Public enthusiasm for the Labour government had waned after four years in office, but the Conservatives did not benefit from an electoral bounce and the pendulum failed to swing. The Tories were also penalised by the electoral system, which worked against them as their votes were less efficiently distributed than Labour's. The context of Labour's commanding majority

and reputation for economic management made a Conservative victory all but impossible; but the failure to make any headway was a serious one, and Hague duly resigned.

### 4.3 The search for narrative, 2001-2005

*My view was that the scale of our slaughter suggested that we needed to do some very fundamental rethinking.*

John Bercow MP (Interview).

The battle between mods and rockers was rejoined in the leadership election to succeed William Hague. The defeat of the doyen of the modernisers, Michael Portillo, initially appeared to be a major blow to their cause. Portillo rapidly retreated from politics, and the mantle instead passed to the archetypal rocker Iain Duncan Smith (Chapter 7: 181-8). The party Duncan Smith inherited was arguably in a more parlous state than at the time of Hague's accession. Perhaps the only major advantage Duncan Smith enjoyed over his predecessor was a greater realisation amongst his colleagues of the scale of the challenge they faced if they were ever be returned to power (see for example, Tyrie, 2001). However, Streeter claimed that whilst the number of his colleagues on the Conservative benches who realised 'the extent to which we needed to change' was on the rise, the increase in numbers was 'a trickle, not a flood'. In his view, 'maybe twenty or thirty people were moving' (Streeter Interview). For Bercow, this is relatively easily explained:

I think both colleagues in the parliamentary party, and party workers in the country, still felt that there was no need for the party to change in a fundamental way... [They thought] the reason we had lost heavily for a second time in a row was simply that the economy was in a relatively good state, house prices were rising, people felt comfortable. And if they thought anything beyond that, they probably felt well, we were in office for a long time, the public may not be completely enamoured with the Blair Labour Party but they have only been in four years and they want to give them a bit longer. (Bercow Interview).

The election of Duncan Smith offered no immediate prospect of a solution to the Conservatives' popularity problems, inspiring little public or media enthusiasm. Under the new rules for electing the leader, Duncan Smith received 54 votes in the second ballot of MPs, to Clarke's 59 and Portillo's 53; before winning 60.7 percent of the vote

in the final all-party run-off against Clarke. This new system was soon blamed for the election of Duncan Smith and the travails that followed, despite the lack of evidence to suggest that a different result would have been achieved under the old rules (Cowley and Green, 2005: 47-50).<sup>6</sup> However, one consequence of the Hague rules was that just 25 of the 112 MPs who had not voted for Duncan Smith could trigger a vote of no confidence in his leadership: as Denham and O'Hara note, 'MPs who regarded the new party leader as an electoral liability would not even have to nominate an alternative candidate' (2008: 66). Further, there was no restriction on when the required number of signatures could be gathered, allowing dissenters the opportunity to strike at a time of their own choosing (although a leader surviving such a vote cannot be subjected to another for at least a year). This potential problem with the 'no confidence' aspect of the system was discussed when the rules were devised, when there 'was patently considerable unease amongst MPs that unless it were carefully circumscribed the new procedure would unduly weaken the leader's position' (Alderman, 1999: 266). On the other hand, as Kelly argued, the Hague rules potentially helped to secure Duncan Smith by creating 'strong incentives to leave an incumbent alone' – not least the prospect of another long, drawn-out and acrimonious leadership election attracting further negative publicity to the party for several months (2003: 101). As Denham and O'Hara argue however, the leadership selection rules put Duncan Smith in 'an impossible position' as he had not received either deep or widespread support from his MPs, who held the procedural key to his removal (2008: 99).

The episode illustrates the constraints of the strategic context of the time. Had either Clarke or Portillo emerged victorious, they would have faced the same apparent lack of legitimacy having secured (like Duncan Smith) barely one-third support in the parliamentary party. They would also have faced the same problem of how to respond to the Blairite Labour hegemony. The context of a public perception of economic crisis and national decline, which gave Thatcherite solutions their electoral appeal, no longer applied. The new context of greater economic prosperity had created a more pressing political dilemma – how to fund and deliver better public services. The Labour Party had successfully made this the public's key electoral concern, by accepting the free market in many areas but questioning the extent to which untrammelled market

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Michael Howard and Peter Lilley are both of the view that Duncan Smith would have emerged victorious had the final decision remained with MPs (Denham & O'Hara, 2008: 69, note 47).

liberalism and privatisation could deliver public services effectively. Even as market-based initiatives such as the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) have been spread throughout the public services, Labour have successfully preserved (at least temporarily) the mass provision of health and education services free at the point of delivery. In this sense, the major accomplishment and legacy of the Blair government has been the fencing-off of a distinct state sector, and the apparent creation of a new consensus on the scope of the state in the early twenty-first century. Whilst the government's progress in improving the public services between 1997 and 2001 did not fulfil the electorate's hopes, the Conservatives had 'evolved neither a convincing narrative nor effective statecraft' in answer to this quandary (Taylor, 2005: 152).

The brief tenure of Duncan Smith also demonstrates the import of agency. The vote of confidence in his leadership was ultimately triggered by the faintly ridiculous 'Betsygate' scandal, when he was accused of impropriety over the employment of his wife in his private office (Duncan Smith was later exonerated); but other more serious avoidable mistakes were made (O'Hara, 2005: 296-7). The fiasco over the Adoption and Children Bill exposed his tactical ineptitude as a leader, and the irony of the former Maastricht rebel demanding that the party 'unite or die' was not lost on many (Chapter 7: 185-6). His weak grip on the party was apparent to the both the media and the public, particularly after his botched attempt to install Barry Legg as chief executive of Conservative Central Office (Redwood, 2004: 156). Duncan Smith lacked the charismatic public persona necessary for success in the media age, and the polls suggested that he was an electoral liability (Garnett and Lynch, 2003b: 8). Nonetheless, an embryonic Conservative narrative emerged during his leadership, and a substantive policy renewal process began.

#### 4.3.1 *On the quiet: progress under Duncan Smith*

Despite his reputation as a traditionalist hardliner, Duncan Smith showed signs of having heeded some of the lessons of defeat. Within weeks of being elected leader, he expressed his desire to re-establish the Conservative Party as 'the party of ideas' by launching a policy review (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a: 259). The early days of his leadership were overshadowed by the events of 9/11, but he used his first keynote conference address as leader to proclaim that 'Public services are our greatest mission.'

He pledged to ‘bring an open mind to the task of reforming public services’, declaring: ‘not for us the ideological baggage, the special favours for those who pay the political bills. For the Conservatives it is just the determination to succeed’ (Duncan Smith, 2001).

This speech marked the beginning of a concerted effort by the Conservatives to reposition themselves as a party of the public services, an agenda that would outlive Duncan Smith’s leadership and be taken into the 2005 general election and beyond. It also marked a shift in rhetoric towards pragmatic politics, and a search for attractive policies. Members of the shadow cabinet made speeches and wrote articles on the subject of schools, hospitals and crime consistently over the following four years. Oliver Letwin made a series of speeches on the ‘Neighbourly Society’, a thoughtful form of conservatism that sought to go beyond free markets (Letwin, 2003a). The issue of Europe received a much lower profile, although opposition to the proposed European Constitution was quickly established. However, a commitment to the public services presented a strategic dilemma to the Conservatives. How could they balance their desire for lower taxes with the new dedication to public services? (Taylor, 2005: 144-153).

The process of policy renewal made progress under Duncan Smith, and his record in this regard compares favourably to that of his predecessor (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a: 259-62). However, there ‘was no obvious sign of a coherent general “narrative”, underpinning the various policies’ (Garnett and Lynch, 2003b: 11). Duncan Smith and his team did attempt to weave such a narrative around the theme of ‘Compassionate Conservatism’, a term borrowed from George W. Bush. The revival of local government through ‘community government’ based on ‘trusting the people’ was suggested, in language not dissimilar to that of the *Direct Democracy* campaign that came three years later (Duncan Smith, 2002a; Direct Democracy, 2005). Duncan Smith pledged to ‘champion the vulnerable’, with a revival of public services ‘as community institutions, not branch offices of government’ (Duncan Smith, 2002b). He used his first anniversary as party leader to declare publicly his desire to defeat ‘the five giants’ that blight Britain’s poorest communities. The targets he selected – ‘failing schools, crime, substandard healthcare, child poverty, and insecurity in old age’ – were less instructive than the language he chose to employ, which deliberately echoed that of the



Beveridge Report (Duncan Smith, 2002d; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a: 260-1). Similarly, his speech to the ‘Compassionate Conservatism Conference’ a year later declared that Labour should not be allowed a monopoly on compassion, as poverty ‘is too important [an issue] to leave to any one political party’ (Duncan Smith, 2003).

Duncan Smith saw this as a two-stage strategy. The first stage was ‘to move away from the subjects that we are most readily identified with... [on to] issues that are not normally associated as priorities of the Conservative Party’ (Duncan Smith Interview). Hence the persistent focus on public services:

When people are asked what are their priorities, they started with health normally, and then went go things like education and employment, and we needed to reflect those priorities as our own. I had a sense that the public needed to instinctively begin to re-identify with the party that they felt cared about what they did, a big challenge. (Duncan Smith Interview).

The second phase was then to ‘refocus the party even further still, into the problems of the worst-off in society’ (Duncan Smith Interview). The aim of this was not to win votes for the Conservative Party in the deprived areas of Britain, but to:

... demonstrate to people, for the right reasons, that the Conservative Party back in government would want to govern in the best interests of Britain as a whole, not just as what we had become identified as (not true, but we did), as solely in favour of a smallish number of people who had ‘made it’. That’s not true of conservatism in its wider historical context, and it’s not true of the Conservative Party I joined, but that’s the perception that the media had imparted and that people had gleaned from the latter days of the Conservative government, and that needed to be rectified. We needed to broaden the party out, stretch the elastic out a bit. And that meant going further and deeper than we’d been before. (Duncan Smith Interview).

This attitude demonstrates that Duncan Smith had appreciated one of the major electoral problems that the Conservative Party faced – its public image, reinforced by Hague’s Common Sense Revolution, as a narrow, sectional party. Duncan Smith hoped to change this not by changing policy on Europe or immigration (these were in fact firmed slightly), but by focussing on other things. For Duncan Smith. ‘we needed at least two years working away at this before we even talked about those [Europe and immigration] again’ (Duncan Smith Interview). As such, Duncan Smith made a consistent attempt to recast conservatism in the language of ‘Compassionate Conservatism’, with key foci on tackling poverty and improving the public services.

Arguably, only a figure from the right such as Duncan Smith could pursue such a strategy, as it drew criticism from that wing of the party (Cowley and Green, 2005: 52).

Like Hague's brief flirtation with compassionate conservatism it failed, despite the greater persistence of Duncan Smith. It failed not because it lacked intellectual coherence, but because of poor leadership and party image (Taylor, 2005: 153). Conservative Party image data remained stubbornly negative under both Duncan Smith and Howard, showing little deviation from the picture bequeathed by Hague (Table 4.2).

*Table 4.2: Conservative Party Image, May 2001 – April 2005*

Percentages of respondents agreeing that the Conservative Party...	May 2001	Sept 2003	April 2005	Change, 2001-5 +/- %
<i>Keeps its promises</i>	5	4	3	- 2
<i>Understands the problems facing Britain</i>	18	20	22	+ 4
<i>Represents all classes</i>	8	8	9	+ 1
<i>Looks after the interests of people like us</i>	11	9	11	-
<i>Is moderate</i>	12	14	12	-
<i>Is extreme</i>	12	12	14	+ 2
<i>Is concerned about the people in real need</i>	9	11	14	+ 5
<i>Has a good team of leaders</i>	7	8	8	+1
<i>Will promise anything to win votes</i>	46	35	45	- 1
<i>Is out of touch with ordinary people</i>	36	32	32	- 4
<i>Has sensible policies</i>	15	16	17	+ 2
<i>Is too dominated by its leader</i>	13	5	16	+ 3
<i>Is professional in its approach</i>	13	14	15	+ 2
<i>Is divided</i>	30	34	23	- 7
<i>No Opinion</i>	10	19	14	+ 4
<i>Source: data on Conservative Party image from MORI (2006c).</i>				

Duncan Smith was hampered from the beginning by a lack of support in the parliamentary party, and failed even to convince key members of his shadow cabinet members of the merits of his approach (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a: 260). Theresa May noted that support for the 'change' agenda amongst her shadow cabinet colleagues

‘varied’ (May Interview). One commented that: ‘I didn’t dislike Iain personally but thought that his leadership was completely hopeless and there wasn’t the slightest chance of us winning an election under his leadership’ (Anonymous Interview). Another of Duncan Smith’s frontbench colleagues echoed this sentiment: ‘He was a pleasant enough fellow but totally ill-suited to the task of leading the Conservative Party’ (Anonymous Interview). For Streeter, ‘the agenda was coming right, although I’m not sure that people believed it from us at that stage, and that’s important’. The central problem was Duncan Smith’s personal appeal and skills: ‘Iain was not electable as a Prime Minister. It was just about his personal leadership, he just wasn’t up to it’ (Streeter Interview).

Like Hague, Duncan Smith also showed signs of deviating from this agenda in the light of his failure to increase the level of Conservative Party support. John Bercow, who resigned from Duncan Smith’s shadow cabinet (Chapter 7: 185) saw his agenda for change as limited and undermined by a number of problems. He accepts that Duncan Smith started the policy renewal process, but only on ‘a pretty modest scale’. He explained:

He did do that, but I think there were a couple of problems. Firstly there wasn’t full sign-up to it in the party, there was no great enthusiasm for that message of change. No way had it seized and energised the party, it was very much in the mind of Iain and a few people around him, and there were people in the shadow cabinet who didn’t really believe in it. And secondly, once he failed to make progress in the polls he retreated into his shell and started to adopt the core vote approach. That was reflected in what I thought was an unfortunate and regrettable speech delivered weeks before his departure: he spoke to the party conference and delivered a very hard-line speech which effectively represented the return to the core base. I thought that was a great pity. (Bercow Interview).

In the speech Bercow refers to, Duncan Smith (2003b) claimed that the asylum system was ‘spiralling out of control’; made 43 references to ‘tax’, ‘taxes’ and ‘taxpayers’: and won a standing ovation for his pledge to fight the proposed European constitution, indicating that (even if it were signed) a future Conservative government would seek to withdraw from it. In the opinion of one commentator, Duncan Smith ‘chose to save his own skin’ but by doing so ‘sank his own party’ (Glover, 2003).

Duncan Smith's legacy was the policy agenda adopted by Michael Howard. In Theresa May's view, 'Iain did a lot more to change the party and to move the change agenda forward than many people actually realise' (May Interview). The origins of the five pledges made by Howard in the 2005 election campaign can all be found in speeches and articles delivered in 2002 and 2003, either by Duncan Smith himself or other shadow ministers. For example, the promise of 'More Police' can be traced to Letwin's (2003b) call for 'neighbourhood policing'; and the pledge of 'School Discipline' was present in an earlier speech by the Shadow Education Secretary Damian Green (2001). The pledge that would dominate the 2005 election, that of 'Controlled Immigration' and the associated campaign posters proclaiming that 'It's not racist to impose limits on immigration', widely attributed to campaign director Lynton Crosby, differed little in tone or content from an article attributed to Duncan Smith (2002c) published in *The Sun* in May 2002.

The Conservatives therefore had a more consistent policy agenda, with a greater range of policies on key issues such as health, education and crime. However, they had failed to dissipate the perception that they were 'the nasty party', and their protestations about tackling poverty and improving the public services therefore remained unconvincing. This left the Conservatives in a bind. To revert their focus to the unholy 'Tebbit trinity' of Europe, immigration and tax would only serve to reinforce the 'nasty party' image, and confirm public suspicions of their true colours.<sup>7</sup> However, the Conservative message on poverty and the public services, hampered by a lack of support amongst some Conservatives themselves and the poor communication skills of their leader, had failed to convince a sceptical electorate. A change of leadership, despite fear of yet more bloodletting, became the most palatable option.

#### 4.3.2 Abandoning the search: Michael Howard and a third defeat

The effort to meet Greenberg's challenge – to develop a coherent narrative – was abandoned by Michael Howard. His emphasis was on delivery. 'It's time for action' was the by-line of the party's 2005 manifesto, which also laid out a timetable for action for the first few months of Conservative government. Howard told colleagues that:

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<sup>7</sup> The 'Tebbit trinity' is Andrew Rawnsley's phrase, quoted in O'Hara (2005: 324).

‘Talking about small concrete measures to improve people’s lives is what I’m about, not having a big idea or vision’. This frustrated some, one shadow minister commented that: ‘The dye was cast then. We were not going to have a strategy’ (quoted in Kavanagh and Butler, 2005: 38).

This was a strategic error by Howard. His leadership brought a public unity to the Conservative Party, and – momentarily at least – the apparent revival of the desire for power traditionally regarded as the key to Conservative hegemony. The fears of further public bloodshed in yet another leadership contest were swept away by Howard’s coronation. It brought a new vitality and sense of purpose to the party, and was welcomed as ‘the first sign of realism in the Conservative Party after so many years of disagreement and divisions’ (Redwood, 2004: 159). Howard’s early pronouncements as leader also suggested that he would take forward the reform agenda begun by Duncan Smith. Two months after becoming leader, he gave a major speech to the think-tank Policy Exchange outlining his vision of ‘the British Dream’. In it, Howard discussed proposals for improving schools and the health service, better provision of childcare, his support for civil partnerships, and how to ‘help families achieve the work-life balance that is best for them’ (Howard, 2004: 14). There was no mention of immigration or asylum, and just one passing reference to the European Union. Today, he declared, ‘we face new challenges. As the country’s economy has strengthened and stabilised, the failings of our public services have become clear’ (2004: 18). As such, this speech appeared to recognise, as Duncan Smith had done, the importance of the public services in the forthcoming election.

Howard acknowledged that in policy terms he continued the programme begun by Duncan Smith:

A lot of policy work had been carried out during Iain’s time as leader – with which of course I was intimately involved because as I was Shadow Chancellor – and I took on and developed a lot of the themes that he had started, but there was no radical shift, I don’t think, in policy terms between his leadership and mine. (Howard Interview).

However, Duncan Smith had tried to deploy a two-stage strategy: the first stage involving a greater focus on the public services and the development of new policies in this area, and a second stage aimed at changing people’s image of the Conservatives

through a focus on issues not traditionally associated with the party, particularly the social justice agenda. By his own acknowledgement, Howard failed to carry this forward: ‘Yes, I probably didn’t do enough in terms of talking about championing the vulnerable, although I subscribe to his general approach. In terms of policies we developed the policies that Iain had started to develop’ (Howard Interview). Duncan Smith similarly saw his strategy as being neglected by his successor: ‘It’s interesting that David Cameron has picked up the baton, with a small blip from Michael Howard. For about a year we didn’t follow that agenda, but we’re back on the same agenda now, which is good’ (Duncan Smith interview). Theresa May views the Howard period in a similar way:

I think Michael, to a very great extent, returned us to the more traditional Conservative Party areas... there were some areas where he did carry forward the change, but in terms of the key issues... schools and hospitals were within the five key points that we campaigned on, so to that extent yes he did carry it forward. But the wider issues of social justice, and helping the vulnerable, those sort of things were not really carried forward. (May Interview).

The failure to carry this agenda forward can be seen throughout Howard’s later speeches, and in the Conservative campaign at the 2005 election. A typical Howard speech, in the run-up to the election, declared that ‘it’s time to take a stand on the issues that matter’ (Howard, 2005). In this speech Howard suggested that voters ‘unhappy about higher taxes, uncontrolled immigration, rising crime and dirty hospitals’ should ‘take a stand’ and ‘be true to our country’ by voting against the government (2005). Although public service issues such as health and education were mentioned, Howard’s claims that the Conservatives would address them more successfully than Labour lacked credibility or a coherent critique. This failure is even more damning as Howard’s authority – having successfully inculcated his MPs with discipline and unity – offered him the opportunity denied to Duncan Smith to pull the party behind the ‘Compassionate Conservatism’ narrative. More sympathetically to Howard, he perhaps calculated that his own image as a Thatcherite right-winger (not dissimilar to that of his predecessor), would render such a pitch unconvincing, and he opted instead for a statement of 16 core beliefs. This was presented as a personal rather than an ideological list, but a conservative tinge was present in his stated desire to ‘remove the obstacles’ in the way of people’s ambitions (see Redwood, 2004: 167-8; O’Hara, 2005: 313-328).

Howard's pitch to the country at the 2005 general election was an offer of incremental, quantifiable measures, inspired by his list of core beliefs. The personalisation of the Conservative campaign was completed by the addition of Howard's 'eleventh word' – accountability – to the five key election pledges. This tied the successful delivery of the 'Timetable for Action' to Howard personally, with the pledge that he would resign if he failed to deliver. The Conservatives lost their reputation for governing competence with the ERM debacle in 1992, and the accountability pledge was an attempt to restore faith in the party's ability to manage the country. Howard sold the 'Timetable for Action' on the basis of his record as Home Secretary, claiming that his success in reducing crime demonstrated that he 'knows how to get a job done' (Conservative Party, 2004).

The 2005 Conservative election campaign was criticised for the prominence given to immigration policy, although this can be partly explained by the increased salience of the issue (Chapter 6). The influence of Lynton Crosby, Howard's election strategist, was also important in determining the tone of the campaign. As Michael Howard noted, whilst Crosby did not determine the content of policies, 'in terms of the emphasis we gave to different policies and the way that we presented them, certainly Lynton's advice was very influential' (Howard Interview). Compared to the party's campaign of four years previously, Howard's five pledges covered a broader range of concerns. Duncan Smith's public service agenda was utilised, albeit in a grossly pared down form. The core theme of Duncan Smith's agenda – concern for the vulnerable and the need for social justice – no longer featured. Without this, the Conservatives lacked an over-arching narrative, and were left with managerialism, with Howard to be personally accountable, as the unifying theme. Without an economic crisis to destroy Labour's reputation for economic competence, it was a battle that the Conservatives could not hope to win.

#### **4.4 Conclusion: Strategic Failure**

The scale of the Conservative Party's woes since 1997 has been well documented: after 18 years in office, the 'natural party of government' saw its share of the vote and representation in the House of Commons collapse, in a landslide defeat the size of which few had anticipated (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997: 120-132, 244-253). Four years later, 'Labour's second landslide' produced another defeat of similar statistical

magnitude, arguably the worst result in the Conservative Party's history (Tyrie, 2001: 3; Geddes and Tonge, 2001; Butler and Kavanagh, 2002: 251-9). The general election of 2005 saw the government's majority more than halved, and the Conservative ranks swelled to 198, a net gain of 32 seats. This was presented in the media as something of a success for the party and may represent a turning point, if only in terms of preventing an implosion of the Conservative Party as a credible political force. On the plus side for the Conservatives, the party came within 3 percentage points of equalling Labour's share of the vote, although this was largely due to a decline in support for the governing party from 40.7 percent in 2001 to 35.2 percent in 2005 (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005: 204). The Conservatives actually out-pollled Labour by 57,000 votes in England, although they won 93 fewer seats. However, the 32.4 percent of the national vote received by the Conservatives represented an improvement of only 0.7 percent on 2001, and the party's share of the vote fell in the North East; the North West; Yorkshire and Humberside; and perhaps most surprisingly, the East Midlands (Ashcroft, 2005: 85; Kavanagh and Butler, 2005: 204-7). Michael Howard followed the precedent set by William Hague and John Major before him by resigning the day after the election.

These three consecutive defeats represent the Conservatives' worst electoral performance for over a century. This failure is the result of an unfavourable political terrain combined with poor strategic decision-making by the party. The external factors of a resurgent centrist Labour Party and an electoral system biased against them made a Conservative return to power within four years of 1997 highly improbable, but the failure to make any substantive progress towards that goal represented a serious breakdown for a party that prides itself on being a governing party (Ball, 2005: 1). The Conservatives' continued travails after 2001 have led some authors to speculate that the party faces a long-term structural decline, caused by ideological divisions and an aging support-base (Garnett and Lynch, 2003b: 15-18).

After the 1997 election Willetts and Forsdyke suggested that the Conservatives could either move rapidly to regain the electorate's confidence, or be forced to change more slowly by a series of defeats, either way change 'is inescapable' (1999: 1). The Conservatives, it has been argued, did not act quickly to recover after Labour's 1997 landslide. Even after a second crushing defeat in 2001, the election of Duncan Smith as party leader appeared to be an illustration of the Houdini-esque abilities of the



Conservative Party to escape from the need for change. However, this conventional interpretation fails to appreciate the complexity of the actual series of events. The party did undertake several re-branding exercises under Hague, none of which had the desired effect on the party's image or opinion-poll rating. The party 'tried everything' (Ancram Interview), but nothing seemed to work. The narrow core vote appeal that Hague left with at the 2001 election only served to make the job of his successor all the more difficult. A more consistent narrative was pursued under Duncan Smith, but also with little apparent positive effect for the Conservatives. In policy terms, Duncan Smith did lay some important foundations, and in the development of his social justice agenda began the long process of re-engaging the Conservatives with issues that had received little attention from Thatcherism. However, his inability to manage his party or present it in a credible way meant that his leadership was doomed. For Seldon and Snowdon, Michael Howard 'had the easiest task, and his failure was thus the greatest' (2005b: 143). The relatively fortuitous circumstances he enjoyed, of a policy agenda, rapidly united party and an embryonic inclusive narrative, were not transformed into a coherent strategy, and were ultimately reduced to a 'mean-spirited and reactionary' election campaign (Portillo, 2005).

The application of the strategic-relational approach (SRA) provides a framework for the analysis of the party in this period, and its adaptive efforts. In addition the SRA encourages greater understanding of the reasons for Conservative electoral failure. A classic Downsian analysis would suggest that the party should have moved rapidly to reposition itself in the 'centre-ground' position of the median voter following defeat in 1997. Such an explanation is clearly inadequate. The SRA allows for a more nuanced interpretation, which highlights the strategic calculations of key actors and how they were informed by their interpretation of the context at the time. In this case, the analytical division between 'mods and rockers' in the Conservative Party reflects a disagreement over electoral strategy based on differing interpretations of the political situation and the nature of the party's context. The presence of a threat to the party's 'right flank' in the form of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), undoubtedly informed these strategic calculations, inhibiting a Downsian repositioning. This was partly informed by a need to retain the party's core vote, but in articulating an appeal designed to do this, the party reduced its attractiveness to the wider electorate.

This influenced the election campaigns of both 2001 and 2005, with the focus on immigration during the latter being a deliberate ploy to neutralise the UKIP threat.

The strategic-relational analysis also accentuates the way in which greater economic prosperity in the 1990s led to the emergence of a new strategic dilemma for the Conservative Party. The ‘reversal of national economic decline’ was no longer the key task for the party as it had been under Thatcher, nor was it any longer an issue of major public concern. However, the rhetoric of Thatcherism and the known desire of Conservatives to ‘roll back the frontiers of the state’ had a lasting impact, causing distrust amongst an electorate increasingly concerned with the government’s ability to enhance public service delivery in health and education. The perception that the Conservatives held a secret desire to privatise or abolish core public services may well have been misguided, but derived from Conservative discourse. Previous politicians had shaped the strategic terrain that Hague inherited in this manner, but he and his successors have struggled to recast it.

The application of the SRA to the Conservative Party in opposition exposes the need for the party to devise a narrative that meets the electorate’s desire for improved public services, without alienating the voters or disowning the Thatcherite commitment to the free market. This dilemma has confronted the past three Conservative leaders, and remains the key challenge under David Cameron. In this respect, the SRA manifests the medium to long-term ‘waves’ in the contours of the political context, which often extend beyond the traditional electoral cycle. Applying the SRA has also demonstrated the importance of this contoured context in structuring the choice of strategies by successive leaders. Faced with no easy solution to the public services dilemma, Hague succumbed to short-term tactical point scoring against the government. As his final conference speech demonstrated, had it lasted a full parliament the Duncan Smith leadership may well have yielded in the same way, particularly if the more consistent message he aspired to continued to bear no fruit.

It has been suggested that the key factor underlying electoral choice is ‘valence’, that is ‘people’s judgements of the overall competence of the rival political parties’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2004: 9). The Conservatives’ trump card in 1992 – the reputation for economic competence – had been lost on Black Wednesday. Furthermore, it is argued that

judgements of valence are reached through two shortcuts, 'leadership evaluations and party identification' (Clarke *et al.*, 2004: 9). On both counts, the Conservatives have consistently fallen short of Labour. Combined with the distrust on the public services, the effect has been a virtual flat-lining by the Conservatives in the polls. The importance of leadership (and political actors generally) was also illustrated by the application of the SRA. Poor leadership skills and tactical errors undid Duncan Smith, and allowed Howard the chance to put his own stamp on the party. The strategic-relational analysis also highlights the importance of context, and suggests that whoever had led the Conservatives during this period would have found leading the party to a general election victory a near impossible challenge. However, the strategies of Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard were sub-optimal, and missed the chance to develop a convincing narrative of the purpose of conservatism in the post-Thatcherite era.

Between 1997 and 2005, the Conservatives were unable to fulfil the minimum requirement for an opposition party: the presentation of a credible governing alternative. Incapacity to appreciate the reasons for defeat in 1997 led to strategic confusion and a failure to develop a consistent narrative of conservatism. As Chapter 1 discussed, having provided an overview of this period, further chapters will analyse in greater depth three particular dilemmas, as a way of considering how conservatism has reacted to the changing strategic context in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These three each pose significant ideological challenges for the party, unresolved after 18 years in power. This will shed light on the ideological nature of conservatism, and expose how contradictions and difficulties within it have contributed to political problems for Conservatives over the past decade.

The first dilemma to be explored (Chapter 5) will be the European Question. The issue of Britain's relationship with Europe has been a highly divisive one for many years, and was a crucial factor in the demise of John Major's government. This chapter will explore whether the relative calm in the Conservative Party on this issue in recent years reflects a genuine resolution of it, or is simply a function of being out of office.

The issue of national identity within conservatism will be explored further in Chapter 6. As well as the issue of Europe, other challenges to a traditional Conservative understanding of British national identity have occurred in recent years: for example as

a result of devolution, and as a consequence of higher levels of immigration. The issue of immigration is also not a new dilemma for Conservatives, but has once again become an electorally very salient one. In an increasingly liberalised global market, it presents a dilemma to Conservatives: how can they balance their commitment to free markets with their desire to conserve traditional forms of national and social identity?

Chapter 7 will consider the dilemma of social morality in politics. In a world where the old debate ‘systems debate’ no longer reigns supreme, different challenges animate politics. For Conservatives in particular, their old role as the defenders of capitalism is no longer sufficient justification for their election. One possible avenue for Conservatives politically is to present themselves as defenders of a traditional social morality – a social conservatism such as that adopted by the Republican Party in the USA. However, this also raises potential problems for Conservatives, such as the electoral viability of such a stance in the UK, and the potential conflict with the liberalism within modern conservatism.

## Chapter 5

### The European Question

#### 5.1 Introduction

The European Question has long been a difficult one for the Conservative Party, as it goes to the heart of the question of national identity. Like the issue of immigration, which is examined in the next chapter, it challenges, and has often been seen as threatening British, and particularly English, national identity. For the Conservative Party, which has historically identified itself with 'the nation', this has caused particular problems. As Britain lost its empire and had to search for a new role, so did the Conservative Party. Europe, as Harold Macmillan realised, potentially offered a new role for both (George and Sowemimo, 1996: 244). However, not least because of de Gaulle's vetoes, Macmillan was unable to settle the debate in the Conservative Party decisively in favour of Europe. Even after Edward Heath successfully negotiated British entry to the EEC, his own enthusiasm for the project was not spread through the party as a whole (George and Sowemimo, 1996: 246).

The previous chapter provided an overview of the case-study period, through an analysis of the strategy of the Conservative Party leadership between 1997 and 2005. This analysis exposed the failure of the Conservatives to forge and pursue a consistent strategy in opposition, informed by confusion about how conservatism should respond to politics after Thatcher. This lack of clarity will be further explored through three particular dilemmas, of which the first is the European Question. This issue is of special significance in terms of understanding post-Thatcherite Conservative politics as in recent years it appears to have been largely neutralised within the Conservative Party, as the parliamentary party has united around a broadly Eurosceptic position. This represents a dramatic shift compared to the intense divisions Europe caused in the 1980s and 1990s. Key to this has been contextual change in terms of the diminishing electoral salience of the issue over the past decade, and the ideational shift within the Conservative Party itself. This chapter will analyse how this once toxic issue has been largely resolved, and how this process relates to the wider question of the Conservative Party's strategy and ongoing electoral problem since 1997. It will explore the leadership's strategic-relational approach to the issue, in terms of how the party

hierarchy has sought to manage it in relation to both party and public opinion. It will consider whether the leadership deliberately sought to neutralise the issue, or whether this has been an unintended consequence of, or independent from, their agency.

## 5.2 The European Problem

Since the end of the Second World War, the contours of British politics have been shaped by the question of the United Kingdom's place in the world, as a former hegemonic power adjusting to a new position of reduced global status. As Dean Acheson famously stated in 1962, Britain had 'lost an Empire [but] not yet found a role' (quoted in Sanders, 1990: 292). Europe emerged as a choice for Britain, 'although the choice was born from a lack of alternatives' (Geddes, 2005b: 122). This process had profound domestic as well as geo-political implications, drawing into question understandings of British identity and the future of the British state. This manifested itself in both a preoccupation with the politics of decline,<sup>1</sup> and in the debate about Britain's relationship with the American superpower and the emerging economic and political association in Europe. Britain's relation to Europe has increasingly been seen as conflicting with the 'special relationship' with the United States, and it is unclear whether Britain will be able to continue to view itself feasibly as a bridge between the two, or whether it will be forced to opt for one over the other (Gamble, 2003: 1).

These questions are difficult ones for all political parties, and have tended to cut across traditional left-right ideological demarcations, within and between parties. For the Conservatives, Britain's relation to Europe has always been viewed and understood in the context of a particular view of the state and the nation. Between 1945 and 1975, the Conservative view of the state was dominated by the 'progressive right' (Smith, 1999: 187; Gamble, 1974). As Smith (1999: 187) summarises:

For the progressive right, which reached its apex under Edward Heath, the key role of the state was to maintain order by preventing conflict between labour and capital. They accepted that the state should provide welfare and even maintain full employment as a means of ensuring the unity of the nation (Gilmour, 1978).

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<sup>1</sup> On the politics of decline and 'declinism' as an ideology see Tomlinson (2000). For an overview of the impact of the debate about decline on British politics, see English and Kenny (2000), particularly the chapters on theories of decline (Gamble, 2000b) and party ideologies and decline (Eccleshall, 2000). On Thatcherism and decline, see Krieger (1986) and Gamble (1994a and 1994b).

On to this progressive right view can be mapped the Heathite national strategy identified by Lynch (1999: 28-38), of which 'EC membership was the centrepiece, viewed as the key to Britain's modernisation' (1999: 28). The progressive right theory of the state was challenged by a New Right critique, and Heath's national strategy was opposed by a Powellite alternative (Lynch: 38-45). Following Thatcher's election as party leader in 1975, a Thatcherite theory of the state began to emerge, and to dominate the Conservative standpoint from the late-1970s. This view 'rejected the pluralism of traditional Conservatism, taking from Enoch Powell the idea of the supreme importance of Parliament as the sovereign decision-maker, with the elected executive at its pinnacle' (Smith, 1999: 188). This perspective continues to underpin the predominant Conservative position, that European integration threatens to undermine national sovereignty and with it the integrity of the state and the legitimacy of its institutions. In this sense, the current Conservative view of the state is a traditional and rather inflexible variant of the Westminster Model (see Smith, 1999: 9-37). More conspiratorial versions of this story regard the European Union as attempting to 'break-up' the United Kingdom so that it can be subsumed within a federal 'Europe of the regions' super-state (Hitchens, 1999: 364-7; Booker and North, 1997). Yet as Crowson (2007:1) points out, Conservative administrations were 'at the vanguard of Britain's bid to become a member of the European club', culminating in accession to the EEC in 1973 under Edward Heath, and supported continued membership (whilst in opposition under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher) in the 1975 referendum campaign. Labour, by contrast, was more suspicious of attempts to join the EEC, and Wilson's decision to hold a referendum was prompted by party and cabinet divisions. Even this clear vote in favour of the 'Common Market' failed to heal Labour's internal rift, and by the early 1980s the Conservatives could rightly claim to be the 'party of Europe' as their opponents advocated withdrawal from the EEC and suffered the SDP breakaway in large part because of the issue (Butler, 1996: 934).

As in many other areas, it was the Thatcher governments that broke this pattern in British politics. Thatcherism profoundly altered the shape of the strategic context faced by the Conservatives, but also had an internal effect on the party and its own understanding of that context through a transformation of its dominant ideological perspective. At the heart of this ideological shift was the economic liberalism of the

New Right, but as Gamble (1996: 35) argued, it also included a turn towards more overtly (English) nationalist discourse, and, to some degree, away from the idea of patriotic Britishness associated with state and empire that the Conservatives had traditionally defended. Previously, Lynch suggests, a One Nation political strategy had ‘established the Conservatives as the party of nation, Empire and Union, the authentic voice of a state patriotism built around British identity and institutions’. This strategy had brought ‘considerable political and electoral advantages’, but by the late 1960s was undermined by decolonisation, declinism, Celtic nationalism, ‘and a developing multiculturalism’ (1999: 49). Powellism, Lynch suggests, was ‘a Tory nationalist reaction to this... [that] replaced imperial myths with those of national homogeneity and unfettered parliamentary sovereignty’ (1999: 49), and in which the genesis of the Thatcherite politics of nationhood can be found (1999: 47).

Powell was a radical forward-thinking Conservative to the extent that he sought to redefine national identity in terms suited to the end of empire. Powell’s concern, Tom Nairn argued, was with the ‘half-submerged nationalism of the English... England’s destiny was once an imperial one; now it had to be something else’ (Nairn, 1970: 5). However, in his endeavours to define a post-imperial destiny, Powell promulgated a myth of an ancient, unchanging England that predated the imperial era. Almost inevitably this appeal to ‘national homogeneity’, as Lynch (1999: 49) delicately puts it, became a race-based argument. The idea of national *difference* is central to this story, and difference in particular from Europe. As Thatcher herself argued, ‘Britain *is* different. That is why Britain is still repeatedly at odds with the other European countries’ (2002: 366). Here, a clear lineage between Powellism and Thatcherism can be seen, as Powell’s mix of ‘free economy and strong state themes plus his populist patriotic discourse’ were picked up by Thatcher in the 1980s (Lynch, 1999: 46). Thatcher though was mindful of political constraints, and was reluctant to translate her Powellite rhetoric and sympathies to policy.

The Thatcher years were instrumental in creating the circumstances which led to intense Conservative disunity over Europe, notably over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in the early-1990s. The stricter view of sovereignty promulgated by Powellism and Thatcherism was central to this, as a zero-sum conception that saw any move towards sharing or ‘pooling’ sovereignty as a loss, even if it could be justified on



'pragmatic' statecraft grounds as being in the national interest. Gamble attributes the rise of Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party directly to Thatcher herself. Her leadership, he argues, led to the denial of the possibility (maintained by the Conservative Party leadership previously) that 'Britain could be both European and Atlanticist' (2003: 176). Further to this, 'the depth of the split that emerged in the party was a direct result of Thatcher's leadership of the party. She legitimated opposition to Europe in a way which the leadership had hitherto successfully avoided' (Gamble, 2003: 178). Her Bruges speech was a critical turning point in this regard, as Thatcher laid out her vision of 'willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states' (1988). Crowson (2007: 53) characterises this as a 'rejection of her government's previous approach to Europe' which had seen Thatcher strongly defend the 1986 Single European Act (SEA). More than this, by being voiced by an incumbent Prime Minister it signified 'that Euroscepticism was moving into the mainstream', and sanctioned as admissible views 'that previously had been dismissed as held by cranks and extremists' (Crowson, 2007: 53). Thatcher thus inaugurated the party management problems that her successor would face, particularly during the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty.

The attachment to neo-liberalism is also important for understanding Thatcherite attitudes towards European integration. As Thatcher noted in her Bruges speech, her government had not 'rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels' (Thatcher, 1988). A party's outlook towards European integration can thus be understood as a function of its (domestic) political position, particularly its view on the appropriate role of the state in the management of the economy. Marks and Wilson use cleavage theory to analyse party responses to European integration, and conclude that the issue 'is assimilated into pre-existing ideologies of party leaders, activists and constituencies that reflect long-standing commitments on fundamental domestic issues' (2000: 433). They plot a possibility curve relating neo-liberalism to European integration, which shows 'single market regime competition' to be the 'preferred outcome' for neo-liberals (2000: 454). Neo-liberals thus support European integration to the extent that it contributes to the weakening of market restraints. They oppose political integration, however, as they fear that it 'will create authoritative capacity for market regulation at the European level'

(2000: 455). Thatcher's support for the SEA was therefore consistent with a neo-liberal strategy, which saw a comparative advantage in a deregulated, low-tax economy within a single market area. Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), for example, regarded by some as one of the most significant erosions of British sovereignty, was supported by Thatcher as a necessary means to this end (Gamble, 2003: 176; Marks and Wilson, 2000: 455).

In their survey of European conservative parties, Marks and Wilson found that most supported Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) 'as the final step' in the creation of a liberalised single market. However, as they also note, neo-liberalism 'exists alongside a national orientation' in most conservative parties (2000: 455). For Conservatives, nationalism thus supplies the 'unambiguous bottom line for European integration', namely that 'the national state should not share with European institutions its legitimate sovereign right to govern persons living in its territory' (Marks and Wilson, 2000: 455). In Britain, the single currency project was viewed by most Conservatives as an infringement of that right, and much more so than the completion of the single market. As Forster notes, 'the arguments of Conservative sceptics against a single currency were never purely economic' rather they 'were also rooted in political ideas relating to sovereignty and national identity' (2002: 116). Even if they had been persuaded by the economic case for a single currency, the political costs would have remained a problem. As one prominent Eurosceptic, Norman Lamont, argued: 'a single European currency would thus be a gigantic step towards the creation of a European government and a European state' (Lamont, 1996: 100, quoted in Forster, 2002: 117).

Whilst it is a very useful stylisation of how views on European integration are informed by concerns at other levels of governance, Marks and Wilson's generalised model can only go so far in explaining the distinctive positions of different conservative parties. In the case of the British Conservative Party, the prevalent position on European integration has also been affected by a neo-liberal view of globalisation, which Baker, Gamble, and Seawright (2002) have characterised as 'hyperglobalism'. In this way, neo-liberalism has led some Conservatives to oppose membership of the European Union completely. Conservative MP Douglas Carswell, for example, argues that British participation 'has been a political and economic disaster' and believes that 'if we do not leave sooner rather than later it will be a catastrophe' (2006: 1). For hyperglobalists,

‘the national policy-making constraints of globalisation are welcomed because they rule out the kind of social democratic and socialist measures which are viewed as incompatible with British national identity, forcing the government to set the people free whatever its ideological predilections’ (Baker *et al.*, 2002: 409). The competition state is therefore compelled to pursue a free market policy of minimal state intervention in order to maintain national economic prosperity in the globalised economy. This not only ‘sets the people free’, but entails a Hayekian form of spontaneous order, of which the nation is the natural product.

The hyperglobalist and Eurosceptical strand of British conservatism that Baker *et al.* identify thus reject the rationally planned European Union as a threat to the nation, and as an infringement of their (limited) view of freedom that will inhibit competitiveness and undermine the economic gains of Thatcherism. For advocates of this position, the EU threatens to undermine the neo-liberal project:

We are being led towards a Europe which displays many of the characteristics of Britain twenty years ago. It is populated with over-manned and protected nationalised industries. In many places private sector managers are in thrall to trade unions. Business is tied down by government bureaucracy and interventionism. Public spending is appallingly high. There persists the belief that Europe can go its own sweet way, unaffected by the assault from international competition, provided that the fortress walls are built high enough (Portillo, 1998: 7).

As Geddes notes, the Thatcherite mantras of ‘no alternative’ and ‘no turning back’, articulated through a discourse of globalisation, had ascended ‘to a global plain’ (2004: 195). Although a few prominent Europhiles in John Major’s government, notably Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke, continued to view EMU as an essentially economic question, and prevented Major from hardening government policy beyond the position of ‘wait and see’, by the time of the 1997 election the Conservative Party was generally Eurosceptic, and Major had been ‘cajoled into conceding a referendum on the Euro if the government recommended entry’ (Forster, 2002: 126).

A 1994 survey of the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) found the majority of Conservative MPs to be clearly Eurosceptic: 50 percent favoured the passing of an act of Parliament to ‘establish explicitly the ultimate supremacy of Parliament over EU legislation’; 60 percent thought that the Commission should lose the ability to initiate legislation; and 85 percent thought that Britain should use its veto to prevent the

introduction of QMV for foreign and defence policy. Further, in the opinion of 79 percent, the way to achieve greater democratic accountability over the EU is not through reform or democratisation of European level institutions, but by ‘strengthening the scrutiny by national parliaments of the EU legislative process’. A repeat of the survey in 1998 found these figures to have increased to 69 percent; 61 percent; 90 percent; and 84 percent respectively (Baker *et al.*, 2002: 417).

This degree of Euroscepticism played a decisive role in the 1997 leadership election, as the seemingly better qualified, more experienced, more popular but Europhile Kenneth Clarke was passed over in favour William Hague, who was understood to be less pro-European. As Gowland and Turner argue, ‘this choice represented an unmistakable victory for the Eurosceptic tendency and was indicative of a shift in the balance of power within the Conservative Party’ (Gowland and Turner, 2000: 212). A mock advertisement for the job of Conservative leader published in *The Economist* in March 1997 stated that candidates ‘[m]ust be of Eurosceptical disposition, but not so Eurosceptical as to split the party’, and Hague met these criteria in a way that Clarke could not (*The Economist*, 13 March 1997, quoted in Harris, 2005: 100). Similarly in 2001, attitudes to European integration played an important part in the election as leader of the former Maastricht rebel Iain Duncan Smith, who won by a clear margin (again over Ken Clarke) in a ballot of party members (Chapter 4: 79-80; 92). The following sections analyse the Conservatives’ position on European integration since 1997, and consider whether an understanding of this is essential for an understanding of the Conservatives’ travails in opposition.

### **5.3 William Hague: Managing the European Question, 1997-2001**

On becoming Conservative Party leader, Europe presented William Hague with challenges on both the ideational and electoral dimensions. In electoral terms, the Conservatives had been badly affected by their image as a disunited party, and Europe was central to this picture. At the time of the 1997 election, MORI surveys found that 44 percent of respondents saw the Conservatives as divided (Table 4.1). Cowley comments that, ‘by the middle of 1996, the percentage of people who thought that the Conservatives were united had fallen into single figures. The public saw the Conservatives as riven’ (Cowley, 1997: 40-1). In fact, the 1992 Parliament had not

been an unusually rebellious one on the Conservative benches: in relative terms the level of dissent was similar for other recent Parliaments (Cowley, 1997: 41). As Cowley notes, contrary to public perception ‘cohesion remained the norm, dissent the exception’, and there was ‘no collapse in Party discipline’ (1997: 42). Europe, however, particularly the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, was a highly visible exception, over which more than 60 percent of Conservative backbench dissent activity during the 1992 Parliament occurred (Cowley, 1997: 42). The Eurosceptics were also very vocal in their cause, and had continued to cause party management problems for John Major until he left office (Hogg & Hill, 1995: 264-283). Hague therefore needed to settle party policy on European integration, particularly on the most pressing and divisive issue of a European single currency, as a matter of urgent party management. For Harris, Hague’s efforts to ‘neutralise the issue of Europe’ were part of a ‘survival strategy’ he employed for the first 18 months of his leadership (2005: 105-6).

Europe presented a difficult challenge to the Conservatives in party management terms in part because of its ideational aspect: unwillingness to compromise from strongly held positions had served to highlight the ideological fissures in the party under Major, and threatened to do the same under Hague. Conservative divisions over Europe also reflected the malaise over the purpose and direction of conservatism discussed in Chapter 3. For arch-Thatcherites such as Shirley Letwin, ‘Nothing in the whole project of creating a European State conforms to the British style of politics’ (1996: 175). For Letwin, the central objective of the ‘Thatcherite crusade... was to make such crusades unnecessary’ (1996: 175), by limiting the role of the state to upholding a strong framework (the rule of law) within which people could go about their lives without political interference. The missionary zeal of Thatcherism was not therefore the usual state of British conservatism or British politics, it was merely necessitated by the magnitude of the crisis the country faced in 1979. European integration, however, poses an even greater threat to this ‘British way’ of politics, and thus opposing it should be the primary purpose of the Conservative Party. As Letwin states:

The unfortunate truth is that although ‘we are all capitalists now’, the battle fought by the Thatcher government has to be fought all over again, but on a new terrain, with a new vocabulary, and new weapons. And what is at issue is even more fundamental than the issue in 1979 – it is the independence of Britain, it is the supremacy of British law and self government in Britain (1996: 176).

Thatcherite malice to the enemy within (the trade unions and socialism) has thus not dissipated with their self-proclaimed victory, but has been transferred to the even more threatening enemy without, the European Union. Letwin's position is not, of course, shared by all Conservatives, but it does illustrate the intellectual shift wrought by Thatcherism.

Whereas 'One Nation' or anti-Thatcherite Conservatives such as Ian Gilmour may argue that 'by helping the European Union to be one of the major powers in the world, [Britain] could retain considerable control over her own destiny, or she could cling to formal sovereignty, while in reality becoming an American satellite and enjoying the international influence equivalent to a county council' (Gilmour and Garnett, 1997: 378), this no longer represents anything other than a small minority view within the Conservative Party. David Willetts agrees with Letwin to the extent that any Conservative 'committed to the integrity of the United Kingdom' will recognise 'that ultimately the issues involved here are far more than economic'. Concerns over European integration, he claims, 'rest on the recognition that there is indeed more to Conservatism than simple economic liberalism' (Willetts, 1996: 83). Hague's former Party Chairman, Michael Ancram, states clearly that in his view: 'The State and European integration are mutually incompatible... the only Europe compatible with the protection of our sovereignty and the smaller state is a European partnership of sovereign nations' (Ancram, 2007: 14). A similar view is held by a group of young Conservative candidates and self-proclaimed modernisers, who argue that 'UK sovereignty has been ceded to Europe without the British people being consulted'. Whilst not arguing for an immediate reversal of this, they suggest that a future Conservative government should pass a Bill so that any moves towards further integration can only be ratified by a public vote: 'a referendum on ceding sovereignty would become the expectation, rather than the exception' (Philp *et al.*, 2006: 158). The neo-Thatcherite view that Europe represents a fundamental threat to British sovereignty has thus established a hegemonic position within British Conservative discourse.

For Hague and his successors, the effect of this ideological transformation of the party under Thatcher and Major was to restrict the scope of viable party management strategies for the leadership on the issue of Europe. As Hall comments, ideas can 'lend

representative legitimacy to some social interests more than others, delineate the accepted boundaries of state action, associate contemporary political developments with particular interpretations of national history and define the context in which many issues will be understood' (Hall, 1993: 289, quoted in Geddes, 2005b: 115-6). Geddes argues that following Thatcher's 1988 Bruges speech, 'a potent Eurosceptic critique' arose from the view that European integration was impinging upon 'core elements of the Thatcherite governing project' (2005b: 129). The impact of this was not so much upon actual government policy, but was 'central to a realignment of Conservative thinking about Europe' (2005b: 129). Hague needed to devise an approach that could exist within this realignment, whilst not either reinforcing the public impression that the Conservatives were either 'extreme' or 'obsessed' with Europe, and also without splitting the party.

The most urgent issue facing Hague in this regard was the party's policy on membership of the single currency. The formula Hague struck upon was that the Conservatives would oppose entry during the current Parliament or in the next. The party could thus campaign against membership without actually ruling it out 'on principle' or 'forever'. This was the basis of Hague's call to 'save the pound' during the 2001 election campaign, although this was effectively neutered by Labour's pledge to hold a referendum before British entry. Hague established this line in October 1997, and suffered two shadow cabinet resignations (Ian Taylor and David Curry) as a result (Harris, 2005: 150). In autumn 1998 Hague held a ballot of party members to seek approval for this policy, which was overwhelmingly endorsed, with 84 percent of returned papers in favour (Harris, 2005: 165; Garnett, 2003: 56). For Bale, Hague adopted this line as: 'he wanted, firstly, to maintain Tory distinctiveness in a manner which seemed to play well with public opinion and, secondly, to use the internal referendum on the issue to give the impression of an authority he sadly lacked' (Bale, 2006a: 388). This is perhaps a little harsh on Hague. To have maintained the 'wait and see' line of his predecessor would have been nigh-on-impossible in the face of deepening Euroscepticism in his ranks, and the position of not joining 'for the foreseeable future', which he used in the first couple of months of his leadership, suffered from an intense vagueness to the extent of appearing almost meaningless. The all-party ballot was also a success in that it brought a degree of legitimacy to the policy (which held firm for four years) and was a tactical victory of sorts over its vocal critics

such as Heseltine and Clarke. For some, such as Hague's chief policy advisor Daniel Finkelstein and his party Chairman Michael Ancram, it 'was significant because it enabled the Conservative Party to finally stop talking about Europe' (Harris, 2005: 166). Ancram commented that Hague 'wanted to put the issue effectively to bed... so that's why we had a referendum in the party on it' (Ancram, interview in Harris, 2005: 166).

Hague's policy also had the advantage that it was generally in line with public opinion: polls continued to show public scepticism over joining the Euro (ICM, 2001). It did not succeed, however, in radically changing the image of the Conservatives as a disunited party. By the 2001 election 30 percent of the public still regarded the Conservatives as divided, down 14 points since April 1997 (Table 4.1).

#### **5.4 'Harder but quieter': European policy 2001-5**

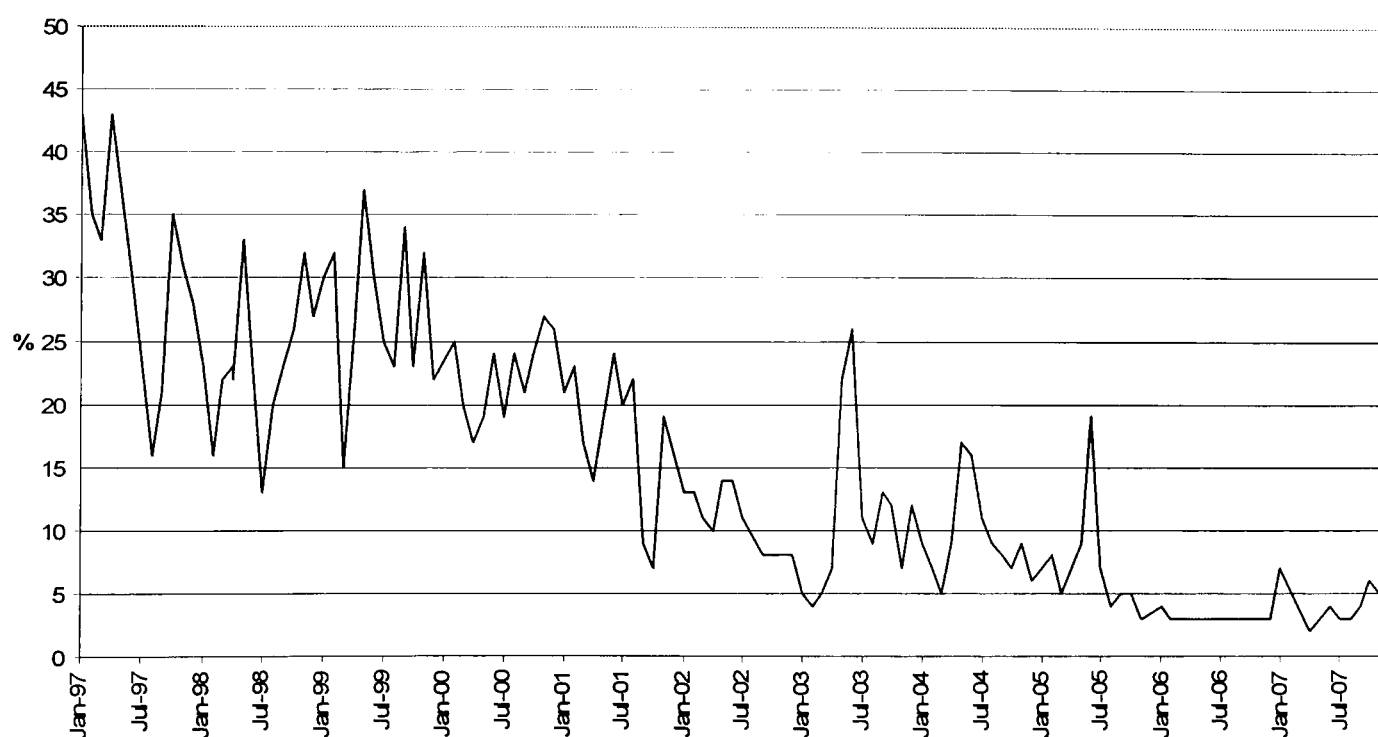
Bale characterises Conservative Party positioning on Europe between 1997 and 2005 as becoming 'harder but quieter' (2006a: 388-391). Following Hague's clamorous calls to 'save the pound', a much quieter line was rapidly established under his successor, Iain Duncan Smith. One of his first moves as leader was to harden Conservative policy, to rule-out membership permanently. As Bale comments, this 'was intended not just to "close" the issue within the party but also to prevent it dominating the Tory campaign in the 2005 general election in the way it had done four years earlier' (2006a: 388). Duncan Smith succeeded in this regard: the party said very little on Europe under his leadership. This was a deliberate effort to move away from core vote issues, which may, ironically, have weakened his position as leader. Theresa May commented that, 'there were a lot of people who voted for Iain because they thought he would be sound on Europe and would put Europe centre-stage. And he didn't: one of the first things he did was to park Europe as an issue' (May Interview). However, as May went on to acknowledge, this was only one factor in Duncan Smith losing the confidence of the parliamentary party:

It was a mixture of things. I think it was partly a reaction against the way that he was trying to take the party. I think it was partly the feeling that he hadn't done what they thought he would do, i.e. return to a 'core vote', right wing, be an anti-Europe leader. Partly, some of the personal issues about his leadership; and partly the fact that there were others who had an interest in becoming leader, and were therefore agitating, or getting others to agitate on their behalf. (May Interview).



The decision by Duncan Smith to deliberately focus on issues other than Europe was a rational interpretation of the strategic context he faced. As Bale argues, ‘the 2001 debacle had proved beyond all reasonable doubt that Europe was incapable of winning the Tories an election’, whilst raising its profile risked inflating the profile of UKIP (Bale, 2006a: 388). The issue also had a low level of electoral salience (Figure 5.1). According to MORI (2008a) opinion poll data, at the time of Duncan Smith’s election as party leader in September 2001, only 9 percent of voters regarded European integration as an important issue. Since then, it has remained a relatively low salience issue, although brief spikes of public interest occurred in June 2003 (when Gordon Brown announced the assessment of the economic tests for joining the Euro); in May and June 2004 (at the time of the European elections and Labour’s concession of a referendum on the proposed European constitution); and in June 2005 (when the debate about the renegotiation of Britain’s rebate hit the headlines).

*Figure 5.1: The Salience of European Integration to the British public, 1997-2007*



Percentage of respondents ranking European integration amongst the most important political issues, based on data from *Ipsos Mori Political Monitor: Long Term Trends. The Most Important Issues Facing Britain Today*. Unprompted, combined answers to the questions: ‘What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?’ and ‘What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?’ [www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml) (MORI, 2008a).

By comparison, 43 percent of those polled in September 2001 regarded health as an important issue, 30 percent named education, and 60 percent cited defence (an abnormally high figure in response to 9/11) (MORI, 2008a). Duncan Smith therefore saw Europe as a low salience issue on which the Conservative position was relatively well known, and chose instead to focus on the priorities identified by the public. As he commented:

Well I didn't think there was any point in talking about it [Europe] really, because I didn't think there could be anyone in Britain who didn't know what our view was. Ironically, it [the message] had got through on that one, which is, that we didn't want any more integration and we thought that the level of integration that we were at now needed serious review. We were against the single currency, all those sorts of things were clear positions. I cleared-up the position over the single currency, and in actual fact we didn't discuss it again for the whole time I was there. The constitution came to the fore in the second year, but we dealt with that with our referendum policy... So we stayed off Europe for a while. (Duncan Smith Interview).

Ann Widdecombe concurred with the rationale of this policy, but attributed the failure of Duncan Smith's leadership to his personal qualities:

The one big plus of having Iain Duncan Smith was that it shut everybody up about Europe, because everybody knew where he stood on Europe, there wasn't a lot of angst about Europe. He very wisely decided that we weren't going to talk about Europe... That much worked, and I think there was a lot of reassurance in that he did talk about that sort of things I've been talking about – social justice, inner city estates and all the rest of it, which gave some reassurance to people who regarded him simply as rather mindlessly right-wing and not much else. But he never had the personality. I've never seen a leader with less charisma. He just didn't have it. And it might not have mattered twenty years ago, but now, with the cameras everywhere, it matters. And he just couldn't hack it. It really is as simple as that, he couldn't hack it. You can theorise all you like, but no, he just couldn't do it. (Widdecombe Interview).

Chapter 4 highlighted the deliberate strategy pursued by Iain Duncan Smith to reposition the Conservatives as a party of the public services, and develop a new Conservative narrative based around 'championing the vulnerable' and social justice. As Widdecombe implies, and as Chapter 4 discussed, this failed not because it lacked coherence, but because of poor leadership and party image problems. The 'harder but quieter' European policy was integral to this strategy. Chapter 4 also noted how Duncan Smith's agenda was only partially carried forward by Michael Howard, who abandoned the search for a narrative based around the language of compassionate conservatism, but did retain elements of the broader policy approach. Howard

maintained the relative silence on Europe established by his predecessor. Although not a former Maastricht rebel like Duncan Smith, Howard's Euroscepticism was widely acknowledged. In his own words, his position is clear: 'I'm not in favour of ceding more powers to the European Union; on the contrary I'm in favour of bringing powers back from the European Union' (Howard Interview).

However, Howard's decision not to make European integration a prominent issue was not informed by the same strategic logic that underpinned Duncan Smith's avoidance of the subject. As Cowley and Green comment, Duncan Smith's 'hardening of policy was not a sign that the party was even more obsessed about Europe; rather, the shift in policy was designed to ensure that the party did not spend any longer discussing the issue' (2005: 51). Reflecting how actors take lessons from their understanding of the context and adjust their strategies accordingly, he was 'determined to escape the criticism levelled at Hague in 2001 for running a single-issue campaign on Europe' (Cowley and Green, 2005: 51). In this sense, the position adopted by Duncan Smith on Europe, and his success in enforcing it, was dependent, although it had failed electorally, on the legacy left by Hague. The mistake of focussing on Europe in 2001 was widely recognised, even amongst Conservative MPs, increasing willing compliance with Duncan Smith's tactic of minimising the issue. The Labour government was also happy not raising what for them was not a strong suit. When the proposed European constitution came on the agenda in 2002, it was dealt with in the Conservative Party by a promise of a referendum (as noted by Duncan Smith above). By taking a firm position to oppose the single currency permanently, and to oppose (and offer a referendum on) any future constitutional treaty, Duncan Smith also aligned himself with mainstream opinion with the Conservative parliamentary party, 'the number of pro-European Conservative MPs having diminished yet further at the 2001 election' (Cowley & Green, 2005: 51). Armed with his own impeccable Eurosceptic credentials, there could be little doubt amongst Conservative MPs that Duncan Smith would honour these commitments.

Howard was therefore happy to maintain Duncan Smith's 'harder but quieter' position on Europe, as it was a success in party management terms, gave the party space to discuss other issues, and created some distance from the discredited 2001 election campaign. However, retention of this element of Duncan Smith's approach should not

be allowed to disguise the overall shift in strategy directed by his successor. Duncan Smith had attempted to both change the image of the Conservative Party and forge a new narrative of conservatism by concentrating more attention on issues of public concern which were viewed as Conservative weaknesses, and focussing much less on traditional Conservative messages on tax, immigration and Europe. Under Howard, tax and immigration policies acquired renewed prominence, and immigration in particular came to dominate the Conservatives' 2005 election campaign. As Bale comments, 'Duncan Smith's decision worked, at least as far as it went: under his replacement, Michael Howard, the Tories again made the same mistake of concentrating their election campaign on an issue on which they believed they were strong rather than on more bread-and-butter concerns; but in 2005, at least, the distraction was provided not by Europe – an issue which all parties were happy to ignore – but by immigration and asylum' (Bale, 2006a: 388). Howard's policy on Europe cannot be seen as part of a coherent broader approach in the way that Duncan Smith's can. Rather it was derived from tactical and party management convenience; and a less developed understanding of, and response to, the 2001 defeat.

For Howard, to draw parallels between his 2005 campaign and that led by William Hague's in 2001 is unfair. He sees the two as very different, as in 2001 the issue of Europe and the Euro had been neutralised by Labour's pledge of a referendum, whereas this was not the case with the immigration:

It [immigration] wasn't at all like Europe in the 2001 election. The problem about Europe at the 2001 election, where we concentrated a great deal on the Euro, was that everyone knew that they were going to have a referendum on the Euro, so they thought understandably that that wasn't really a reason for voting Conservative in a general election. If they didn't like the Euro they could perfectly happily vote Labour and vote 'no' to the Euro. There wasn't going to be a referendum on immigration, so I think it was completely different. (Howard Interview)

In this sense, Howard's understanding of the reasons for defeat in 2001 seems to be based around the idea of tactical failure, rather than the more fundamental critique informing Duncan Smith's attempts to recast conservatism, and with it the image of the Conservative Party, in a 'compassionate' light. Howard therefore either failed to grasp, or simply disagreed with, Duncan Smith's assessment of the 2001-5 strategic context. One possible explanation for this could be that Howard saw the Conservative Party's image problems, and electoral failure in 1997 and 2001, as being specifically related to

Europe, rather than a broader problem encapsulated by Theresa May's comment that the Conservatives were seen as 'the nasty party' (Cowley & Green, 2005: 51). More likely, however, is that Howard noted the lack of progress in the opinion polls under his predecessor, and made a tactical assessment of what he thought he could achieve in a probable 18 months before the next general election. Howard did make some attempts to 'reach out' on in the early days of his leadership, for example his 'British Dream' speech to Policy Exchange (Howard, 2004). These were abandoned as the election neared, and it is possible that had he remained as leader Duncan Smith would similarly have been pressured to retreat on to traditional Conservative issue strengths.

When asked what his key priorities on becoming leader were, Howard replied: 'Impose discipline on the party. Work towards achieving a clear message. And attempting to convincing the electorate that we were a credible alternative to the government' (Howard Interview). His approach to policy on Europe can be understood in these terms. Raising the issue's prominence risked exacerbating division and indiscipline in the party, and obscuring Howard's message. As such, it would have done little to enhance the Conservatives' credibility as a government in waiting. It therefore made sense to downplay the issue.

### **5.5 Analysis: Conservative positioning and the salience of European integration**

Intertwined with ideational factors such as the ideological positions of Conservative MPs, are electoral concerns and calculations, notably relating to the salience of key issues. The salience of European integration has declined notably since 1997, upholding the logic of Duncan Smith's 'harder but quieter' policy. Oppermann argues that this transformation into a low-salience issue was the successful outcome of deliberate New Labour strategy. He suggests that as the Blair government's approach to Europe was not in concordance with the 'deeply entrenched Euroscepticism' of the British public, New Labour had a strong electoral incentive to attempt to reduce, or at least contain, its public salience (Oppermann, 2007: 1). Oppermann notes that, 'Between 1997 and 2006, the approval ratings of New Labour's European policies lagged behind those of the Conservative Party's policies in seven out of ten years'. Furthermore, at both the 2001 and 2005 general elections, 'voters who ranked European issues among the important determinants of their voting decisions again

preferred the Conservatives' policies' (2007: 7). Labour has responded to this electoral danger through a mix of different strategies, notably by deferring major European policy decisions; by pledging referendums on such decisions; by attempting to depoliticise such decisions so they appear technical rather than political (for example the five economic tests with respect to joining the Euro); and by downplaying the apparent differences between government policies and those of the Conservative opposition (Oppermann, 2007: 17-25). This effort to neutralise the issue contrasted markedly with Labour's strategy in the six years before Tony Blair became leader, when the party 'deliberately repositioned itself as a distinctly pro-European alternative to the increasingly Eurosceptic Conservative government' (Oppermann, 2007: 17).

Labour's failure to make a serious effort to re-orientate public opinion in a more pro-integrationist direction can be regarded as a chief shortcoming of their time in office, and a significant missed opportunity. For instance Peter Mandelson has noted that 'Britain's leaders have done a good job of selling globalisation... But they have done less well explaining the role of the EU in helping Britain defend its interests in a globalised world' (Mandelson, 2007: 1). For some, it reflects New Labour's predilection for an Anglo-Saxon (or Anglo-American) neo-liberal economic model, in preference to a more social democratic 'European' capitalism. Jessop, for example, argues that the government 'deliberately, persistently, and wilfully' drove forward 'the neo-liberal transformation of Britain' (Jessop, 2007: 282). Indeed, the British government under Blair was 'far keener to export lessons of US enterprise culture and welfare-to-work to the European Union' than they were to facilitate a transfer of ideas in the other direction (2007: 287). Numerous other authors see New Labour in similar terms: Bauman regards the lasting legacy of the Blair years to be the consolidation and 'institutionalisation' of Thatcherism (Bauman, 2007: 60); and Fullbrook (2007: 160) declares that neo-liberalism 'is the ideology of our time' and characterised the Blair governments. From such perspectives, New Labour's adjustment of its stance on European policy issues, and its efforts to neutralise them, can be understood as part of a wider ideological shift, as the transformative effect of Thatcherism on British politics continued to be felt.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the motivations, the outcome does however, appear

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<sup>2</sup> Human agency has of course been central to this, and the Labour government has been widely criticised for failing to counter neo-liberalism more vigorously since 1997 (see for example, Hall, 1998; 2007; Jessop, 2007; Wilson & Macaulay, 2007).

clear: the public salience of European integration declined dramatically (Figure 5.1), thereby augmenting the space available for the government to pursue a European policy at odds with public sentiment at minimal electoral cost.

However, as Figure 5.1 shows, the salience of European integration did not follow a smooth downward trajectory: spikes of public interest occurred at the time of related high profile political episodes, for example the assessment of the economic tests for joining the Euro in 1997 and 2003, and the 1999 European elections (Oppermann 2007: 10). Oppermann divides the Blair premiership into ‘two distinct phases’, either side of the 2001 general election. The first phase is marked by a high level of electoral salience for the issue of European integration: on average, 24.5 percent of poll respondents regarded it as an important issue, and at ‘the 2001 general elections, the importance attached to European issues was second only to health policy’ (Oppermann, 2007: 9-10). By contrast, during the second phase, Europe ‘was considered to be among the most important political issues of the day by an average of only 8.6% of respondents’ (2007: 11). For Oppermann, this drop can be partly ascribed to Labour’s strategies as noted above. However, a factor that he overlooks, which may also have contributed to this fall, is the Conservatives’ changing approach to European policy. Notably, the steep decline in the public salience of the issue only occurs *after* the 2001 general election, when the Conservatives under Iain Duncan Smith deliberately chose to downplay the issue. This could be interpreted in one of two ways: either the Conservatives were responding to Labour’s (successful) strategy to defer and defuse the issue; or public concern with European integration fell as it was the subject of less political conflict, as the Conservatives went quiet on the subject.

Using data from the British Election Panel Survey (BEPS), Geoffrey Evans’ (1998) analysis of Euroscepticism and Conservative electoral support found that the British public became more Eurosceptic during John Major’s premiership. By 1996, on an issue-proximity model, the Conservative Party ‘was even closer to aggregate public opinion, when compared with its main competitors, than it had been at the time of the 1992 election’ (1998: 573). This failed, however, to translate into increased electoral support. The problem was threefold: firstly voters displayed confusion over the Conservatives position; secondly the appearance of disunity put voters off; and thirdly they tended to be swayed by other issues.

For Evans, by failing to pursue a consistent Eurosceptic line the Conservatives under Major squandered ‘the potential electoral benefit provided by popular Euroscepticism’ (1998: 590). The ambiguous nature of the government’s attitude to European integration under Major actually caused voters to inaccurately place the Conservative position on an issue-proximity scale, to the extent that by 1996, voters perceived themselves to be closer to the positions of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. As Evans explains, ‘in 1996 people who perceived the Conservatives to be anti-European tended to themselves be pro-European, while those who perceived the party to be pro-European were more likely to be anti-European’ (1998: 581-2). No such confusion arose with regard to the other major parties. As Evans argues, the palpable reason for this was surely the clear public divisions in the Conservative Party over the issue of Europe at the time. Disunity therefore had a double-whammy impact, not only on the public image of the party (see Chapter 4), but also on the credibility of the party on one important issue which should have been a Conservative electoral trump card.

In the light of this, William Hague’s strategy on Europe might be regarded as eminently sensible. Hague hoped that a consistent Eurosceptic position would reverse the damage inflicted on the party by the image of disunity, whilst as Evans highlighted above, it also offered potential electoral dividends. Moreover, on becoming leader he inherited a situation where his party was far behind the Labour on all major issues with the exception of Europe. As a comparison of Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 illustrates, by the time of the 2001 election he had failed to make significant inroads into this situation. In April 1997, six issues were cited as ‘important’ by at least 20 percent of the electorate. They were health (63 percent), education (54 percent), Europe (43 percent), unemployment (28 percent) crime (27 percent) and the economy (22 percent) (MORI. 2008a). As Table 5.1 shows, Labour had large leads on three of these (health, education and unemployment); the Conservatives had a small lead on the economy, whilst on crime and Europe both had similar levels of public approval.



*Table 5.1: Best party on key issues, April 1997*

	<b>Conservatives %</b>	<b>Labour %</b>	<b>None / Don't know %</b>	<b>Labour Lead %</b>
Crime	28	29	36	+1
Economy	33	26	34	-7
Education	21	40	24	+ 19
Europe	25	24	42	- 1
Health	15	47	28	+ 32
Unemployment	18	42	34	+ 30

*Source:* Data on best party on key issues (MORI 2008c; 2008d; 2008e; 2008f; 2008g; 2008h).

*Table 5.2: Best party on key issues, February 2001*

	<b>Conservatives %</b>	<b>Labour %</b>	<b>None / Don't know %</b>	<b>Labour Lead %</b>
Crime	26	30	38	+ 4
Economy	18	44	34	+ 26
Education	17	44	30	+ 27
Europe	26	27	40	+ 1
Health	14	42	35	+ 28
Unemployment	12	48	37	+ 36

*Source:* Data on best party on key issues (MORI 2008c; 2008d; 2008e; 2008f; 2008g; 2008h).

The major change between 1997 and 2001 (Table 5.2) was the emergence of a large Labour lead on the economy. Labour retained clear leads on health, education and unemployment, leaving Hague with two issues, crime and Europe, on which his party was in touching distance of the government. Combined with the continued electoral salience of European integration (see Figure 5.1), his decision to campaign heavily on Europe at the 2001 elections, when he warned the British public that they had just 'two weeks to save the pound' (Jones, 2001: 1) appears rational.

Why did John Major not pursue such a policy? Major's problem was one of internal party management. As Evans noted, 'the cost of maintaining a distinctly Eurosceptic line is likely to be high in terms of intra-party strife, while Labour's recent evolution into an efficient election-winning apparatus has coincided with its position on Europe shifting toward a less integrationist line (i.e. the endorsement of a referendum on EMU), thus further reducing the benefits that might accrue to a Eurosceptic strategy for the

Conservatives' (Evans, 1998: 589). For Major, these costs were too high: he could not have followed this strategy without losing key members of his cabinet such as Michael Heseltine and Ken Clarke. For Hague, however, these costs were much less, as the rump of 165 Conservative MPs remaining in 1997 tended to be more Eurosceptic, and his position on the Euro had been legitimised by the ballot of party members.

Hague's strategy is given further credence by the fact that Europe was one issue on which the Conservatives were viewed relatively favourably, particularly amongst voters who regarded it as important. As Table 5.3 demonstrates, despite the ideological divisions under Major, the Conservatives had a clear lead over Labour as the 'best party' on Europe at the time of the 1997 general election amongst voters who regarded the issue as important. This disappeared in 1998, but returned clearly in 1999, and has generally been maintained since. As Table 5.4 demonstrates, even amongst all voters (not just those naming it as an important issue) the Conservatives have largely matched Labour as the best party on Europe since 1999. By contrast, on the electorally most salient issue of health, Labour held large leads amongst both voters naming the issue as important (an average lead of 26 percent) and amongst all voters (an average of 23 percent) for the entire 1997-2005 period (Tables 5.5 and 5.6).

*Table 5.3: Best Party on Europe, amongst all voters mentioning the issue as important*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Lib Dem</b>	<b>None/ Don't know</b>	<b>Cons lead</b>
8 April 1997	38	19	8	29	19
21-24 May 1998	26	43	9	21	- 17
23-26 July 1999	38	26	8	24	12
21-24 Jan 2000	31	29	12	25	2
20-24 July 2000	37	27	11	22	10
15-20 Feb 2001	35	33	8	20	2
11-16 Sept 2003	39	16	18	22	23
10-14 Sept 2004	29	19	15	24	10
7-11 April 2005	32	21	16	22	11
6 Sept 2006	18	24	10	46	- 6

*Source: MORI (2008f).*

*Table 5.4: Best Party on Europe, all voters*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Lib Dem</b>	<b>None/ Don't know</b>	<b>Cons Lead</b>
8 April 1997	25	24	6	42	1
21-24 May 1998	16	40	5	38	-24
23-26 July 1999	28	28	8	33	0
21-24 Jan 2000	25	28	8	38	-3
20-24 July 2000	28	25	7	38	3
15-20 Feb 2001	26	27	5	40	-1
11-16 Sept 2003	24	21	11	42	3
10-14 Sept 2004	19	20	11	43	-1
6 Sept 2006	20	20	9	47	0

*Source: MORI (2008f).*

*Table 5.5: Best Party on Health, amongst all voters mentioning the issue as important*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Lib Dem</b>	<b>None/ Don't know</b>	<b>Lab Lead</b>
8 April 1997	13	51	10	26	38
21-24 May 1998	11	50	10	28	39
23-26 July 1999	13	46	8	31	33
21-24 Jan 2000	14	41	8	36	27
20-24 July 2000	17	43	8	31	26
15-20 Feb 2001	13	44	8	33	31
11-16 Sept 2003	17	31	11	40	14
10-14 Sept 2004	17	29	11	41	12
7-11 April 2005	22	36	10	31	14
6 Sept 2006	25	21	13	39	-4

*Source: MORI (2008g).*

*Table 5.6: Best Party on Health, all voters*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Lib Dem</b>	<b>None/ Don't know</b>	<b>Lab Lead</b>
8 April 1997	15	47	9	28	32
21-24 May 1998	11	49	9	30	38
23-26 July 1999	13	45	7	33	32
21-24 Jan 2000	15	38	7	39	23
20-24 July 2000	16	42	7	34	26
15-20 Feb 2001	14	42	7	35	28
11-16 Sept 2003	16	30	11	42	14
10-14 Sept 2004	15	28	10	44	13
6 Sept 2006	19	23	10	47	4

*Source: MORI (2008g).*

So why did Hague's strategy fail? The conventional wisdom is that this was a core-vote strategy that failed dramatically, as illustrated by the outcome of the 2001 election result. Leach rehearses the standard critique of Hague's leadership:

Hague chose to adopt a harder Eurosceptic position which isolated the dwindling number of Conservative Europhiles, and drove a few out of the party. It was assumed a clear line would banish the ambiguities of the Major years, and appeal to a Eurosceptic electorate. Thus Hague fought the 2001 election as a single-issue campaign to 'save the pound'. It is now almost universally recognised that this was a mistake. Although the majority of voters shared Conservative opposition to the euro, it was well down their list of priorities. Hague's obsession with Europe meant that Labour's general record and Conservative alternatives never received detailed scrutiny. His tough line with dissent meant that the party was perceived as 'dogmatic', and 'extreme' rather than united, particularly among those voters who recalled that all the main developments in the UK's relationship with Europe had been undertaken by previous Conservative governments. The party was effectively denying its own past. (Leach, 2002: 207).

An alternative view, however, could be that Hague's strategy was a relative success. It secured Hague a notable victory at the 1999 European elections, thereby securing his position as leader (Chapter 4). And it may have been the optimal vote-maximisation strategy available to him: in other words, another leader or another strategy may have actually resulted in the Conservatives doing even worse. As Harris comments, 'the future of the Conservative Party on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1997 was by no means guaranteed: the parliamentary party was literally tearing itself apart over the issue of Europe. party

membership was rapidly dwindling and it was on the brink of bankruptcy' (Harris, 2005: 105). In this context, to have stabilised the party so that it did not implode and lose further ground electorally, and to have brought a semblance of unity on the most divisive issue for the Conservative Party since tariff reform, is no mean achievement. As Lord Parkinson commented, 'The big thing was to hold the party together... I don't think there was a strategy William could have devised that would have increased his vote beyond what he got, quite frankly'. In his view, a different leader could have achieved no more (Parkinson Interview).

Andrew Lansley MP, who oversaw policy renewal under William Hague, is dismissive of the idea that the focus on Europe at the expense of other issues was a major tactical mistake: 'The emerging conventional view is that the Conservative Party did not succeed better because we did not talk about health and education over the course of the election campaign. This is bunk. If the general election had been nothing more than a debate about public services, the Conservatives could have done even worse' (Lansley, 2001: 69). By contrast Andrew Cooper, Hague's former Director of Strategy (1997-1999) saw little benefit to the 'core-vote' strategy with Europe as its centrepiece, so consequently saw little risk in pursuing an alternative, broader agenda. As he comments:

It is indeed highly probable that an election campaign fought wholly on public-service issues, and trying to engage positively with the most salient issues, coming at the end of a Parliament in which the party had barely touched on these issues, would have made only limited difference to the outcome. Yet the notion that such a campaign would have achieved a worse result than the core-vote or core-vote-plus strategy is highly implausible (Cooper, 2001: 106).

As this chapter has shown, Europe, as both an ideological influence and electoral issue was central to this conclusion. The Hague years were also important in shaping the context for his successors. Duncan Smith would have been unable to harden and quieten the Conservative Party's approach to European integration so rapidly or with such ease had it not been for his predecessor's actions. 1997-2001 marks an important phase in the transition by the Conservatives into a firmly Eurosceptic party. As discussed, this ideological shift in the party is one (major) element of the Thatcherite transformation of British conservatism, but it is one affected and institutionalised by key political actors. In this respect, Hague's overtly Eurosceptic policies and rhetoric,

enforced with strict parliamentary discipline and sanctioned by the party ballot, marks the completion of the process of legitimising opposition to European integration signalled by Thatcher's Bruges address. The fundamental settlement of this issue in ideological terms, combined, ironically, with its electoral failure as the chief element of the 2001 campaign, afforded Duncan Smith the opportunity and autonomy to recast conservatism in a new direction and on new ground. Although it failed, the Duncan Smith era can thus be seen as the fountainhead of genuinely post-Thatcherite conservatism.

### **Conclusion: Space for Cameron-ism?**

This chapter began by exploring why European integration has long been a difficult issue for Conservatives in Britain. For several decades, Europe was *the* defining issue in Conservative Party politics, and was central to any understanding of it. Damian Green suggests that this is no longer the case:

For most of the 1980s and 1990s, to the enormous damage of the Conservative Party, Europe was an issue that defined you. It didn't matter what you thought about anything else, if you stood on one or other side of the Europe debate that defined you as right-wing or left-wing. Well actually now that's not true, it was never completely true, and it's now much less important an issue for the party as it was then. (Green Interview).

Europe was talismanic of the Thatcher legacy, and was emblematic of the party's difficulties in the 1990s, when the Conservatives came to be seen as fractious, divided, and ideologically obsessive. Yet the chapter ends with the suggestion that the 1997-2005 period has seen a radical (and little commented on) transformation of Conservative politics in relation to Europe, to the extent that it no longer appears to be the defining issue it once was. It is no longer the source of significant party management problems for the leadership, nor is it the cause of discordant displays of disunity. Since 1997, the Conservatives have maintained a broadly consistent and unified Eurosceptic position. This has a number of important implications.

Firstly, it offers the Conservatives the hope that it will yield some electoral benefits in the manner suggested by Evans (1998) by being proximate to a largely Eurosceptic electorate. The 1999 European elections and the Conservatives' relatively favourable

ratings on the issue (Tables 5.3 and 5.4) offer some support for this, although this is strongly tempered by the lessons of the 2001 election, and the relatively low (and declining) salience of the issue (Figure 5.1). However, should the salience of European integration increase significantly in the future, for example if membership of the single currency once again became a major point of political debate, the Conservatives are well placed to capitalise on this.

Secondly, the neutralisation of this deleterious subject is a hugely significant ideological change in the Conservative Party, and is, in a sense, the final neutralisation of the Thatcher legacy. It opens the space for the Conservatives to develop a genuinely post-Thatcherite agenda, by developing a new narrative of conservatism based upon different priorities and issues. The tentative beginnings of this were seen under Duncan Smith and are now being developed more considerably by David Cameron, who has pushed a broader Conservative agenda encompassing issues such as climate change and social exclusion. On Europe, Cameron has maintained the harder but quieter approach established by Iain Duncan Smith. He has attacked the government for failing to offer a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, but has not made Europe a prominent campaign issue.

Thirdly, however, the resolution of the European issue within the Conservative Party has occurred upon broadly Thatcherite lines, exemplifying how no Conservative leader, including Cameron, has been able to escape the contours laid down by Thatcherism. This is well illustrated by Cameron's pledge to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the European People's Party (EPP), the main centre-right grouping in the European Parliament, which has attracted criticism from some of his natural supporters. For example Michael Portillo comments that: 'By and large, Cameron's policy of daily saying the opposite of what you expect a Conservative to say is working well and the opinion polls reflect his success. There remains a single exception: Europe. On that one issue Cameron turns from Jekyll to Hyde, foaming like a Tory reactionary of the old school'. Euroscepticism is therefore the 'one survivor' of modernisation, not least because many of the leading modernisers emerged from the party's Eurosceptic right-wing (Portillo, 2006). So for Portillo, Cameron's failure to confront his party's Euroscepticism is a strategic error in that it runs counter to his overall approach, and is a tactical error, as by 'blundering into this terrain he will resurrect the party's reputation for being divided and self-obsessed' (2006). However, as Portillo himself

acknowledges, Euroscepticism actually performs a useful function for Cameron as ‘the one link between the party leader and that large body of right-wing opinion that did not convert to modernisation’ (2006). So the maintenance of the firm Eurosceptic line he inherited would appear to be a sound judgement by Cameron that has helped him carry party opinion into other areas where it may have been reluctant to venture, even if the as yet unresolved EPP issue causes him problems.

The way in which the European issue has been resolved within the Conservative Party along broadly Thatcherite lines will therefore be of significance in shaping the nature of post-Thatcherite conservatism, as we are beginning to see. In this respect, the 1997-2005 period is of great importance, as it was the actions of key actors during this time that shaped how this came about.



## Chapter 6

### National Identity and the English Question

*The Conservative Party is the nationalist party par excellence. A Conservative Party which cannot present itself to the country as a national party suffers under a sever handicap.*

Enoch Powell (quoted in Lynch, 1999: xi).

#### 6.1 Introduction

The question of national identity, epitomised by the issue of European integration, has been problematic for the Conservatives. This chapter also explores the question of identity, through an examination of Conservative Party policy and discourse in two further areas: immigration and devolution. The previous chapter showed how since 1997 the European question has largely been resolved in the Conservative Party as, with only a handful of dissenters, the party has settled on a Thatcherite Eurosceptic position. However, the end of bitter internal feuding over Europe has not meant the end of challenges to Conservative conceptions of national identity.<sup>1</sup>

The debate about both devolution and race/immigration issues is intimately related to the ‘English question’ – that is the emergence of a stronger and more visible sense of Englishness and its political, cultural, and constitutional implications. Devolution has challenged the traditional Conservative view of the British state by fundamentally altering its structure, leading some Conservatives to question the historic role of the party as the defender of the Union. This debate over how to respond to devolution is traced in the next section. Higher levels of immigration have pushed the issue up the political agenda and increased its electoral salience, and the way in which Conservatives have sought to respond to this reveals a significant dilemma: whether to seek to exploit the issue via

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<sup>1</sup> There is a wealth of academic literature dedicated to discussing what constitutes ‘national identity’. Here I adopt Anderson’s (1991) definition of a nation as an ‘imagined community’. Consequently, the key features of national identity are an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members (Smith, 1991: 14). For further discussion in relation to England and Britain see Kumar (2000; 2003), and Mandler (2006a; 2006b).

policy and rhetoric, or develop a more inclusive image. In the light of these two areas, the final section considers the implications of the Conservatives' reluctant drift towards becoming an English party. Once again, this case highlights the importance of multi-layered contexts. Conservative Party leaders have had to react and adapt to circumstances largely beyond their control, such as the establishment of an asymmetric system of devolution and the changing composition of society. Strategic choices must also be understood in the context of an ideological tradition of unionism as well as in terms of electoral dynamics. Political actors retain, however, a vital capacity to shape the terms of debate and interpret competing demands in different ways, thus affecting outcomes and changing the context faced by their successors. As such, the actions of Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard influenced the nature of the 'English question' faced by Cameron today.

## **6.2 Devolution: from opposition to acceptance**

The Conservative Party has traditionally identified itself as the party of the Union – indeed, it is still officially known as the Conservative and Unionist Party. Gamble identifies the Union as one of the four pillars of Conservative political hegemony in the twentieth century (1995: 13-16). Along with defence of the Empire, the constitution, and property, defence of the Union was a key feature of the Conservative Party's identity and electoral appeal. However, each of these pillars, Gamble argues, has been undermined, to the extent that by the mid-1990s conservatism could be said to be in 'crisis' (1995: 13).

Conservative commitment to the Union was weakened by the political situation in Northern Ireland in the 1970s which led to a breakdown in relations with the Ulster Unionists, who opposed the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement. This breach was further entrenched in the 1980s and 1990s, as 'under both Thatcher and Major the Conservatives have pursued a strategy of disengaging Britain from Northern Ireland' (1995: 15). This culminated in the 1994 Downing Street Declaration, as Gamble (1995: 15) comments:

The key passage in the Declaration was the statement that the British Government had no selfish or strategic interest in Northern Ireland, and that if ever the Ulster people wished to

separate from the United Kingdom, the British Government would not oppose it... The message of the Declaration was not lost on the Unionists. They had to recognize that there was now no party at Westminster which was committed in principle and in all circumstances to the maintenance of the Union.

Conservative commitment to the Union with Northern Ireland therefore no longer rests on the presumption that the Union is an inherently good thing which should be defended on principle, but rests merely on the grounds that it remains the democratic will of the people. In other words, Union with the six counties shall only be maintained for as long as a majority of the Northern Irish wish it. This has implications for the Conservative approach to devolution in other parts of the United Kingdom.

At the 1997 general election, the promise of constitutional reform was a key feature of Labour's manifesto. The central plank of this was devolution to Scotland and Wales, subject to public approval by referendum. The Conservatives campaigned vigorously against this, John Major warning that the country had just '72 hours to save the Union', claiming that Labour's proposals would mean 'the break-up of the United Kingdom as we know it' (quoted in Jones, 1997). This was a consistent theme of Major's, who likewise at the 1992 general election had called on voters to 'wake up' to the dangers of devolution (quoted in Jones, 1997). Similarly under William Hague, the Conservatives fought against devolution in the referendum campaigns in Scotland and Wales. Harris claims 'the Union played an important part in Hague's understanding of British national identity' and that this opposition stemmed from his belief that 'it would inevitably spark the process of the disintegration of the Union' (2005: 129).

However, once the referendums had been held, and despite the very close result in Wales, the Conservatives quickly moved to accept the new arrangements.<sup>2</sup> For Harris this revision of party policy can be explained, somewhat ironically, by Hague's unionism. She explains: 'rather than rejecting the will of the people, intransigently opposing the new assembly and parliament and refusing to take part in the new tiers of government, Hague steered his

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<sup>2</sup> In Scotland, 1,775,045 voters (74.3%) agreed that there should be a Scottish Parliament, whilst 614,400 (25.7%) disagreed. 1,512,889 (63.5%) agreed that it should have tax raising powers, with 870,263 (36.5%) against. Turnout was 60.4%. In Wales, 559,419 voters (50.3%) agreed that there should be a Welsh Assembly, and 552,698 (49.7%) disagreed, on a turnout of 50.1%. (BBC News, 1997).

party in the direction of working within the system to stop the snowball effect which he believed would result in Scotland or even Wales leaving the Union' (2005: 129). In his first major speech on the constitution as party leader, Hague acknowledged the dilemma he faced: should Conservatives seek to reform, reverse or advance the changes Labour was making? And what were the implications for the Conservative Party? As Hague asked, 'What happens to the defenders of the status quo when the status quo itself disappears?' (1998b: 2). Rapid constitutional change is, he acknowledged 'bewildering for many Conservatives', not least because 'the public is at best bemused and at worst uninterested' (1998b: 2). This public apathy was partly the Conservatives own fault, as 'the merits of our existing constitutional arrangements were so self-evident, we believed, that it was hardly worth making the intellectual case for them' (1998b: 1). The Conservatives (and the nation) were now paying the price for this failure, as public concern about Labour's 'constitutional vandalism' remained muted (1998b: 1). The question was therefore whether the Conservatives could, or should, accept it:

Some Conservatives believe we will simply have to shrug our shoulders and accept whatever arrangements we inherit. But how can we accept constitutional arrangements which are unstable and undemocratic and with whose underlying principles we profoundly disagree? I do not believe we can or should just put up with them. (1998b: 2).

The practical reality however, was that undoing these measures would be impossible: the Conservatives could not hope to 'unscramble the omelette' (1998b: 11). The only realistic response, Hague claimed, was to develop a programme of further change aimed at correcting 'the dangerous imbalances and tensions which Labour's constitutional reforms will unleash'. The Conservatives must seek 'to construct a set of constitutional relationships which will preserve the key, overarching principles of our existing constitution: limited government, the rule of law, the unity of the kingdom and, above all, democratic accountability' (1998b: 3). This was a theme that Hague echoed in another speech to the Centre for Policy Studies the following year, in which he sought to explain how Conservatives could 'strengthen the Union after devolution' (1999b: 2). This debate

centred in particular around the asymmetrical nature of the devolution and where this left England: the West Lothian Question.<sup>3</sup>

Devolution, Hague claimed, ‘strikes at the heart of the constitutional arrangement that has held our Union together for hundreds of years’ (1998b: 11). As a response he suggested four possible options for the Conservatives to consider in what Harris labelled an exercise in constitutional ‘damage limitation’ (2005: 135). These were: the creation of an English parliament; English votes for English laws (EvfEl); a major cut in the number of Scottish MPs; and substantial devolution of power in England to local councils and other bodies such as hospital trusts (Harris, 2005: 135; Hague, 1998b: 13-14). Labour’s proposal of English regional government was rejected as ‘such assemblies assume that strong regional identities exist in England, which they do not’ and ‘an extra layer of politicians... would lack legitimacy in the eyes of the voters and would simply confuse accountability still further’ (Hague, 1998b: 13). Lacking legislative powers, regional assemblies would also ‘fail to ameliorate the West Lothian Question’ (Harris, 2005: 135).

In 1998, Hague warned that the ‘dark clouds of nationalism are gathering – not just Scottish and Welsh nationalism, but English nationalism too’ and pledged that ‘a patriotic Conservative Party will fight it wherever it seeks to gain support’ (1998b: 12). By the following year however, he was more confident that this ‘flowering of English consciousness’ could ‘play an increasingly important part in our sense of British national identity’ (1999b: 6). However he also warned:

Try to ignore this English consciousness, or bottle it up, and it could turn into a more dangerous English nationalism that could threaten the future of the United Kingdom. Recognise its value and it can actually strengthen our common British identity. I believe answering the English Question is vital to the future stability of the United Kingdom. Giving the voters of England a fair say is the way to strengthen the Union after devolution. (1999b: 6).

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<sup>3</sup> The situation whereby Scottish MPs at Westminster were able to vote on legislation that only applied to England (or to England and Wales), whilst English and Welsh MPs enjoyed no such right over legislation that only applied to Scotland (as it had been devolved to the Scottish Parliament).

As Harris (2005: 137-140) summarises, Hague announced in his speech of 15<sup>th</sup> July 1999 that the options of creating an English parliament or slashing the number of Scottish MPs (to the effect that Scots would be underrepresented at Westminster) had been rejected. Elements of the localist proposal to devolve more powers to English councils were endorsed, but were not seen as an answer to the West Lothian Question as they did not rectify the imbalance of legislative devolution. The fourth option, of English votes for English laws was consequently adopted as Conservative Party policy. This was not viewed as an ideal solution. Hague had noted in 1998 that each of the four proposals under consideration had drawbacks, but that the party was merely seeking ‘the least damaging answer to the West Lothian Question’ (1998b: 14). The adoption of EvfEl did, however, usher in a prolonged period of policy stability in this area, and effectively marginalised debate on the issue within the parliamentary party. EvfEl featured in the form outlined by Hague in both the 2001 and 2005 Conservative election manifestos, with little detailed elaboration. For example the 2005 manifesto made just a two-sentence comment:

Now that exclusively Scottish matters are decided by the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, exclusively English matters should be decided in Westminster without the votes of MPs sitting for Scottish constituencies who are not accountable to English voters. We will act to ensure that English laws are decided by English votes. (Conservative Party, 2005: 22).

Harris asserts that under William Hague’s leadership, the Conservatives ‘remained a steadfastly unionist party’ (2005: 143). For example she quotes Michael Ancram, who said: ‘I believe that the Conservative Party is the unionist party and that we should never do anything that actually remotely is going to undermine the Union’; and Lord Strathclyde who stated that English nationalism: ‘is of no serious intellectual interest to Conservatives, who are a United Kingdom party’ (interviews in Harris, 2005: 142). More recently, David Cameron has similarly sought to display his unionist credentials, claiming that the Conservatives are ‘a party of the Union and as long as I lead it that is how it will stay’, and pledging to ‘carry out my duty to nurture and support the Union whatever my party’s political standing in any of the Union’s constituent parts’ (2007: 1).

However, although they may have been developed from a unionist perspective, the Conservative proposal for EvfEl has been widely criticised as potentially damaging to the

Union. Sue Stirling, for example, suggests that EvfEl is fundamentally unworkable, as it ‘raises the prospect of a UK government being unable to govern England, its largest constituent part’ (Stirling, 2007). From a rather different perspective, the Campaign for an English Parliament concedes that whilst it does address the West Lothian Question, EvfEl will lead to other difficulties. As well as pointing to the potential for confusion and even deadlock in the House of Commons, they also argue that ‘it will undermine the Union by undermining its Parliament’ (CEP, 2006: 11). Even the staunch Conservative loyalist Malcolm Rifkind suggested that:

The proposal on which the Conservative Party fought the last couple of general elections had identified the right problem but their solution was too crude. If you simply, without further elaboration, say English votes on English business, and whenever the House of Commons is discussing English business the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish will not vote, that does create two classes of MP. (Rifkind Interview).

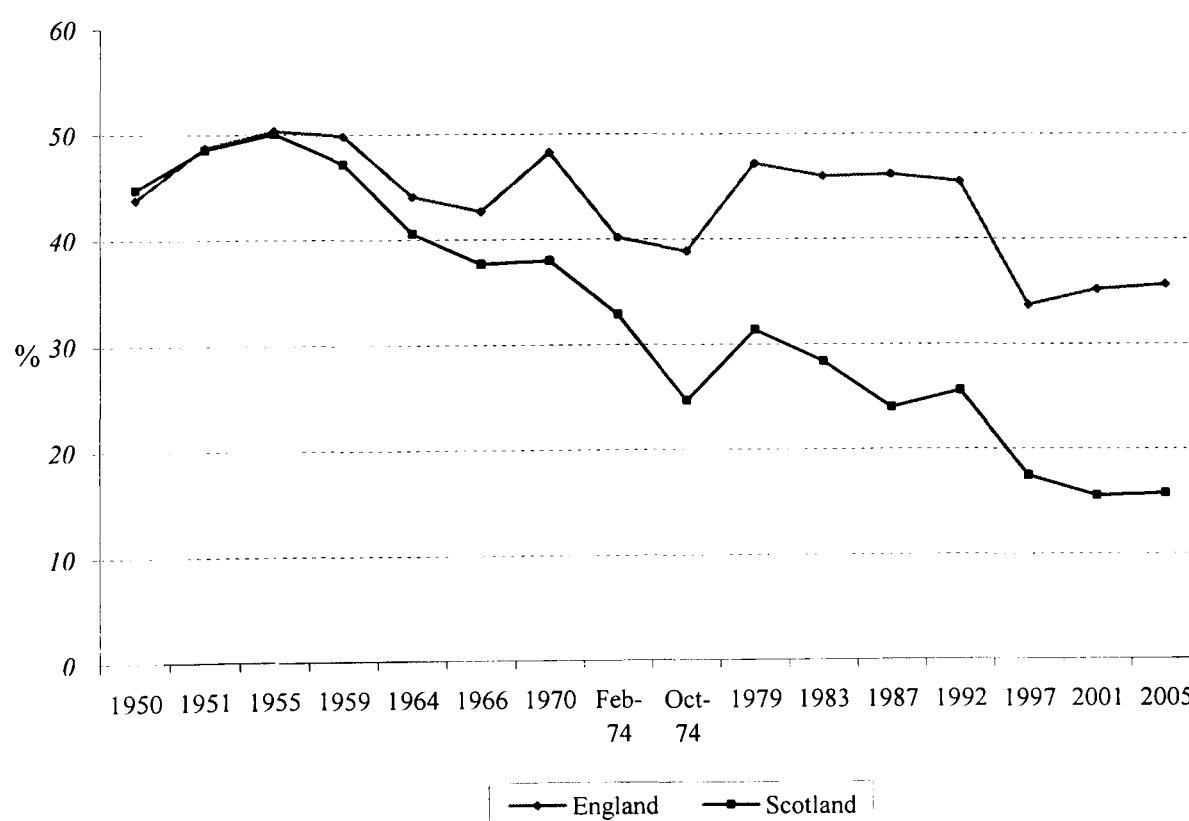
As an alternative to EvfEl, Rifkind proposes the creation of an English Grand Committee to consider ‘English only’ business. The House of Commons as a whole would then be bound by a convention (but not a law) to respect the wishes of the Grand Committee on such legislation. Rifkind also denies that Labour has been left as the sole voice of Britishness:

No that’s not true. The Conservative Party remains overwhelmingly a unionist party, totally committed to the union. What is however true, is that the Labour Party has a much greater party political interest in Scotland, and the Tory Party has a much greater party political interest in England. That’s simply where our strengths are. And therefore for the Labour Party to survive at the United Kingdom level, given that England is 85 percent of Britain, they are in a much more vulnerable position than we are. It is politically much more important for them to emphasise their Britishness, and their opposition to any change. Whereas the Tory Party, whether it’s Britain or England, will be likely to dominate the English scene for most of the time, so the Tory Party can afford to be more relaxed about that matter. It is also, in crude political terms, to the Tory Party’s advantage if a Labour government could not get its legislation through the House of Commons. It’s not impossible to have a Tory government with a minority in England, but it’s obviously highly unlikely. Now that’s not why I’m arguing what I’m arguing. I’m arguing for constitutional reasons to try to protect the future of the United Kingdom, but I have to acknowledge that my party would benefit and the Labour Party would lose out...

Some people argue that the kind of ideas that I have been putting forward, or indeed the Conservatives have been putting forward, will break-up the United Kingdom. It’s actually the other way round. (Rifkind Interview).

Whether Conservative policy does indeed contain ‘the seeds of the break-up of the Union’ (CEP, 2006: 16) or will help to save it as Rifkind suggests is open to contention. What is clear, however, is that the Conservative Parliamentary Party and leadership has remained broadly unionist. This needs to be explained, as a number of contextual factors would suggest that the Conservatives could have profited from adopting a less unionist, and more English-orientated position. Most visibly, the Conservatives have become an almost exclusively English party. In the 1997 landslide, they lost all eight of their seats in Scotland and all eleven of their seats in Wales. In Scotland their share of the vote was just 17.5 percent and in Wales 19.6 percent, compared to 33.7 percent in England (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997: 256). In 2001, they won just one seat in Scotland and none in Wales. By 2005 there had been little change to this picture. The Conservative vote in England was up to 35.7 percent, marginally ahead of Labour on 35.5 percent (although Labour won 92 more English seats). In Scotland however, the Conservatives languished in fourth place, with just 15.8 percent of the vote (although this did deliver one seat to Westminster). In Wales they finished second in terms of vote-share (with 21.4 percent) but fourth in terms of seats, winning only three (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005: 205).

*Figure 6.1: Conservative vote share at General Elections, 1950-2005*



*Source:* Data from Seawright (2002: 3) and Kavanagh and Butler (2005: 203-5).



This disastrous performance since 1997 is the culmination of longer-term trends (Figure 6.1). The Conservatives' share of the vote in England and Scotland began to deviate in the 1950s, with a significant gap appearing in the 1970s. Since 1983, the party has performed approximately twice as well in England compared to Scotland in terms of vote share. Seawright attributes this to a divergence between mainstream Scottish public opinion which moved to the left in the 1970s and Conservative Party ideology, which simultaneously swung to the right: 'The laissez-faire discourse gained ground in the party at the very time when the Scottish indigenous industrial base was facing an acute crisis of survival and it is not surprising that the Scots should have developed a taste for economic intervention' (Seawright, 2002: 4). The Conservatives were aware of this disparity and the potential electoral danger it posed, and contrary to popular belief, sought to shield Scotland from the full force of Thatcherite policies (Gamble, 2006: 27). As McLean and McMillan note, public spending levels in Scotland and England did not converge under Thatcher or Major, as:

Scotland continued to pose a credible threat to the Union, which any SNP resurgence would bring back to life. Conservative governments were particularly sensitive to this threat. Their Secretaries of State continued to protect Scotland from the full rigour of the Barnett formula until 1997. Secretaries of State Lang and (especially) Forsyth boasted about the spending differential in order to warn Scots that devolution would threaten it. (McLean and McMillan, 2003: 54).

Clearly however, this strategy failed to placate the Scottish electorate, as despite a small upturn in 1992, the Conservative vote in Scotland almost halved between 1979 (31.4 percent) and 1997 (17.5 percent). One explanation for this is, as the previous chapter noted, is that the Conservatives under Thatcher developed a more overtly English nationalist discourse (Gamble, 1996: 35).

Combined with the electoral logic, another clear reason for the Conservatives to embrace English nationalism post-1997 was that following the referendums in Scotland and Wales, the Conservatives could claim (as Hague did) that circumstances had fundamentally

changed in such a way that they could not be reversed, and that the party should therefore adapt, perhaps radically, to the new situation. Indeed, the idea of an English parliament was championed by the Conservative backbencher Teresa Gorman, who in late-1997, supported by David Davis and Eric Forth, introduced a Private Member's Bill proposing a referendum on the creation of such a body, but garnered little support (Harris, 2005: 131-2).

Such a move could also be seen as a consistent development of the Powellite themes of Thatcher's national strategy. Although Powell himself was an ardent unionist, devolution changed the nature of the British state and meant that his vision of national unity based around the supreme authority of Parliament could never be realised. Within England, however, it still might. Powell's biographer and intellectual disciple, Simon Heffer, has been the most forceful exponent of a Conservative Englishness. Heffer's self-proclaimed 'Toryism' has, at its heart, a concern with the nation. It is perhaps therefore surprising that his most prominent contribution to British politics has been his advocacy in recent years of English independence, particularly as he acknowledges that 'for much of the last three centuries, belief in nation was synonymous with a belief in the Union' (2005: 200). This seemingly un-conservative policy is his response to the rise of separatism in Scotland, and the acquiescence of the New Labour government in legislating for devolution shortly after its election in 1997. His call to break the Union, eloquently stated in *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England* (Heffer, 1999), is presented as a pragmatic reaction to this new political reality. For Heffer, the union with Scotland has long since lost its strategic importance to England: the benefits (particularly financial), run purely in one direction. 'It is hard to see what the English have to fear from fragmentation of the Union', as the loss of Scotland 'would only be a marginal loss to England, and no loss at all in economic terms' (1999: 12).

This political Englishness is most clearly linked to the constitutional changes in Scotland and Wales, but a growing commitment to Englishness, at least in cultural terms, pre-dated this legislation. Indeed, 'a new mood of English nationalism was discernible as far back as the early 1990s, and was gathering momentum well before New Labour came to power in

1997' (Kenny *et al.*, 2008: 3). Aughey traces this to 1996, when the swathe of St George's flags that accompanied the hosting of the European football championships 'helped to dispel the myth of the English being reserved and reluctant to engage in collective celebration' (2007: 1). It can also be seen in the upsurge of interest in, and writings about the history, sociology, and national character of the English.<sup>4</sup> This range of cultural reflections offers itself as a potential source of a new identity for Conservatives, particularly as their traditional appeal of a national ideal based on Empire, Union and anti-socialism appears increasingly irrelevant. However:

Despite the multiplicity of accounts of the English/British past that have been propounded from within the media and academy, English historical understanding remains tied to a remarkably selective set of (largely mythical) stories and icons. The recurrent mythology of the English destined to be an island race defined by hostility to rival European powers – with Nazi Germany playing the role filled since the late eighteenth century by Catholic France – remains remarkably prevalent; and totally ill-equipped as an intellectual template for a people seeking to come to terms with its status as one nation in a multi-national political structure. (Kenny *et al.*, 2008: 6).

The nature of these dominant themes of English nationalism, which fail to adequately reflect the varied sources of the new Englishness, have made the construction of a modern, inclusive, plural appeal based around it difficult for politicians of all parties. For the Conservatives, the only viable political Englishness available has been the rather hard-edged nationalism promulgated by Heffer, which comes with clear political risks. It is linked to a belligerent Euroscepticism and comes perilously close to becoming a race-based argument. By embracing it the Conservatives would risk becoming associated with what Cameron (2006b) has labelled 'sour Little Englanders', which could be distasteful to many voters and in party image terms an electorally foolish strategy. For Theresa May, to make themselves electable the Conservatives both needed to change their image and change the party 'in a deeper sense' (May Interview). She explains: 'it's a whole range of change. The image in terms of the sort of people we have as candidates is crucial, but that's also about tapping into the skills-set that is there beyond simply the stereotyped white male MP that the party has been used to having' (May Interview). The narrow

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<sup>4</sup> For example: Blunkett (2005); Bragg (2006); Heffer (1999); Hitchens (1999); Kumar (2003); Mandler (2006a); Marr (2000); Paxman (1998); Scruton (2000); Stapleton (2001); Weight (2002).

understanding of Englishness espoused by Conservative writers such as Roger Scruton (2000) and Simon Heffer (1999) offers a rather nostalgic and mono-cultural version of national identity, seemingly out of touch with twenty-first century British society.

Whilst they have shied away from outright little-Englander populism, the Conservatives have also struggled to articulate a convincing narrative of Britishness, or present themselves successfully as the party that embodies the British nation. The prevailing consensus in the party is effectively summarised by Michael Howard:

I don't want to turn the clock back on devolution; but I do, however, believe there should be English votes for English laws. I think that members of Parliament from Scotland shouldn't be able to vote on matters that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. So I look at each issue on its merits. I don't think that the things that I've suggested are a recipe for an English party, which I wouldn't like to see. We have three members in Wales and one in Scotland, and I'd like to see more of them, and I'm confident that we will at the next election. (Howard Interview).

Howard enunciates the mainstream Conservative view, which likes to see itself as addressing the English Question pragmatically, within a unionist framework. It is wary of presenting itself as an English party, for the reasons noted above. It thus prefers to maintain the position (in spite of the electoral mathematics) that it is a party of the whole of the UK. This identification is then partly a negative one – lacking a sufficiently palatable English-based identity, the Conservatives have attempted to maintain a British-based national appeal, even as the traditional Conservative understanding of Britishness appears to have been losing its relevance. In practical terms however, since devolution the Conservative Party in Scotland has become increasingly separate from the organisation in England, with effective operational and financial independence. ‘All that unites them with the London-based party is the brand-name’ and there have even been rumours that they are to be officially split (Nelson, 2007). Revealingly, the manifesto of the Scottish Conservatives for the 2007 Scottish Parliament election (Conservative Party, 2007a) made no mention of the Union, and mentioned the UK (or the United Kingdom) only twice in 39 pages. However, under Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard the Conservatives maintained a unionist position. The prospects for this changing are discussed below (section 6.4).

The new Englishness has implications beyond the constitutional question of the future of the Union and the nature of the relationship between England and Scotland. It also informs the broader issue of attitudes to English and British national identities. The Conservatives' uncertainties about what form these should take can be further revealed and explored through the examination of the politics of immigration and race.

### 6.3 Nationhood and the politics of immigration

*I don't wish to have what they call a multicultural society. I hate these phrases. Multicultural society! A multicultural society will never be a united society.*

Margaret Thatcher, 22 May 2001 (quoted in Walters, 2001: 174).

A patriotic attachment to nation and empire was the cornerstone of British conservatism for much of the twentieth century, and, as noted above, can be seen as one of the pillars of Conservative hegemony. However, the position of Britain as a great power was challenged by relative decline and the disintegration of empire, whilst the traditional view of Britishness was further brought into question by immigration from the New Commonwealth. As Lynch notes, 'The conservative nation is constructed around ideas of authority, patriotic allegiance, national character and the organic evolution of institutions, which sit uneasily with a plural society' (1999: 152). Immigration and race thus form an important part of the politics of nationhood, and have been at the heart of the debate about what the conservative nation should look like. However, the fervour of this debate in British politics has varied over time, both in terms of the level of public interest and the attention paid to it by politicians.

As Layton-Henry (1980: 50-52) notes, the legacy of empire is important not only as the source of Commonwealth migrants to Britain, but because the imperial ideal contributed to a reluctance amongst many Conservatives to restrict immigration. Empire placed obligations on the mother country, including the notion of common citizenship with a right to free movement and settlement. The reaction to the first wave of Commonwealth immigration 'was initially subdued', not least because it helped meet a serious labour

shortage, and it did not become an election issue in the 1950s (Layton-Henry, 1980: 52-55). However, public concern was on the increase: by 1961, polls showed 73 percent of the population in favour of immigration control, with just 6 percent in favour of continuing the open regime (Layton-Henry, 1980: 56). A series of nationality acts (1962, 1968 and 1971) followed, progressively tightening immigration controls. The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was justified by the Conservative government at the time on the grounds that 'Britain was a small island, in danger of becoming overcrowded' (Geddes, 2003: 33). However, the real reason for introducing the legislation, Geddes argues, was 'concerns about the "racial" character of some immigrants' (2003: 34). It was during this period that 'race card' politics emerged, as the Conservative Party gained an electoral advantage over Labour by being seen as tougher on immigration (Saggar, 2000: 174-183).

Concern that immigration was destroying the British way of life was voiced in apocalyptic tones by Enoch Powell in his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech in April 1968. Edward Heath immediately sacked Powell from the shadow cabinet, but it was clear that his views had resonated with a sizable proportion of both the Conservative Party membership and the electorate. Powell's campaign on immigration was 'in essence an opportunistic appeal to an ethnocentric nationalism' (Rich, 1986: 53), but his speech 'tapped the widespread popular frustration with the bipartisan approach to immigration and race relations which had existed since 1965' and consequently Powell and his views became 'a factor that the party leader could not ignore' (Layton-Henry, 1980: 62). The bipartisan consensus held at the 1970 general election, even though immigration was considered the fourth most important issue facing the country and opinion polls indicated the popular appeal of a tougher line (Layton-Henry, 1980: 63). Although his views were disowned by the party leadership Powell had a significant impact on the election, to the Conservatives' benefit (Saggar, 2000: 187).

The bipartisan accord on immigration was one of the victims of Thatcher's suspicion of consensus, and was abandoned in 1976 (Lynch, 1999: 134). Populist Powellite rhetoric was employed by Thatcher in the early years of her leadership. In an interview with Granada television in 1978, she expressed people's fears that indigenous culture was being

‘swamped’ by immigration, ‘echoing Powell’s belief that such prejudices were legitimate and had to be addressed’ (Lynch, 1999: 134). Here, the debate about the number of migrants was crucial. Thatcher argued that ‘if you want good race relations, you have got to allay people’s fears about immigration’. She went on:

We must hold out the clear prospect of an end to immigration because at the moment it is about between 45,000 and 50,000 people coming in a year. Now, I was brought up in a small town, 25,000. That would be two new towns a year and that is quite a lot. So, we do have to hold out the prospect of an end to immigration except, of course, for compassionate cases. (Thatcher, 1978).

The first Thatcher government did legislate to reduce immigration, introducing the British Nationality Act (1981) to tighten citizenship criteria. However, the Powellite rhetoric did not result in fully blown Powellite policy, and some immigration continued. ‘The most fervent imaginings of the anti-immigration lobby – repatriation and the dismantling of race relations legislation – never came to pass’ (Geddes, 2003: 37-38). After playing a significant role in the first Thatcher administration the issues of race and immigration subsided, as the party leadership decided to play them down (Layton-Henry, 1986: 73, 95-7). The effect of Thatcher’s first term was to depoliticise the issue, as ‘there was nowhere else for ostensibly liberal politicians to go and little scope for the racist extreme right to make a breakthrough... Both the rhetorical and physical limits of control appeared to have been reached’ (Geddes, 2003: 39-40). Thus, race questions were progressively marginalised, to the extent that in the 1987 general election, only 1 percent of voters regarded them as amongst the most important (Rich, 1998: 100). This trend was continued under Major. Some further restrictions on entry to the UK were introduced, particularly with regard to asylum seekers, whose numbers had markedly increased (Lynch, 1999: 140). In terms of political debate however, ‘it would be fair to conclude that the whole question of ethnic and race issues were put on hold in the Conservative Party under Major’ as other subjects, notably Europe, took centre stage (Rich, 1998: 103).

On becoming leader, Hague was keen to present himself as embodying a ‘fresh start’ for the Conservative Party (Chapter 4). One of his first (and most publicised) acts was to attend the Notting Hill Carnival, in a conscious effort to display his multi-cultural

credentials (Nadler, 2000: 212). For Alibhai-Brown, although much derided, this visit 'was a phenomenal act of support for multiculturalism and a first not only for the Tories, but for any of the main political parties' (2000: 26). This visit in many ways symbolizes the 'Fresh Conservatism' propounded by what Kelly labels 'Hague Mark I', and which was abandoned in favour of the more populist 'Common-sense Conservatism' by 'Hague Mark II' (Kelly, 2001: 197-203; Chapter 4). It also exposes the dilemma faced by the Conservatives since 1997: whether to try to rebuild electoral support with strong messages on populist 'core vote' issues, or whether to deliberately downplay such issues in an effort to demonstrate that Conservative Party has changed, and to allow space for a new narrative of conservatism to emerge. As Chapter 4 (pp. 85-91) discussed, Hague sided firmly with the traditionalist 'rockers' in mid-1999, in the light of the reaction to Lilley's Butler Memorial Lecture and the European election results. Central to this shift was Hague's message on Europe and the single currency, but it also involved more emphasis on appearing tough on asylum and immigration.

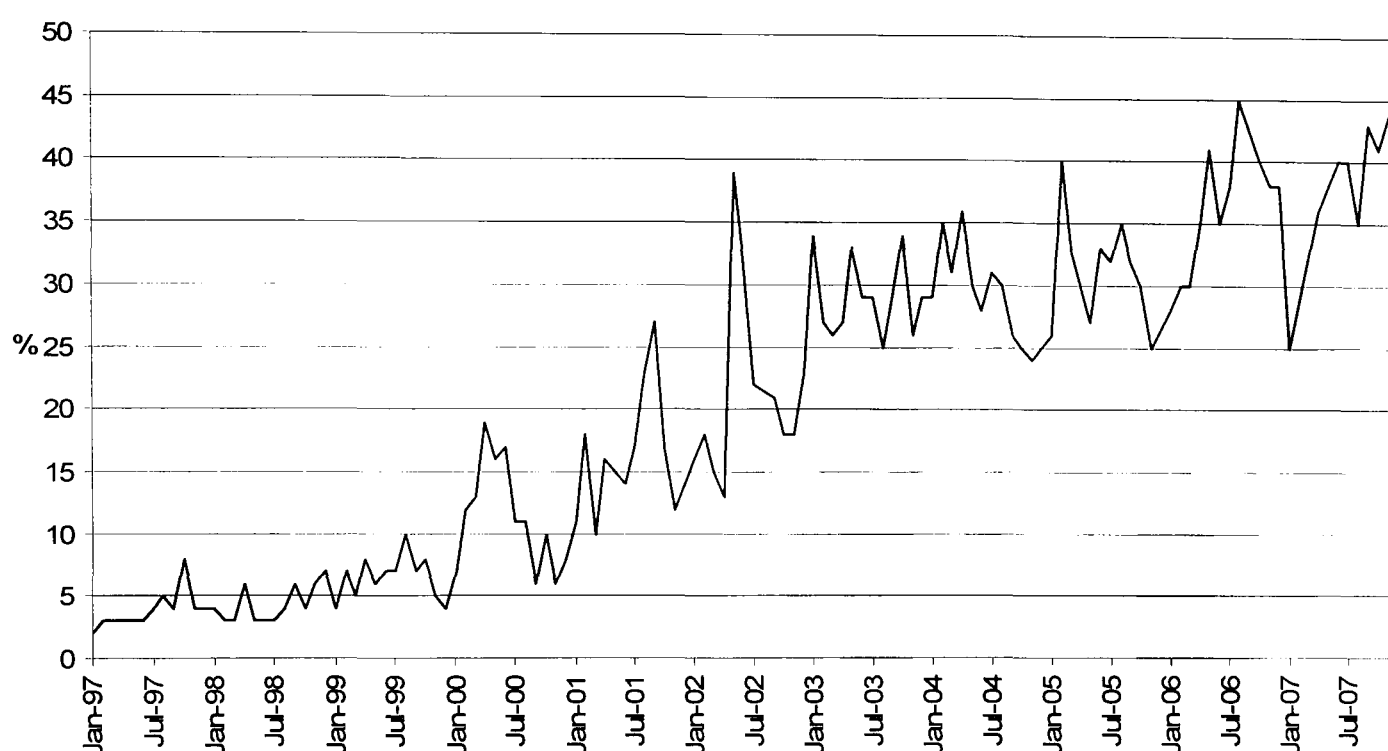
Was this a strategic mistake? In 1998, Rich argued that 'by the early 1990s the electorate appeared only marginally interested in the immigration issue, and appeared far more concerned about Europe', and as such, 'the debate over nationhood in Britain has not lived up to predictions that it would connect up with issues of race' (1998: 106). Similarly Lynch suggested that any attempt to play the race card would be unlikely to reap much electoral reward, as 'immigration does not have the electoral potency it had in the 1970s and a tougher Conservative line would further reduce the Conservatives' chances of increasing their support among ethnic minority voters' (Lynch, 1999: 153). As such, the major focus of debate and concern in the politics of nationhood, both in the Conservative Party and the wider public, has been on the issue of Europe, not immigration or race. The blurry amalgamation of the two issues was illustrated by the rhetoric of Hague's (2001) 'foreign land' speech, which was attacked by Gurbux Singh, the chairman of the Campaign for Racial Equality for undermining the fight against racial discrimination, but was 'spun' by party officials as an attack on the European Union (Walters, 2001: 147). Consequently, whereas a clear and unified Eurosceptic position had the potential to benefit the Conservatives electorally in the 1990s (Chapter 5; Evans, 1998), the same cannot be said



for immigration. However, the immigration issue was brought to the fore during the 2005 campaign, to the extent that it completely overshadowed European integration as the main focus of the politics of nationhood. It is therefore worth tracing its salience in order to discover to what extent this was a response to an upsurge in public interest and concern.

In April 2008, MORI (2008b) conducted an opinion poll of attitudes towards race and immigration to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. This found that 79 percent of the population regard themselves as 'not prejudiced at all' against people from other races. However, 58 percent of respondents agreed that 'parts of this country don't feel like Britain any more because of immigration', and 59 percent agreed that 'there are too many immigrants in Britain'. This figure has been relatively stable however, varying between 54 and 68 percent between 1989 and 2008. The idea that government should encourage immigrants to return to their country of origin was supported by 49 percent. Analysing data from the British social attitudes survey, Somerville suggests that 'the trend over the course of Labour's administration is one of rising resentment' as the proportion of the population believing the number of immigrants should be reduced has risen from approximately two-thirds to three-quarters (2007: 130). Polling evidence also shows that in recent years there has been a clear upsurge in the proportion of the population who regard immigration as one of the major issues facing the country (Figure 6.2).

*Figure 6.2: The Salience of Immigration to the British public, 1997-2007*



Percentage of respondents ranking race relations/immigration/immigrants amongst the most important political issues, based on data from *Ipsos Mori Political Monitor: Long Term Trends. The Most Important Issues Facing Britain Today*. Unprompted, combined answers to the questions: ‘What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?’ and ‘What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?’ [www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml) (MORI, 2008a).

Over the longer term, immigration has not been a major issue of public concern. MORI data on what people regard as the most important issues facing the country is available from September 1974. Concern with immigration was pronounced in the late 1970s, peaking with 27 percent naming it as an important issue in August 1978. It was 16 percent when Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street, but had dropped to 4 percent by the time of the 1983 general election. It rose again briefly in 1985, reaching 17 percent, but then declined and stayed below 10 percent until August 1999 (MORI, 2008a). As Figure 6.2 illustrates, since then the trend has been upward, not dropping below 10 percent since December 2000 or below 20 percent since November 2002. The figure peaked with 46 percent naming it as an important issue in December 2007, making it the issue of most concern that month, ahead of crime (37 percent) and the NHS (33 percent) (MORI, 2008a). The increased importance of immigration to the public can be seen in part as a response to rising net migration to the UK since 1997 (Table 6.1).

*Table 6.1: Immigration, emigration, and net migration from and to the UK, 1997-2005*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Immigration (000s)</i>	<i>Emigration (000s)</i>	<i>Net migration (000s)</i>
1997	326	279	+47
1998	390	251	+139
1999	454	291	+163
2000	483	321	+163
2001	480	308	+172
2002	513	359	+153
2003	513	362	+151
2004	582	359	+223
2005	565	380	+185

*Source:* Data from ONS (2008).

Conservative policy and rhetoric on immigration can be contextualised by these figures. Making it a major campaign issue at the May 2005 election, when the importance of the issue to the public had averaged 29.5 percent over the preceding two years, can be seen as a sound electoral calculation in response to public concern (by contrast in the two years prior to the June 2001 election, the figure was 10.5 percent). Indeed, Cowley and Green suggest that the Conservatives ‘had little choice’ but to focus heavily on immigration in 2005, as its salience had risen substantially whilst the Conservatives had maintained a clear lead over Labour as the best party on the issue (2005: 61). In April 2005, 52 percent of voters named the Conservatives as the party with the best policies on asylum and immigration, whilst just 11 percent selected Labour (MORI, 2008c). Consequently, ‘by focussing on this issue the Conservatives’ strategy was consistent with salience theory: to raise the salience of your own issue strengths and neutralise or downplay the strengths of your opponent’ (Cowley & Green, 2005: 62). The Conservatives also hoped that their tough policies and rhetoric would prevent them being outflanked by UKIP, whose voters tended to be concerned about immigration (Cowley & Green, 2005: 62). In Bercow’s view this was Howard’s strategy: ‘I think he thought he would try to neutralise our disadvantages on the public services and show that we were reasonable. and then get on to the “red meat” of taxation, crime and immigration’. He recalled how at a meeting of the 1922 committee about six months into his leadership, Howard ‘said that he thought that he had addressed those issues and that the time had come “to move onto potentially fruitful

territory for the Conservative Party” namely taxation, immigration and Europe. That was a mistake’ (Bercow Interview).

As Bercow implies, the apparent logic of Howard’s strategy has to be weighed against the wider implications of it, particularly the risk that it reinforced negative aspects of the party’s image, the problem captured in Theresa May’s comment that the Conservatives are seen as the ‘nasty party’ (Chapter 4). Iain Duncan Smith explained how for the Conservatives this could be a difficult issue to handle during elections, and how he had sought to manage it as leader:

We had made a clear policy position on this, but we hadn’t banged-on about it. Immigration came up, asylum came up, but I always felt that it was one of those subject areas that during an election campaign could probably bear two or three days, but you need to move on after that, because after that it just gets nasty. You can do it objectively and with a certain amount of decency when you launch reasons why it has gone wrong, what you would do in its place, you can talk about that - that would last 2 or 3 days. (Duncan Smith Interview).

Commenting on the 2005 election campaign, he noted that ‘We got terribly bogged-down with asylum and immigration, which was a mistake’ (Duncan Smith Interview). He suggested that under his successor the party had handled the issue poorly and let it get out of control, and that this had damaged public perceptions of the party:

What happened was, I think they lost control of the process. I think there was a prisoner who was an asylum seeker who was released and who had stabbed someone to death, and during the election campaign it all came out. At that point I felt there was a crossroads, a fork in the road: you can either go off down the crime issue, or you could continue down the asylum road. And whether they chose to or not we ended-up going down the asylum road, and that meant that probably for the next week we were stuck in this rut. It’s not that I don’t think asylum is important, it is important because you need to be able to demonstrate to the public that you are in control, and that these sort of things are not being forgotten about, because they worry about them particularly, and it’s a difficult area that can lead to lots of problems. So having clear policies at that stage would always be a blessing, and you will then be able to focus on how you will resolve them, but then you move on. If you get into that subject for too long it just confirms lots of opinions about you and makes you feel a touch uneasy. So there’s nothing wrong with the subject, it’s quite legitimate to deal with it. It’s quite legitimate for a government or a would-be government to raise it as an issue during the course of a campaign, but you need to do it in the wider context of elections and governing generally. (Duncan Smith Interview).

Duncan Smith's efforts to stop the Conservatives 'banging-on' about immigration were part of a more general strategy to challenge people's preconceptions about the party by downplaying issues traditionally associated with the core-vote, and to move into new territory. As he commented:

I made an edict, 'I will not speak about Europe'... We didn't talk about immigration for a good year while I was there. I think it was about a year, maybe slightly less, when we had an issue on Sangatte, the camp in France. So immigration wasn't really talked about either. We didn't talk about tax at that stage, well, we didn't talk about tax reductions – we were going to talk about that later. So all-in-all I think we did keep off the main subjects, I hate the phrase dog-whistle too, by the way. So we didn't talk about those subjects, because I knew what people knew about us on those subjects, and I didn't think there was any need. What they needed to understand was that there was something wider about us, something bigger, so that's why we stayed off them. David Cameron seems to be pursuing much the same strategy now, which is a good thing. (Duncan Smith Interview).

As Chapter 4 discussed, this strategy failed, due to his poor leadership skills and inability to manage the party and therefore present his agenda in a disciplined and coherent manner. Pursued successfully however, Duncan Smith's approach may have avoided some of the pitfalls encountered by his successor. According to Peter Lilley, a particular problem faced by Michael Howard was that his policy on immigration, whilst popular, was viewed cynically by the electorate. Lilley explained: 'partly because he [Howard] was only there towards the end, there was a feeling that everything was opportunist. Immigration policy seemed to be opportunist, although about 70 percent of the population agreed with it, about 20 percent thought he would do it' (Lilley Interview).

For Ann Widdecombe, the way in which immigration came to dominate the 2005 campaign was symptomatic of a wider problem, as the public were no longer sure, beyond this issue, what the Conservatives actually stood for:

If you asked people in the 1980s 'what do Conservatives stand for?' – the very simplistic. the ones who wouldn't go into great political theory would say: grammar schools, as opposed to comprehensives; small businesses, as opposed to vast state monopolies; lower tax. They would have a series of things that they associated in their minds with the Conservatives. Now I challenge anybody today to tell me even in the most prosaic terms a series of six things which they associate with the Conservatives. They would probably say immigration control, I doubt if they could say anything after that. (Widdecombe Interview).

This partly reflects the role of the media in setting the agenda, particularly during general election campaigns, but that is something that the party leadership must respond to:

You cannot stop, in the end, the media homing in on whatever it wants to home in on. You can call a press conference on one thing, but if all they want to talk about is another, that is what will be reported. And I think Michael [Howard] was in that bind, William [Hague] was in that bind. (Widdecombe Interview).

Michael Howard denied that it was a mistake for the Conservatives to campaign on immigration, and dismissed the characterisation of the 2005 campaign as one that concentrated almost exclusively on core-vote issues (particularly immigration). He did, however, acknowledge the role of the media in shaping which of the Conservatives' messages were communicated most forcefully to the electorate:

It is not a fair characterisation at all. It's quite ridiculous to suppose that the only people who are interested in immigration are core Conservative voters. Very many people were concerned about immigration, and I think that it was right that we responded to those concerns and put forward sensible policies to deal with that problem, which was out of control, as we have seen very vividly in recent weeks. It was only one of our five themes. I think the media gave it disproportionate attention, but I only devoted one press conference to immigration, although of course I was asked a great deal about it in various interviews that I did.

... So I think the characterisation that you put to me is completely unfair, and for all those reasons I don't think it was a mistake. (Howard Interview).

In this sense, Howard conceded that he was caught in something of a bind, as Widdecombe suggests. He noted that:

I didn't think that I had much alternative but to respond to questions that were put to me, and it was part of our campaign, and I didn't want to pretend that it wasn't. If I had attempted to deflect questions on immigration I can see the headlines the next day saying 'Howard backtracks on immigration'. I didn't want to have those kinds of headlines; I didn't want to backtrack on immigration. I believed in the policies we were putting forward. It was one of our five key points. But only one of them. You can't control the extent to which the media highlight one or other of the key messages that you are trying to put forward. (Howard Interview).

The only way out of this difficulty, Widdecombe argues, is to forge a clearer alternative image of your party over a much longer period. If the 'nasty party' image could be dispelled, the Conservatives would be able to talk about issues such as immigration during

election campaigns without reviving voters' negative preconceptions about the party. This, in essence, was what Duncan Smith tried but failed to do whilst leader, and what Cameron appears to be doing rather more successfully:

What David [Cameron] has tried to do, which I actually think is quite clever, is he's tried to set mood music. He's talked about things like the environment, and a whole load of other stuff, so that when the time quite inevitably comes, as it will before the next party conference, when we have to set out what I suspect will be quite tough policies on things like law and order, health, immigration, the things that we can't ignore come the election; when we have to set out those policies, nobody will ever be able to say this is all the Tories talk about. He could come out now with the toughest policy ever seen on immigration, but nobody would say that is all the Tories talk about, because he has actually spent a couple of years talking about other things. It has been clever, and it has set a different kind of mood music, the crucial test will be when we have to come out with the other stuff. He analysed correctly what had happened in 2001 and 2005, which is that the press control the agenda during an election, therefore set your agenda before it. (Widdecombe Interview).

With just 18 months as party leader before the general election, Howard's opportunity to change the 'mood music' and set the agenda was more limited than that enjoyed by Cameron. He could have chosen to continue Duncan Smith's strategy (namely his focus on public services and social justice, and relative silence on 'core vote' issues) which if implemented successfully may have altered the electorate's impression of the Conservatives. However, he saw his priorities as imposing discipline and making the party appear credible (Chapter 5: 123), two things that had been lacking under his predecessor.

One source of indiscipline under Duncan Smith was that a large section of the party was unconvinced by his strategy. Therefore for Howard, the easiest way to rapidly create the appearance of a united and disciplined party was to offer clear leadership on familiar Conservative themes. To do otherwise was to risk appearing implausible to both the public and his party: as he candidly admitted, he probably was not 'the best person to convince the country that the Conservative Party had changed' (Howard, interview in Portillo, 2008). Moreover, he was 'ambivalent' about modernisation, and in his own words conceded that: 'I didn't feel that I could really be true to myself and present an appeal to the country based on the fact that the Conservative Party had changed' (Howard, interview in Portillo, 2008). Howard thus calculated that to shun issues such as immigration would not only mean that the Conservatives were passing up the opportunity to capitalise on high

saliency issues on which they had a clear lead over Labour, but would also breed public suspicion. As he commented: ‘I was very reluctant not to talk about things which I thought were very important to people. I didn’t stop talking about Europe or crime or immigration, and I think that if I had people would have realised I wasn’t being true to myself’ (Howard, interview in Portillo, 2008).

If the prominent role of immigration in the 2005 Conservative campaign can be understood as a strategic calculation consistent with saliency theory, how can its role in 2001 be accounted for, when its saliency was substantially lower? As previously noted, race and immigration issues played much less of a role in the 2001 campaign, when it was very much secondary to Europe in the politics of nationhood. As Somerville comments, in 2001 both Labour and the Conservatives ‘were virtually silent on immigration’ although asylum policy did receive some attention (2007: 127). When asylum was discussed by the Conservatives, the language used emphasised their tough approach. The 2001 manifesto pledged to end the ‘chaos’ in the asylum system by interning all asylum seekers in reception centres, and blamed the government for giving Britain ‘a reputation as a soft touch for bogus asylum seekers’ (Conservative Party, 2001: 31). This language was echoed by Hague (2001) in his ‘foreign land’ speech, when he claimed that his policy was ‘not bigotry’ but ‘plain common sense’ and reflected the wishes of the people. The Party Chairman at the 2001 election, Michael Ancram, also argued that the Conservative campaign agenda reflected public concerns, particularly those communicated to the party via focus groups:

When the election came we talked about immigration, we talked about asylum, we talked about Europe and saving the pound. Immigration and asylum we largely talked about because every time we asked our focus groups – we were flat-lining in the polls, and we kept on saying to our focus groups what should we be talking about? Guess what they said? Immigration and asylum. Over, and over, and over again. If I was Party Chairman now, I would junk focus groups, because it turned out they were wrong. I’m afraid the present administration of the Conservative Party has gone back to them, which makes me nervous! Focus groups are not necessarily the best test of public opinion. (Ancram Interview).

Ancram also identified a wider problem at the 2001 election, namely that people were not interested in listening to Conservative messages on other issues, particularly public services. As he states:



There was another problem, which was that the electorate were comfortable and simply didn't want to listen. The biggest expenditure I had as Chairman in the run-up to the 2001 election was a series of posters which said: 'You've paid your taxes, where are the nurses, you've paid your taxes, where are the police?' And those were not, what you have just identified as the core issues, and we had them plastered all over the country for two months, and we didn't get a single move in the polls from that. So when it got to the election in a sense we were trying to find anything that was going to shift what was a very rigid political situation, not because people were determined not to move, but there was an inertia, they were comfortable, so anything that was going to make them sit up a bit. (Ancram Interview).

This frank admission that the Conservatives were fumbling around in a rather desperate search for anything that would grab public attention encapsulates the inconsistent and incoherent nature of party strategy for much of this period, as well as the rather disjointed approach to the issue of immigration. Since 1997 Conservative policy and rhetoric on race, asylum and immigration issues has at times been contradictory, and has not demonstrated a clear and consistent approach to the politics of nationhood, being driven by short term electoral strategies and calculations, which themselves have been disputed within Conservative ranks. The next section considers the identity question more broadly, by considering whether the issues under review here (devolution and immigration) show whether the Conservatives have become a party of English (rather than British) nationalism over the past decade.

#### **6.4 An English Party? The Conservatives and the politics of nationhood since 1997**

On both the constitutional question of the future of the post-devolution Union, and the cultural question of immigration and national identity, the Conservatives' approach to the politics of nationhood since 1997 has been mixed. In respect of both issues, the party has appeared unsure whether to seek to exploit them in the hope of gaining political advantage over their opponents, or to downplay them to reduce their political temperature. This reflects the absence of a dominant, coherent view of national identity in contemporary Conservative thought to provide clear answers to these policy questions.

The lack of such a perspective is perhaps unsurprising. The traditional Conservative view of Britishness and the state has been brought into question by contextual factors largely

beyond their control, and in some cases (notably devolution) which they fought vigorously, albeit unsuccessfully, against. The numerous reports of the death of Britain may have been exaggerated, but it is undoubtedly the case that a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors have undermined the traditions, values and beliefs associated with Britishness for much of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Writing in 1995, Philip Dodd saw British identity as ‘in turmoil’ (1995: 5). Five years later, Alibhai-Brown noted that: ‘Over the latter half of the twentieth century there has been a considerable weakening of the most abiding myths which have created this sense of nationhood in Britain’ (2000: 27). As both authors note, this occurred despite the efforts of Mrs Thatcher to resist this trend and hold on to the traditional pillars of the Conservative nation.

The Conservatives’ conception of nationhood is an important one for their identity as a party, and has also been a primary aspect of their electoral appeal. However, as the traditional view of Britishness has weakened, so has the Conservative appeal that was built around it. As discussed in the context of devolution above, one distinctively Conservative narrative of nationhood has offered itself as a potential response to these changed circumstances. However, to declare Britishness and the United Kingdom as defunct and embrace English nationalism in the way that Heffer (1999) has suggested would involve a number of pitfalls. It would provide a clear-cut conception of national identity across the issues of Europe, the Union, and immigration and race, but as Cameron (2006b) and other Conservatives have recognised, carries with it the risk that it would have only a narrow appeal and damage the image of the party. This dilemma is neatly summarised by Lynch (1999: 168):

Pragmatic moves towards a reforming, pro-European centre ground would have political benefits and mark a development of themes evident in an earlier Conservative national strategy: but it would erode the distinctiveness of the Conservative politics of nationhood. Alternatively, further moves in the direction of a nationalist strategy built around Euroscepticism and English nationalism would establish a clear Conservative vision of the nation-state and national identity, but would consign the party to a reactive and outdated view of the nation-state and might allow Labour to establish predominance in the politics of nationhood.

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<sup>5</sup> On the ‘death’, ‘abolition’ and/or ‘break-up’ of Britain, see: Nairn (1981); Preston (1994); Haseler (1996); Redwood (1999); Hitchens (1999); Marr (2000); Scruton (2000); Weight (2002).

This latter approach would be consistent with the ideological trajectory set by Thatcherism, and the party has moved partway there by embedding a solidly Eurosceptic position (Chapter 5). However, it is perhaps a slightly unfair caricature to suggest that the Conservatives have ‘progressively ceased to be a Unionist Party of the whole of the United Kingdom and become instead largely a party of English nationalism’ (Rich, 1998: 97). Ironically, Mrs Thatcher’s vigorous nationalism, pursued in the name of Britain against ‘threats’ such as Europe, Argentina, and devolution, actually helped to fertilise Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and took on an English nationalist character. It is also true that the reforming zeal of her administration and that of her successor radically reshaped the British state, and in the process ‘massively undermined the principal remaining props of Britishness: the National Health Service, state education, trade unionism, British Rail, the Post Office, the BBC and the nationalized industries’ (Kumar, 2003: 264). Further to this, in terms of its geographical representation the trend since 1997 has continued the drift towards becoming an English party. As Weight noted, the 1997 election result meant that ‘the Conservatives were now truly the party of One Nation – England’ (2002: 721). However, the analysis of both case-study areas in this chapter demonstrates the reluctance of the party to embrace fully the English nationalist position, although at times (perhaps out of desperation, and for want of better alternatives) the party has sought to exploit it. At the 2001 general election, for example, the ‘race card’ appeared opportunistically on the political scene (Saggar, 2001). As Clarke commented, ‘When it became obvious we weren’t going to win the election, they kind of panicked, and decided that we’d better start “blowing the dog whistles” and getting the core vote back’ (interview in Portillo, 2008).

The Conservative approach to Englishness and Britishness has become entangled with the wider debate over how to reinvigorate the party’s electoral appeal. The message of ‘change’ that David Cameron wishes to promote requires a new identity for the party, and this sits uneasily with the sectional appeal of English nationalism. This was recognised by the party leadership before Cameron: witness Hague’s early attempts to embrace multiculturalism; Duncan Smith’s attempt to move away from core vote issues such as immigration; and the willingness of senior figures such as Michael Portillo and Kenneth Clarke to question the electoral sense of the tone taken on asylum during the 2001 election

campaign (Saggar, 2001: 767). As William Hague recently noted, the Conservatives needed a new identity to persuade the electorate that they had really changed, the problem was presenting one convincingly:

Clearly people found that this was not a believable thing about the Conservative Party. The leader who went to the Notting Hill Carnival wasn't believable. That the Conservative Party was open to ethnic minorities, and that we were genuinely young – there must be something phoney about this, some pretence. And so that did make it quite hard to carry on with a 'change' message. (Hague, interview in Portillo, 2008).

The difficulty of appearing credible whilst presenting a message of change was also recognised by Michael Howard (above), and used to justify his focus on more traditional Conservative messages at the 2005 election. This dilemma, and the awareness of it amongst the party leadership, illustrates why the party has not pursued one approach to the politics of nationhood consistently over the past decade, but has offered contradictory messages at different times. David Cameron has, so far, been more successful than his three predecessors in consistently pursuing a message of change and modernisation of the party, and presenting it credibly. His major advantage in this regard is that after three heavy election defeats both the parliamentary party and the wider membership is more easily persuadable of the importance of changing its image, messages, and strategy. After all, by his own admission, Howard had 'tested the alternative theory to destruction in the 2005 election, and lost!' (interview in Portillo, 2008). As Michael Portillo dryly observed: 'maybe even the Conservative Party reacts after three defeats' (Portillo Interview). However, as he also noted, the 2005 leadership election did not demonstrate that even then the parliamentary party was wholly convinced of the need to radically alter course: 'I observe that more members of parliament voted against David Cameron than voted for him. There were two candidates who were no-change candidates and one candidate who was a change candidate – more people voted no-change than change, even in 2005' (Portillo Interview).

Cameron has been able to sustain his modernising agenda and mute criticism from sceptics in his own party as under his leadership the Conservatives have performed relatively well in the opinion polls and in local elections. Without these indicators of success, his project

may well have foundered. In terms of the politics of nationhood, the challenge for Cameron has been to articulate a vision of national identity that supports his agenda of presenting the Conservative Party as modern, inclusive, and best placed to solve contemporary social and economic problems. However, this has mainly involved a change of language, tone, and rhetoric, rather than any substantial shift in policies. For example Cameron has expressed his faith in the future of the Union not only as a constitutional arrangement, but ‘as something much deeper’ which embodies ‘the bonds of kinship and the strength of our individual, and community, relationships which span the border’ (Cameron, 2007b). However, he looks likely to enter the next general election with a manifesto pledge to introduce some form of English votes for English laws, as he is also committed to resolving the West Lothian Question. As he commented:

We cannot ignore the asymmetrical nature of the situation in which Scottish MPs may vote on legislation that affects England, but neither they nor English MPs can vote on subjects that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The answer is not a separate English parliament, with more politicians spending more taxpayers' money. Instead, we need a balanced approach that ensures that MPs for English constituencies have the final say on issues that only affect England. (Cameron, 2007b).

The precise mechanism to be adopted has yet to be announced, and is being reviewed under the auspices of Kenneth Clarke’s Democracy Taskforce, but the parameters have been set. Clarke recently commented that the current constitutional arrangements may lead to nationalistic English resentment towards Scotland, and that he ‘would like to nip that in the bud by some sensible constitutional minor change, in my opinion, to finish the business of devolution’. To do this, a means to tackle the ‘niggle that sometimes English matters are settled against the majority votes of the English MPs’ is required (HC 75, 2008). To preclude this possibility from occurring again in the future would necessitate some way of preventing Scottish MPs from voting on English-only legislation at some point in its passage: fundamentally the same policy (perhaps more subtly implemented) as that adopted by the Conservative Party under Hague in 1999.

On immigration too Cameron has changed Conservative language, tone, and presentation, but made no significant changes to the policy the party took into the 2005 election. The 2005 manifesto pledged to introduce 24-hour surveillance at ports and create a Border

Police Force; implement a points-based system for work permits; withdraw from the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees; and ‘set an overall annual limit on the numbers coming to Britain’ (Conservative Party, 2005: 19). The actual limit was not specified, but was to be set annually by Parliament. For Portillo this was ‘the most narrow-minded, nationalistic manifesto and agenda of all time – written by David Cameron. But I assume, that even then he knew it was all rubbish in terms of being completely the wrong way to go’ (Portillo Interview). However, with the exception of withdrawal from the Geneva Convention, where current policy remains unclear, this is essentially still the Conservatives’ policy position. Cameron has not disguised this, arguing in a speech on ‘the challenges of a growing population’ that:

Non-EU migration, excluding British citizens returning to live here, accounts for nearly seventy per cent of all immigration. Of course overall non-EU migration includes asylum seekers, students and family members as well as economic migrants. But non-EU economic migration is something we can and should limit, and I cannot understand why this government has not done so... we need explicit annual limits on non-EU economic migration, set at a level substantially lower than the current rate. Enforcing such controls, and preventing illegal immigration, requires a proper Border Police Force, equipped with powers to track down immigrants who over-stay or illegally enter the country. (Cameron, 2007c).

A policy document written by the Shadow Home Secretary, David Davis, and the Shadow Immigration Minister, Damian Green, outlines these policies and predicts that if implemented, immigration would ‘be significantly less than current levels from the rest of the world outside the EU’ (Davis & Green, 2006: 4). However, Cameron has generally used more positive language than his predecessor when discussing immigration, for example emphasizing the ‘many benefits’ of immigration, and that ‘Britain has so much to gain from being open to the world’ (Cameron, 2007c). The Conservatives have also steered the language they use when discussing immigration firmly away from any notion of race or national identity. Rather it is now an issue of the ‘general well-being’ of society, meaning that consideration of ‘the various social and environmental pressures that rapid population growth can bring’ must underpin policy (Cameron, 2007c). Controlling immigration thus becomes just one element of the Conservatives’ agenda to mend Britain’s ‘broken society’ encompassing issues such as family breakdown and social exclusion (Jones, 2007). As Cameron argues:

Our current level of population growth and atomisation is unsustainable. Immigration is too high. Family breakdown is too high. Unsustainable demographic change makes it harder to build the opportunity society I want to see, where young people can get on the housing ladder and where everyone has more power over their own lives. It makes it harder to build the responsible society I want to see, with strong families, communities and public services. And it makes it harder to build the secure society I want to see, with our quality of life and our environment protected in equal measure. (Cameron, 2007c).

Cameron has thus sought to associate the Conservative Party with an inclusive national identity based on the Union and disassociate immigration from the identity debate. Other factors, however, may continue to push the Conservatives further towards becoming an English party. Most obviously, the popularity of the SNP administration in Scotland increases the possibility of the Scots voting to leave the Union. Ironically, the Conservative electoral revival in England may increase the chances of a Scottish vote for independence, as the nationalists might seek to portray it as a referendum on the return of Tory rule. If a future Conservative government were to introduce some form of English votes for English laws, the chaotic situation which could result – of a government with legislative responsibility for England but unable to command support amongst a majority of English MPs – might also add to the pressure for a separation (Hayton & Kenny, 2008).

## 6.5 Conclusion

Beneath the political debates, the broader cultural trend of the emergence of a stronger felt and more clearly defined sense of Englishness looks unlikely to abate (Kenny *et al.*, 2008). This chapter demonstrates how party strategy is embedded in, and needs to be responsive to, these contextual factors. The challenge for the Conservatives in the early twenty-first century is to find a way to engage with this growing sense of English identity in a pluralistic and inclusive manner, which does not limit the party's electoral appeal by drawing on the exclusivist Powellite English nationalism that currently permeates much of this discourse on the right. Such a treatise need not be incompatible with unionism, or a form of Britishness shorn of its imperial past. However, the chapter has also highlighted the way in which the effect of the ideological legacy of Thatcherism is to pull conservatism in the Powellite direction, whilst statecraft favours a more moderate Britishness.

Examining this question in relation to two key policy areas, devolution and immigration, demonstrated how these ideological debates impact upon the formulation of party strategy. These two issues indicate that party leaders do not face simple choices between optimal electoral strategies and an 'ideological' path. Ideology is not crudely juxtaposed with electoral concerns, acting as an obstacle to moving towards the position of the median voter, but is an integral feature of the way in which actors understand their context and seek to develop strategies. The question of whether the Conservatives should reposition themselves as an overtly English party is a classic example of this. The party leadership demonstrated uncertainty and disagreement over whether this would be an electorally beneficial strategy, and consequently vacillated over its approach. However, this variance of opinion was not merely about electoral calculation, but also reflected ideological differences. For example, some of the most forceful exponents of the electoral benefits of fully embracing an English identity (such as Heffer, 1999) are clearly ideologically motivated. The eventual Conservative position on devolution and the West Lothian Question – proposing EfvEl in an effort to assuage perceived English concerns, but presented in a unionist discourse – surely reflects the history, ideology and tradition of the Conservative Party as a unionist party as much as electoral reckoning. As Wellings has argued, English Conservatives are 'instinctively British' (2007: 398). Devolution, for them, is thus another reason to defend the British state, rather than to embrace English nationalism.

Ideology therefore plays an important role in the interpretation of the electoral context, and consequently in the strategies pursued. As a key site of ideological difference in contemporary conservatism, the national identity question demonstrates how the debate about such issues can impact on leadership strategies, illustrating their complexity, and the difficulties caused to the party by a lack of a coherent conception of nationhood.



## Chapter 7

### A New Moral Agenda?

*Just as I felt that the party was beginning to relax over the European issue it decided to have an explosive internal row about something else.*

John Redwood MP (2004: 143).

#### 7.1 Introduction

A widely accepted and often repeated belief, both amongst Conservatives and many of their critics, is that on the issue of the economy the Conservatives have been victorious in the ‘battle of ideas’. The case for the free market over statist socialist planning has been comprehensively demonstrated, they argue, by the failure of Keynesianism and the success of Thatcher’s economic revolution, a success vindicated at the polls by four Conservative election victories and the emergence of New Labour. Whilst enjoying the taste of this triumph, some Conservatives actually see it as the root cause of their electoral problems. They are the victims of their own success: by forcing Labour to accept their agenda, they have created a new consensus and neutralised one of the most compelling reasons for voting Conservative. Indeed, after the collapse of the Conservatives’ reputation for economic competence after ‘Black Wednesday’ in September 1992, Labour were able to argue that they are the party best able to manage the economy, and polls have until recently demonstrated that the public believe this to be the case.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after becoming party leader, David Cameron acknowledged this problem, claiming:

We knew how to rescue Britain from Old Labour. We knew how to win the battle of ideas with Old Labour. We did not know how to deal with our own victory in that battle of ideas. That victory left us with an identity crisis. Having defined ourselves for many years as the anti-socialist Party, how were we to define ourselves once full-blooded socialism had disappeared from the political landscape? (Cameron, 2006).

The consequence of this difficulty, Cameron argued, was that ‘as Labour moved towards the centre ground, the Conservative Party moved to the right. Instead of focusing on the

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<sup>1</sup> In March 2008, ICM found that the Conservatives (40 percent) led Labour (32 percent) as the best party on the economy (*The Guardian*, 2008).

areas where we now agreed with Labour on our aims... we ended up focusing on those areas where we didn't agree'. The Conservatives in opposition therefore emphasised taxation, immigration, and Europe as areas of policy difference from Labour, but this left them lacking a clear message on the 'common ground' of British politics, namely Blair's agenda of 'social justice and economic efficiency' (Cameron, 2006).

Cameron claims that under his leadership the Conservatives 'have at last come to terms with our own victory in the battle of ideas', presenting the opportunity to combine this triumph and the preservation of its fruits with 'the resolution of the social problems which were left unresolved at the end of our time in government' and which Labour has also failed to cure (Cameron, 2006). To this end, Cameron has spoken of the need to mend Britain's 'broken society', citing problems such as poverty, drug abuse, debt, family breakdown and educational failure (Jones, 2007). This chapter will explore the extent to which this agenda of social rather than economic reform now offers fertile terrain for a Conservative electoral revival. It will examine party policy and rhetoric on social and moral issues since 1997, particularly gay rights and family policy. It will consider whether the key dividing line within the Conservative Party is no longer between Eurosceptics and Europhiles, but between social liberals and traditionalists. How this division has informed the strategies of Hague, Duncan Smith, and Howard and the debate over modernisation will be explored. The chapter will end with an assessment of Cameron's claim that the Conservatives have come to terms with this dilemma, and evaluate whether his efforts to appear socially liberal whilst also emphasising the centrality of family policy constitute a distinctively Conservative answer to it.

## **7.2 Mods and Rockers: Conservative divisions over social and moral issues**

In an effort to map the ideological composition of contemporary conservatism and explain ideological discord within the Conservative Party a number of different typologies have been developed. These have highlighted divisions between 'wets' and 'dries' on economic policy and conflict between Europhiles and Eurosceptics (Heppell & Hill, 2005). For Heppell and Hill, Europe and economic policy are 'the two most significant ideological

policy divides' (2005: 347). However, Heppell's (2002) model also mapped the 'social, sexual and moral policy divide', distinguishing social liberals from social conservatives to create a three-dimensional typology (2002: 312). Social and moral issues have long been of concern to Conservatives, and form a distinctive aspect of conservatism. The notion that positioning on such issues is an important divide for Conservatives is an increasingly prevalent one, linked to the need to develop a post-Thatcherite agenda. Such issues have also come to form a more central feature of Conservative identity as self-identification as the anti-socialist party (as Cameron highlights above) has diminished. At the same time, Conservative ideology has failed to establish the degree of hegemony enjoyed in the economic arena. As Pilbeam notes, 'modern Conservatism has signally failed to close down contestation over moral issues in the same way that it has done over others'. Whilst the traditional Left has been defeated 'on the battleground of economics, Conservatives continue to face an array of opponents, such as feminists and gay rights activists, fiercely challenging them in the moral arena' (Pilbeam, 2005: 158-9).

For the Conservative MP John Hayes, 'the most important challenges we face are not economic, they are social and cultural'. Future economic success, he argues, is dependent upon the nourishment of 'the social capital upon which a successful marriage between civil society and free enterprise depends' (Hayes, 2002: 71). Consequently, Conservatives need to redefine their mission:

For too long politicians have assumed that good economics equals good politics; they have behaved as though standard of living and quality of life are synonymous. The view that endless material advance is the utopia to which all policy should be directed has dominated political debate for fifty or so years. This is a reductionist view of politics that ignores all those components necessary to a balanced quality of life that do not relate to economic well being. (Hayes, 2002: 68).

These sentiments have been echoed by Cameron's calls for politicians to focus 'not just on GDP, but on GWB – General Well-Being' and his claim that: 'It's time we admitted that there's more to life than money' (2006c). For Hayes, the reluctance of most politicians to address such issues can be explained by the fact that they have 'awkward associations with values and morals', so 'it became convenient for politicians to retreat to the safer ground of

managing the public purse and advocacy of ever greater material consumption' (2002: 68). In the case of the Conservatives this reluctance can partly be explained by the ill-fated 'Back to Basics' campaign of 1993-94. This effort to re-launch John Major's government sought to divert attention to social issues after the economic debacle of withdrawal from the ERM, but quickly unravelled in the face of allegations of sleaze and immoral behaviour on the part of Conservative MPs. In Gary Streeter's words, it left a 'scar' on the party, and 'made people cautious about those kind of value-laden statements and directions' (Streeter Interview). John Bercow similarly agreed that memory of the 'very damaging' Back to Basics campaign meant the post-1997 party 'was rather more wary under successive leaders of sounding too shrill or judgemental on that whole set of issues' (Bercow Interview).

For Streeter, reengaging with social and moral issues is a necessary if daunting task, on a scale 'similar to the economic battles that faced the incoming Conservative government of 1979' (2002: 4). However, in his view, the party 'is ready for it again, big time' (Streeter Interview). A future Conservative government, he suggests, would face numerous challenges such as public service reform, terrorism, and relations with the EU, but Streeter claims that 'none will be greater than the social challenges of drugs, rising crime, alienation and intergenerational poverty' (2002: 3). David Willetts has similarly argued that Conservative politics should be about more than economics, and a vibrant civil society is a central component of his 'civic conservatism' (1994). He argues that 'what really matters most of all to Conservatives is everything in between the individual and the state'. For him, 'how we sustain and support that rich social architecture... is the real challenge for politics today' (2002: 58). Likewise Oliver Letwin (2003) has called for Conservatives to foster a 'neighbourly society' in which social duties and obligations have the same importance and recognition as the pursuit of material gain.

For Pilbeam (2003) it is a profound mistake to see Conservative politics as merely about economics. He points to the lack of confidence amongst Conservatives that cultural and moral concerns are being sufficiently addressed by intermediate institutions such as families, churches, and schools: 'There is thus good reason for them to concern themselves

with the condition of the wider social fabric, even to the extent of questioning its neglect by conservatives of the past' (2003: 87). Some, such as the commentator Peter Hitchens (1999) have gone as far to suggest that the Thatcher governments were complicit in this national moral decline, despite Thatcher's professed desire to re-instil 'Victorian values'. In contrast to Shirley Letwin (1992), who championed the moral strength of Thatcherism for its emphasis on the 'vigorous virtues', Hitchens argues that the neo-liberal policies of the Thatcher years, whilst not the *cause* of permissiveness, did nothing to counter it and most likely worsened it, by neglecting the social and moral agenda. The common portrayal of the right as being largely concerned with economic liberalism is thus partly the fault of Conservative politicians, but for Pilbeam it is also a caricature which it has been in the interests of the Left to maintain: 'this distortion clearly serves ideological purposes', as it leaves social issues as the preserve of the Left (2003: 87).

Whilst Conservatives appear increasingly keen to re-associate themselves with social and moral issues, how to do so has been the cause of disagreement between social liberals and social conservatives, as the typologies of conservatism illustrate (Heppell, 2002). In 1998 *The Times* argued that the key dividing line in the Conservative Party is no longer over Europe or between Left and Right, but that: 'the real division is between liberals and reactionaries, modernisers and traditionalists, those armed primarily with principle and those whose first instinct is to take shelter in institutions'. Furthermore, for the Conservatives to regain power, the 'liberals must first win the battle of ideas within their party' (*The Times*, 1998). The leader went on:

The more important argument the Conservative Party still needs to have is between those sensitive to changing times and those inclined to nostalgia. It is a battle, we believe, between Tory Mods and Rockers. In the Sixties the former were those comfortable with change, the latter those who followed old fads. It is the difference between those with a gaze fixed on new horizons and those either blinkered or still dreaming.

Regardless of their personal preferences, electoral necessity demanded that Conservatives recognise the changing society in which they had to operate. 'Wise Conservatives deal with the world as it is, not as it should be or once was. They respect the changing landscape and are sensitive to its contours'. The Conservatives could demonstrate this pragmatic attitude 'by showing a liberal face to the electorate and extending an

emancipating hand to all voters’, and by taking ‘government out of the boardroom and the bedroom’, contrasting themselves with an interventionist statist Labour Party (*The Times*, 1998).

The version of modernisation sponsored by *The Times* in 1998 bears a notable resemblance to that advanced by David Cameron since he became Conservative Party leader in December 2005. However, as Denham and O’Hara note, despite a long-running intraparty debate about modernisation, there ‘is still no consensus’ amongst Conservatives that this denotes either the only viable or the most appropriate modernising strategy open to them (2007a: 167). Indeed, during the 2005 leadership contest, three of the four principal contenders (David Cameron, David Davis and Liam Fox) explicitly committed themselves to modernising the party, but it ‘meant very different things’ to each (2007a: 186). Arguably this represented an advancement on the position during the leadership election of 2001, when the two candidates presented to party members (Ken Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith) both eschewed the ‘modernising’ label (its chief advocate (Portillo) having been eliminated by the final ballot of MPs). However, as Denham and O’Hara note elsewhere, as a consequence of this lack of consensus Cameron’s legitimacy and mandate for modernisation remain conditional on his ability to deliver electoral success, both ‘in practice and in prospect’ (2007b: 422). Failure to do so could therefore lead to significant pressure to adopt a different, more right-wing, version of modernisation, more akin to those expressed previously by Davis and Fox.

Michael Portillo transformed himself into a leading ‘Mod’ after losing his seat in the 1997 election, and argued that embracing social liberalism must be central to any modernising strategy and offered the best hope for electoral recovery. He saw doing so as a way to give the party a clear and distinctive narrative with a sufficiently broad and centrist appeal:

One of the things that I would like to see is the Conservative Party positioning itself as a liberal party, partly because I think it would provide tremendous coherence – if people understood that the Conservative Party tended to believe that you should keep a bit more of your own money, if that were possible; and a bit more of your own civil liberty, if that were possible; and if it also believed that what you did in your own house was no business of the state; and if it also believed that it would be better for fewer people to be living off the state and more people to be exercising their own freedom of choice and so on, all those things

would be very coherent. One of the curious things about the Conservative Party in recent history is that it has been economically liberal and socially authoritarian. A lot of those things I think, would provide a coherent framework that would run through the responses to these things. There would be those who would argue that these would not be very popular responses, but I'm not so sure about that. You never quite know when people are going to feel that the government has gone too far, in the sense of its interference in our daily lives and its omnipresence in our lives. So I think the Tory Party could have some answers to all of that, but it would have to be quite brave. At a time when the tide is probably flowing in its direction, I think this would be worth doing. (Portillo Interview).

Streeter, by contrast, does not see embracing social liberalism as the way onto this territory for Conservatives, or as a prerequisite for electoral success. For him, the agenda for helping the vulnerable 'is not about extending laissez-faire doctrines throughout society', but about representing 'the small platoons' against big business as well as against big government. As such, 'Conservatives must not stand for social liberalism, but social justice' (2002: 9). He also argued that the distinction between mods and rockers is no longer as useful for understanding the contemporary Conservative Party as it was when it was first applied by *The Times*, suggesting that 'the boundaries have become much more fluid' (Streeter Interview). Whilst acknowledging the existence of a 'spectrum' of views on social and moral issues, Streeter argued that a liberal position is not a prerequisite for modernisation. He explained:

I think it was more true then, but it wasn't just about being socially liberal or conservative. I am quite socially conservative, but I knew that the party had to modernise and that we had to be dramatically radical and different otherwise we would never win again. I certainly fell into that camp which was why I supported Portillo in the 2001 leadership election. I just wanted us to be modernised, and Portillo was a class act, although I wouldn't have voted with him on a number of moral issues. (Streeter Interview).

For Bercow too, whilst 'there is a dividing line between people who fall into those different categories' it is not a distinction that 'defines the party on a daily basis'. Nor is it, he suggests, the source of an 'unbridgeable and dangerous gulf' (Bercow Interview). Nonetheless, it has been the arena for significant disagreement within the party, interlaced with the strategic question of how to broaden the Conservatives' appeal. This debate reflects the ideological legacy of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party, which has continued to frame party positioning since 1997. For Heppell, 'Thatcherism constituted a self-conscious ideological strategy to redefine the Conservatives as a party of *economic*

*liberalism, national independence and moral authoritarianism*' (2002: 302, original emphasises). Whilst the doctrines of economic liberalism and national independence (at least in terms of Euroscepticism) now appear to be firmly embedded in the party, the case study period demonstrates that moral authoritarianism does not have the same grip. It has, however, been a significant feature of the debate over gay rights and family policy since 1997.

### **7.3 Hague: Bandwagon politics?**

*There are millions of people in this country who are white, Anglo-Saxon and bigoted, and they need to be represented.*

Eric Forth MP, 24 October 2000 (quoted in Walters, 2001: 86).

During his leadership campaign and in the early part of his tenure William Hague was keen to present himself as embodying a fresh face for conservatism (Chapter 4: 79-85). This involved presenting himself and his party as at ease with modern British society, including its non-traditional and multicultural aspects (Chapter 6: 149-150). Another element of this strategy was a more liberal approach and softer tone on sexual and moral issues such as gay rights. In this respect, Hague could point to his own record as having voted to equalise the age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual acts at 16. He also sent a message of support to a Gay Pride event and publicly rebuked members of the 'old guard' such as Norman Tebbit who criticised his stance on homosexual rights and multiculturalism (Jones, 1997b). In his first conference speech as leader, Hague noted his wish to lead 'a new, united, inclusive, democratic, de-centralised, and open party'. He spoke of his desire to articulate 'an open conservatism, that is tolerant, that believes freedom is about much more than economics, that believes freedom doesn't stop at the shop counter' and argued that Conservatives are 'caring'. Compassion, he argued 'is not a bolt-on extra to conservatism' but is 'at its very core' (Hague, 1997).

However, this socially inclusive and liberal-minded conservatism, even if it reflected Hague's own personal preferences, was short-lived. The most obvious reason for this is



that it did not reflect the opinion of the majority of Conservative MPs, and Hague failed to convince them to alter their approach. For example in the 1998 vote on reducing the age of consent for gay sex to 16, only sixteen Conservative MPs voted in favour of equalisation (Dorey, 2003: 134). Although this vote was passed by the Commons, it was subsequently defeated by the votes of Conservative hereditary peers in the Lords, after a campaign led by the Conservative Baroness Young (Waites, 2001: 496). The government reintroduced a similar measure during the next parliamentary session and it was again defeated in the House of Lords. Sexual equality was finally achieved in November 2000, but only after the government had invoked the Parliament Act to overrule the House of Lords (Waites, 2001: 497).

Hague had avoided the appearance of party disunity over the age of consent by allowing a free vote on what he described as 'a matter of conscience' (Brogan, 2000). This liberal approach was abandoned, however, on the issue of Section 28. This clause in the Local Government Act (1988) was introduced by the Thatcher administration to forbid councils from promoting homosexuality or promoting its acceptability as a family relationship (Durham, 2005: 98). The Conservatives imposed a three-line whip against the government's proposal to abolish Section 28, and successfully prevented repeal in the House of Lords. For Bercow, this decision was a 'great mistake' as 'it made us look and sound very unattractive'. It was also, Bercow thought, driven by populism: whilst it may have reflected Hague's personal views 'I suspect he thought the government's position would be unpopular with large swathes of the population and that the Conservatives should capitalise on that' (Bercow Interview). Once again this Conservative victory was only possible with the votes of hereditary peers (Waites, 2001: 498), but on this occasion the government was unable to invoke the Parliament Act (which only covers legislation initiated in the Commons) as the Bill had initially been introduced in the House of Lords (Dorey, 2003: 135).

The retention of Section 28 was just one element in a panoply of populist positions adopted by Hague throughout 1999 and 2000, on issues such as asylum, Europe, and the Tony Martin case (Walters, 2001: 64). Theresa May, who as a member of the Shadow Cabinet

supported the party line, candidly admits that ‘I think I was wrong on Section 28, and have changed my view on Section 28’. She acknowledges also that the stance taken on this issue, and on the strong defence of grammar schools, appealed to ‘the traditional image of the party rather than to the more modern image of the party’ (May Interview). For Waites, these kind of issues were deliberately linked together by the Conservatives in an effort to define the party under Hague, and ‘may be interpreted as including partially-coded appeals to certain racist and homophobic elements of the electorate, presenting Conservatives as defendants of the imagined British nation beloved of traditionalists, in contrast to the modernising multiculturalist Blairites’ (Waites, 2001: 503). The language of fear and ‘threats’ was echoed in the party’s 2001 election manifesto, which pledged to retain Section 28 and argued that ‘the common sense wisdom of the mainstream majority, on crime, or on taxes, or the family, or on Europe, is under threat as never before’ (Conservative Party, 2001: 2).

Hague’s hard line on Section 28 led to the defections to Labour of MP Shaun Woodward, who had been sacked from the frontbench for refusing to support it; and Ivan Massow, the prominent Conservative businessman who had sought the party’s nomination as candidate for Mayor of London. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Massow lambasted the ‘skinhead conservatism that has marked the “tabloidification” of the Conservatives [and] highlighted the cancer eating away at the very lungs of the party’. He claimed that on issues of race and sex Hague had been manipulated against his own wishes by the party membership: ‘the core members, the Baroness Youngs and loony right-wingers, who actually do the dirty work of door-to-door campaigning for their party... These are the people who, although literally dying out, set the tone of the party by their sheer dedication to “the cause”... Theirs is the politics of the taxi driver’. The prospect of a Hague premiership, he claimed, was ‘a nightmare’ (Massow, 2000).

Popular appeal, as Waites suggests, was undoubtedly a factor in the Conservative leadership’s decision to oppose the repeal of Section 28 during Labour’s first term. Party pressures, as Massow argues, were also a factor, although the picture he presents of a leader powerless to resist the wider membership is overdone. Historically the Conservative

Party leadership has been seen as relatively autonomous (Bulpitt, 1986), and to the extent that this autonomy waned in the 1980s and 1990s this was largely in relation to dissenting backbench MPs (Kavanagh, 1998: 39-42). The wider membership did for the first time gain a role in selecting the party leader as a result of Hague's *Fresh Future* reform, but this package can be seen as an effective centralisation of power, legitimised by plebiscite (Chapter 4: 82-3; Kelly, 2003: 82-106). A more telling factor on Hague's decision was opinion within his own shadow cabinet and parliamentary party, illustrated by the free votes on the age of consent. The position on Section 28 can also be seen as part of a wider move towards a more traditionally Conservative stance on family life and marriage, which quickly encroached upon Hague's early flirtation with a socially liberal agenda. By the time the government began its legislative attempts to repeal Section 28 in 1999, the Conservatives' traditional stance on family values was firmly embedded. Indeed, the first hints of this agenda were contained in Hague's 1997 conference speech, when he declared that: 'I personally believe that it is best for children to be brought up in a traditional family. That means their mother and their father in their home'. In this speech, he attempted to combine a pro-family stance with a liberal agenda. He noted that Conservatives should show 'understanding and tolerance of people making their own decisions about how they lead their lives' (the extension of liberalism on economics to social issues, as advocated by Portillo above), whilst also claiming 'that doesn't alter our unshakeable belief in the enduring value of traditional family life' (Hague, 1997).

Hague outlined his vision of family life further in January 1998, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation. In this speech he developed the thesis (echoed by Hayes and Streeter above) that a key factor in the Conservatives' 1997 defeat was that they appeared solely interested in economics, and that to counter this (false) image the party should once again 'dare to speak on the family' (Hague, 1998c). Reflecting arguments made elsewhere by Willetts (1992; 1994; & 1996), he sought to defend the free market agenda of Thatcherism against the charge that it undermines family life and is 'at loggerheads with true conservatism' (Hague, 1998c). He again noted that Conservatives should not be judgemental about people's sexuality, and welcomed (without commenting on the very small minority of his MPs who had actually voted to equalise the age of consent) what he

described as ‘our more tolerant attitude towards homosexuals’ (Hague, 1998c). However, he also stated that ‘tolerance is not the same as indifference’ and put a practical and moral case in favour of marriage. Economic liberalism should not be extended into social libertarianism as:

Libertarianism easily descends into a refusal to recognise that social policy means more than simply being a referee in a match fought between opposing ways of living. We know that some of those ways of living are better for children than others. We know that some have social consequences, the cost of which are borne by the rest of us. No Government can be neutral in those circumstances, and certainly not a Conservative Government. (1998c).

The aim of government policy should therefore be ‘to encourage permanent commitment between parents’, and to that end, recognise marriage as ‘the best means of doing that’ (Hague, 1998c). One way the state could do this is through the tax system. In this regard, Hague suggested the previous Conservative government had failed to do enough to support traditional families (Dorey, 2003: 135). They had been wrong, he suggested, to begin the phasing out of the married couple’s tax allowance ‘without at least replacing it with an allowance focused on married families with children’ (Hague, 1998c). This had rightly damaged the party’s credibility on the issue, and had caused the electorate to overlook ‘one of the very best ideas’ in the party’s 1997 manifesto – namely the proposal for transferable personal allowances for married couples (which would primarily have benefitted couples with only one breadwinner). Hague thus sought to restore this credibility, and present the Conservatives once again as a pro-family party. The Conservatives under Hague made a clear case in favour of the ‘traditional’ family, and opposition to the repeal of Section 28 was a consistent element of this. As Dorey notes, ‘greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles and sexual relationships did not mean moral neutrality or indifference’ (2003: 136).

These themes were reiterated by Hague in his party conference speech later that year, when he argued that ‘strong and stable family life is the cornerstone of a healthy society’ and pledged to ‘develop policies on welfare reform which strengthen family responsibility and support for the institution of marriage’ (Hague, 1998a). The flagship policy adopted on the family was a commitment to introduce a new married couples’ tax allowance, replacing

that which had been finally abolished in the April 2000 budget. This would, the manifesto claimed, be worth £1000 a year to married couples. In addition, Child Tax Credit for families with a child under 5 would be increased by £200 a year, and those with children under 11 and not using all or part of their personal tax allowance would be able to transfer it to their working spouse (Conservative Party, 2001: 3-4).

Hague's approach to social, moral, and sexual politics was a consistent part of the core vote strategy he adopted from the October 1998 conference onwards, initially under the 'British Way' label, and later as the 'Common Sense Revolution' (Chapter 4: 85-91). As Nadler argues, his populist line on Section 28 demonstrated that 'he had effectively abandoned his earlier attempts to reposition the party' (2000: 284). This strategy was premised on the belief, expressed by Norman Tebbit, that substantial numbers of Conservative voters were 'out there' waiting to be persuaded back to the fold by more strident policies (Tebbit Interview). Tebbit pointed to the 'relatively low' turnouts at the 1997 (71.5%), 2001 (59.4%), and 2005 (61.2%) elections as evidence of a consistent failure by the Conservative Party to do this (Tebbit Interview). Hague's promises of tax cuts for families, support for marriage, retention of Section 28, a crackdown on 'bogus' asylum seekers, calls for tougher sentences for paedophiles, and his suggestion of a change in the law to protect homeowners defending their property (in response to the Tony Martin case) were designed to chime with this forgotten 'silent majority' and encourage them back to the polling station. Nadler claims that for Hague this phase was 'about more than shoring up his core vote' – it flowed from 'his own convictions', reflected his 'gut instincts' and in this sense represents the authentic voice of William Hague (Nadler, 2000: 288). One problem with it, however, was that it appeared inauthentic, contradicting his earlier attempts to paint himself as liberal-minded and socially inclusive. Hague thus found himself the target of criticism from both modernisers and traditionalists in his own party.

Interviewed by Michael Portillo in 2008, William Hague acknowledged his own preference for the core vote issues he adopted, and defended his approach as derived from practical necessity:

We had to be able to blow the trumpet, we had to show that the Conservative Party did stand for certain things, and we had to have some things on which to fight an election, as simple as that. And also I suppose I was going with some of my own instincts on those subjects. So there was undoubtedly tension in the senior reaches of the Shadow Cabinet, but I think once you arrive at an election you have to fight with the tools that you have got.

I think in retrospect you [Portillo] were right in many of the things you said at the time, that we had to stop talking about other things to get any attention for certain subjects, but the huge risk at that time, stopping talking about those things – the traditional subjects – was that the Conservatives would have gone even further down. The 2001 result could have been worse, even worse, than it was. (Hague, interview in Portillo, 2008).

Hague's strategy was post-Thatcherite in that it sought to address the perception (which was an inaccurate interpretation of the Thatcher years in his view) that the Conservatives were not interested in society, and were merely concerned with economics. This would be a dominant concern of the party in the years that followed his departure as leader, as illustrated by Streeter, Letwin, Hayes, Willetts, and Cameron above. In this respect, Hague was engaged with 'one of the most important imperatives of post-Thatcher conservatism', namely the attempt to balance the Thatcherite legacy with the construction of a Conservative politics that 'could escape the allegations of harshness and economic monomania' that had dogged Thatcherism (Durham, 2001: 471). The form that this took however, illustrated the enduring hold of the traditional values promoted by Thatcher on the Conservative Party. For Waites, 'Thatcherism signalled the resilience of homophobia on the political right' (2001: 502), and Hague's stance on Section 28 was consistent with this. His prescriptive stance on marriage and the desirability of 'traditional' families was in harmony with the socially authoritarian aspects of New Right thinking, and parallels can be drawn with the 'compassionate conservatism' of George W. Bush (Ashbee, 2003: 43-6). In this sense Hague's offering at the 2001 election – of economic liberalism, vigorous nationalism, and traditional social values – was not post-Thatcherite at all. For Portillo, this agenda was 'arguably to the right of Margaret Thatcher' (2008). As Hague acknowledges above the Conservatives needed some sort of message, and lacking a coherent new narrative they comforted themselves with rehashed old themes.

A final consequence of Hague's strategy may have been to increase division within the party on the social, sexual and moral policy divide, and to highlight the emerging rupture between mods and rockers. His initial dalliance with social liberalism gave credence to the

modernising view that embracing societal change was essential for Conservative electoral revival, and his abandonment of it provided the modernisers with ammunition with which to attack his leadership. Redwood notes that before the Hague years, social liberalism ‘was not a cause of a great deal of tension within the party’ (2004: 144). By the time of the October 2000 conference, the degree of polarisation between the two camps was clear, embodied by the modernising Shadow Chancellor, Michael Portillo, and the traditionalist Shadow Home Secretary, Ann Widdecombe. Widdecombe used her speech to announce a ‘zero tolerance’ policy on drugs, which delighted conference delegates but was rapidly condemned by police, drug charities and human rights groups (BBC News, 2000). Portillo, by contrast, distanced himself from traditional Conservative themes, declaring: ‘We are for people whatever their sexual orientation’ and arguing that difference should not merely be tolerated, but respected. It was not, contra Widdecombe, the role of the state to promote certain lifestyle choices. Why, he asked, ‘should people respect us if we withhold respect from them?’ (Portillo, 2000). At the end of Hague’s tenure social, sexual and moral issues were arguably the most potent cause of internal party discord, and would play a key role in the battle to succeed him as leader.

#### **7.4 Duncan Smith: the rocker who modernised?**

*In the case of Iain Duncan Smith it is repeated slightly tragically, because he begins as an arch-conservative but ends up as a moderniser, but by then it’s too late.*

Michael Portillo (Interview).

Two factors were pivotal in Duncan Smith’s election as leader of the Conservative Party. The first was that he was not Michael Portillo, the second that he was not Kenneth Clarke. In the final ballot of party members, Clarke was comprehensively defeated because of his pro-European views (Chapter 4; Redwood, 2004: 152). In the parliamentary contest, Duncan Smith was able to beat Portillo into third place (by one vote) because of unease amongst a substantial number of Conservative MPs about both Portillo personally and his plans to remodel the party. Unlike in 1997, when the right of the parliamentary party failed to coalesce behind a single candidate, once David Davis had been eliminated Duncan

Smith became the standard bearer for traditionalists. Whilst Davis adopted a more reformist tone and promised ‘a fundamental policy review’, Duncan Smith rejected modernisation, opting for ‘neoliberal generalisations such as the need for more choice in education and health’ (Alderman and Carter, 2002: 577). In a direct challenge to Portillo’s agenda, he explicitly rejected all-women shortlists or any possibility of relaxing the law on drugs. Portillo commented that: ‘too many MPs disliked me, and/or my uncompromising agenda for modernisation. One offered me his vote if I’d water down my plans for change. I refused, and lost by one vote’ (Portillo, 2008). For Streeter, this mix of personal and political factors explained the result: ‘some people didn’t like the message, and some people didn’t like the messenger’ (Streeter Interview). To understand the result, Bercow suggests, ‘for Ken’s Europhilia substitute Michael’s socially liberal credentials’. For him, Portillo ‘was clearly the modernising candidate in 2001’ but the party ‘wasn’t ready for and wasn’t signed-up to the idea that it needed fundamentally to change its approach’ (Bercow Interview).

According to John Redwood, Portillo ‘did not define a distinctively social liberal agenda which made any sense’ (2004: 152). Michael Ancram echoed this sentiment: he felt unable to support Portillo because ‘I had no idea where he intended to take the Conservative Party and I don’t think he did either’. Ancram thus joined the leadership contest as an anti-Portillo candidate, and was also ‘seen as having the advantage that he would not be divisive’ (Alderman and Carter, 2002: 573). He recalled that: ‘I simply thought you don’t put the party in the hands of somebody who doesn’t seem to have a clear idea of what they want to do with themselves’ (Ancram Interview). Ancram also felt unable to support Clarke, because ‘his stance on Europe would have split the party’ (Ancram Interview). Almost by default, therefore, he supported Duncan Smith. After his preferred candidate (Portillo) failed to reach the final ballot, Bercow also supported Duncan Smith as he feared ‘there was a serious chance’ that Clarke’s views on Europe ‘would rip the party in two’ (Bercow Interview).

Portillo noted how both tactical mistakes and animosity towards him personally played a part in the failure of his leadership campaign:



I think that there were quite a lot of objections to me. I was thought too flash, and obviously a lot of people had had issues with me in the past. Comparing myself with Cameron, Cameron is a creature with much greater charm, which is very important. And also of course we got all the tactics wrong from the beginning. I entered the election race on the advice that I would be a shoo-in, and then, as we got down to it, the advice was that winning amongst the MPs was not a problem, the problem was going to be with the constituencies. Actually I think that both halves of that were wrong. I really think that if we had managed to win with the MPs we could probably have won in the constituencies, either against Iain Duncan Smith or against Ken Clarke. But in fact when we first totted up the number of MPs we had about 50, and at the end we had about 50. We had made no progress at all. I was told that in 1995 I looked hesitant, so in 2001 you must be first out of the starting blocks. Well I was first out of the starting blocks and I was alone for about two weeks, there were no other candidates! And of course that means that you are the sole target for those two weeks. (Portillo Interview).

The modernising agenda Portillo promoted had become intertwined with his own personality and life since losing his Enfield Southgate seat at the 1997 general election. Shortly before re-entering Parliament at the Kensington and Chelsea by-election in November 1999, Portillo admitted to having had gay experiences in his youth (Jones, 1999). He later described this admission as a 'big mistake' for his standing in the party, and it resurfaced in the leadership campaign (Portillo, 2008). One former member of the shadow cabinet commented that 'an element of homophobia' had counted against Portillo (Anonymous Interview). Portillo believed that 'the party needed to change radically, and accept the social changes it had resisted, especially sexual, racial and cultural equality' (Portillo, 2008).

Ken Clarke also offered a prescription for change at the 2001 leadership election, but his was limited to addressing the issues of greatest public concern (public services) and a critique of Hague's focus on Europe and the Euro (Denham and O'Hara, 2008: 59). Clarke also made much of his ability to 'carry the fight to Labour' to win back lost voters (Alderman and Carter, 2002: 576). Portillo's message was much more wide-ranging, leaving him vulnerable to attack and unable to establish a hold on 'solid Tory ground' (Denham and O'Hara, 2008: 60). In spite of this, many of his Shadow Cabinet colleagues, he claimed, were also convinced of the need for a modernisation strategy by mid-2000 (Portillo Interview) and at the launch of his 2001 leadership bid he received public

endorsements from eleven, making him the clear frontrunner.<sup>2</sup> For Theresa May, the decision to back Portillo was straightforward: she supported him ‘because he was the change candidate. I thought he was the one who understood the depth of change that was needed’. Portillo’s failure to win the election is also relatively easily explained: ‘the party didn’t want change’ (May Interview). Lilley suggests that Duncan Smith’s victory may have been partly accidental, and the result of a miscalculation by some MPs who wished to caution future-leader Portillo against an all-out modernisation strategy:

There was a feeling that people were making a statement by voting for Iain Duncan Smith, but didn’t really expect him to become leader as a result of it. It was more a way of saying to Portillo, ‘remember, there are lots of us’... The Right wanted a choice between Iain Duncan Smith and Portillo, not Iain Duncan Smith and Ken Clarke. Their second choice of choices would have been Portillo versus Clarke. (Lilley Interview).

Ultimately, however, the result of the final round of the parliamentary ballot (Clarke 59, Duncan Smith 54, Portillo 53) demonstrated that with less than one-third of them supporting him, Conservative MPs ‘were not persuaded by Portillo’ (Ancram Interview). The debate between mods and rockers did not end there, however. Duncan Smith attempted change the policy focus of the party towards public services and social justice (Chapter 4) but did not regard this as ‘modernisation’:

I hate the phrase modernise because I don’t think it really means very much. Everyone obligatorily uses it but I don’t think it means anything at all really, today’s modern is tomorrow’s old-fashioned so it’s best to talk about *change* in a more structured sense. So I knew that the party needed to change. It needed to change, however, not – and this is where I disagree with Michael Portillo about this – his sense of change was almost to reject its central beliefs, its tenets, and almost adopt what we now saw in front of us – what I would call the metropolitan Labour Party, the sort of fashionable aspects of New Labour that are popular in the metropolitan sense, that is amongst those who live in these rather rarefied zones around the City through into Westminster, rather than what I call change, which was change to stretch it out to relocate it in the hearts of minds of people that live beyond that. (Duncan Smith Interview).

Duncan Smith soon found himself in the unfortunate and somewhat curious position of being attacked by both modernisers and traditionalists, having failed to please either camp. As Ann Widdecombe saw it, he ‘tried to ride two horses. We all knew where he stood, he

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<sup>2</sup> The eleven were: Francis Maude, Peter Ainsworth, Edward Garnier, David Heathcoat-Amory, Oliver Letwin, Andrew Mackay, Tim Yeo, Gary Streeter, Archie Norman, David Willetts, and Theresa May (BBC News, 2001a).

was a strong traditionalist, but he tried to go for a slightly modernising agenda' (Widdecombe Interview). His first shadow cabinet demonstrated a clear Eurosceptic bias (BBC News, 2001b) – he even included his co-conspirator in the Maastricht rebellion, Bill Cash – but his efforts to downplay the European issue were seen by Redwood (2004: 153) as a victory for the modernisers. Duncan Smith's move away from 'core vote' issues such as Europe and immigration did not, however, insulate him from criticism from 'the mods'. Duncan Smith's deputy and shadow Foreign Secretary, Michael Ancram, saw much of the internal feuding emanating from disgruntled supporters of Portillo:

I think the flak largely came from – it might have been a bit from the Eurosceptics, but he put quite a lot of them into his shadow cabinet, notably Bill Cash and Bernard Jenkin – I think it came rather more from the Portillistas. Their agenda, as much as they had one, was modernisation, and Iain was not a moderniser. (Ancram Interview).

In the same way that Duncan Smith did not see himself as modernising the party but changing it, the modernisers did not regard him as 'one of them':

It wasn't their change, and I think they felt very bitter. The sad thing about Michael Portillo was that had he won his seat in 1997 he would have probably walked it [the leadership election], and there were a lot of people who had invested heavily in Portillo shares for many years before that and who saw their investment go, and couldn't believe in 2001 it had disappeared again, and they were very unhappy bunnies. I think it was factional, that was my impression. (Ancram Interview).

Disagreement turned to warfare in November 2002, over the ostensibly minor issue of the passage of the government's Adoption and Children Bill. The House of Lords had amended the legislation to the effect that only married couples could adopt children, and the government sought to repeal these revisions in the Commons to allow unmarried and same-sex couples the same rights. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, this was relatively uncontroversial (Dorey, 2004: 376). For the Conservatives however, it went to the heart of the debate over the status of marriage that had featured heavily during the Hague years. Should they take a liberal view and accept these different forms of family life, or continue to advocate their preferred traditional model for raising children? The easiest way out of this difficulty for Duncan Smith would have been to allow a free vote, but he instead chose to impose a three-line whip against the changes. The result was a

public split and a leadership crisis that was ‘almost entirely self-inflicted and eminently avoidable’ (Cowley & Stuart, 2004a: 357). Thirty-five Conservatives absented themselves from the Commons, and eight MPs defied the whip and voted against the party line. These eight included ex-leadership challengers Clarke and Portillo; four former Shadow Cabinet members (David Curry, Andrew Lansley, Andrew Mackay and Francis Maude); and most damagingly, John Bercow, who resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in order to rebel (Cowley & Stuart, 2004a: 357).

Bercow resigned because he both felt strongly about the issue and was unhappy with the direction of the party under Duncan Smith’s leadership. As he explained:

I felt very strongly that the party was wrong to do what it did. It could of course be argued – and it was, by some – that I should have simply gone missing that night and abstained, rather than make a huge fuss about it, but I felt strongly that the party had got it completely wrong. And it was also the case that I was disillusioned on several other fronts: I felt that the party was not really making any great progress and I didn’t want to be part of that frontbench team. I thought we weren’t going anywhere as a party and I didn’t want to be part of it, and this issue was the final straw. (Bercow Interview).

Duncan Smith interpreted this rebellion as a conspiracy designed to destabilise his leadership. The next day he made a statement on the steps of Conservative Central Office calling for the party to ‘unite or die’. In it, he claimed that he had ‘begun to reconnect the Conservative Party with the views and attitudes of contemporary Britain’. Equally, he asserted that he was leading the party with unity in mind, ‘respecting those who would like me to move faster and those who feel threatened by our moving at all’. However:

Over the last few weeks a small group of my parliamentary colleagues have decided consciously to undermine my leadership. For a few, last night's vote was not about adoption but an attempt to challenge my mandate to lead this party. We cannot go on in this fashion. We have to pull together or we will hang apart. (Duncan Smith, 2002e).

This marked a turning point both for Duncan Smith’s leadership and for party management of sexual/moral political issues. In terms of issue management, the lesson for the Conservatives was clear: the party was divided, and free votes on ‘conscience’ issues offered the most effective means to prevent them from attracting media interest and becoming public displays of disunity. Duncan Smith adopted this tactic when, in March

2003, the government once again brought forward legislation to repeal Section 28, and it has also been used by Cameron and Howard (see below).

The ‘gay adoption’ episode exposed both Duncan Smith’s ineptitude as a party leader and the problematic context he faced. The party was clearly divided, and a modernising leader would have faced similar (or perhaps even more acute) difficulties in terms of keeping the party together. However, the incident also exposed Duncan Smith’s personal failings and the barely-muffled murmurs of discontent with his leadership became thunderous. One Conservative MP claimed that a desire to oust Duncan Smith played a significant role in the rebellion, on an issue that would not normally have been expected to stir such emotions (Anonymous Interview). Another commented that the parliamentary party was ‘a seething mass of discontent... People were gathering in corridors saying “we can’t go on like this, this guy hasn’t got it”.’ (Anonymous Interview). Gary Streeter noted the presence of ‘disgruntled modernisers’ but ‘was not actively aware of any plots’ against the leader (Streeter Interview).

The fact that Duncan Smith even felt the need to make an extraordinary appeal to the party barely a year into his leadership illustrated the perilous nature of his position, and it was strongly rumoured that he was on the brink of resignation (Hoggart, 2002; Brogan & Helm, 2002). The normally sympathetic *Daily Telegraph* described it as ‘the most desperate day in the history of the Conservative Party’ (Young, 2002). Kenneth Clarke attacked the party leader’s handling of the ‘entirely self-induced’ crisis (Jones *et al.*, 2002), and within days a YouGov/*Telegraph* opinion poll revealed that 52 percent of Conservative voters thought that the election of Duncan Smith had been a mistake. Moreover, 81 percent of supporters and 75 percent of party members thought he had mishandled the adoption issue by failing to allow MPs a free vote (Helm and Sylvester, 2002).

The issue of adoption by unmarried and same-sex couples was an ideal tool for the modernisers to use in order to attack Duncan Smith’s leadership. They were able to argue not only that it should be subject to a free vote; but that the position taken by the leadership

only served to highlight how 'out of touch' with contemporary society the party had become. Garnett and Lynch (2003b: 14) observe that the modernisers may well have exaggerated the electoral salience of the party's stance on sexual questions, but the wider impact on the party's (poor) public image, exacerbated by the revolt over the three-line whip is harder to quantify. Duncan Smith's firm line on adoption also went against other moves apparently aimed at softening the party's image after the failure of Hague's core-vote approach and the 2001 election. In early 2002, for example, Oliver Letwin signalled that the Conservatives were willing to shift their position to give more legal rights to gay couples. He called for homosexual partners to be given certain property rights similar to those enjoyed by spouses, but stopped short of embracing either civil partnerships or adoption rights. Letwin claimed that whilst he wanted to devise practical measures to help gay couples, he didn't want to do anything to undermine the sanctity of marriage, commenting: 'We don't want to create a pale imitation of marriage, but we do recognise that there are real grievances' (BBC News, 2002). This reflects the general theme of Duncan Smith's leadership, namely his effort to steer a middle-course which reflected some of the concerns of the modernisers, without disavowing his own (ill-disguised) traditionalist leanings.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from his handling of Section 28. Keen to avoid a repeat of the rebellion over adoption, Duncan Smith and his party Chairman, David Davis, devised a compromise whereby Conservative MPs were ordered to vote for a Conservative amendment to replace rather than abolish the Clause (*The Guardian*, 2003). An amendment to retain Section 28 was also tabled by the traditionalists Edward Leigh and Ann Widdecombe. On a free vote, 71 Conservatives supported this amendment (including Duncan Smith and Michael Howard) whilst just 23 voted against (BBC News, 2003; Durham, 2005: 99). On this occasion the Clause was finally scrapped.

This pattern was repeated under Duncan Smith's successor, Michael Howard. On becoming leader Howard's priority was to 'impose discipline' on the party (Howard Interview). To this he might have added: 'and counter the public image of disunity'. Howard's strategy reveals an effort to downplay party divisions on a number of

controversial social, sexual and moral questions by allowing free votes. Notably, he opted for free votes on the Civil Partnership Bill, which gave gay couples entering into a civil partnership the same rights as married couples; and on the Gender Recognition Bill, which gave transsexuals legal recognition and the right to marry in their adopted sex (Cowley and Stuart, 2004b: 1-2). One effect of the free votes was that many Conservative MPs did not vote at all, but those that did vote revealed the depth of the split on such issues in the party. On the Gender Recognition Bill, a total of 36 Conservative MPs voted in favour of either Second or Third Reading (or both) and a total of 44 Conservative MPs voted against either Second or Third Reading (or both). Combining the votes on the Second and Third Readings of the Civil Partnership Bill reveals 'similarly stark splits', with a total of 74 voting in favour on at least one occasion, and 49 opposing it at least once (Cowley & Stuart, 2004b: 2-3).

Howard's relatively brief tenure as leader of the Conservative Party can therefore be regarded as period of better party management tactics on the social, sexual and moral policy cleavage, but it was still characterised by significant internal division on such questions. Howard also lacked a clear strategy to improve the image of the party by moderating positions on such issues: whilst morality/individual behaviour has remained a low salience issue in terms of having a direct impact on how people vote,<sup>3</sup> such issues may affect a party's image (Chapter 4). Quinn argues that the major problem the Conservatives have faced in opposition since 1997 is not that they have been too right-wing in their policy positions, but that they have suffered from a severe image problem. In short, the Conservatives were seen as 'angry, stuck in the past, and socially intolerant'. Electoral revival, therefore, requires them to revitalise their image rather than reinvent their policy programme. 'Shifting to the centre ground' can thus be achieved by 'softening the Conservatives' image, toning down their language, and appearing more socially inclusive, rather than [by] the wholesale sale abandonment of policies that were not particularly different from those of Labour' (Quinn, 2008: 179). Under Howard, the party gave the

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<sup>3</sup> Since 1997, morality/individual behaviour has never been regarded as one of the most important issues facing the country by more than 10 percent of the electorate. It has averaged 4.6 percent (MORI 2008a).

impression that it was reluctantly conceding to social change, rather than welcoming and adapting to it enthusiastically.

The next section considers whether David Cameron has finally solved this problem through a new approach to the Conservative politics of the family. Cameron is considered in this way as it appears that he may be forging a distinctive position on the social, sexual and moral policy divide. This perspective may therefore offer us an additional lens through which to view the 1997-2005 period. Further, if Cameron has been able to resolve this question, it will mark an important conclusion to the ideological differences highlighted by this case study, and indicate strategic learning from past mistakes by the party leadership.

### **7.5 Cameron: The family man**

*I am unashamedly pro-family. For me it comes absolutely first.*

David Cameron (quoted in Grice, 2007).

David Cameron has repeatedly sought to emphasise his credentials as a ‘family man’. He has put the family at the heart of his policy agenda and his public image, and has stated on a number of occasions that his family is more important to him than his political ambitions (Sky News, 2006). In some key respects, Cameron’s policy on the family represents a clear continuation of the direction set by Iain Duncan Smith, who he appointed as Chairman of his Social Justice Policy Group. Cameron has frequently claimed that his priority as Prime Minister would be to ‘mend Britain’s broken society’ (Jones, 2007), and has argued that strengthening families is central to this. Yet in contrast to Duncan Smith, Cameron has also sought to portray himself as a social liberal, at ease with contemporary British society. The central message of his leadership campaign was that the party must ‘change to win’ (Cameron, 2005). He has described himself as a ‘liberal Conservative’, has deliberately gone ‘out of his way to strike a very different note about asylum seekers’, and has given strong support to civil partnerships for same-sex couples (Rawnsley, 2005). This liberal element of Cameron’s approach conforms to Quinn’s strategy of changing party image by moving closer to groups not traditionally part of the Conservative support base. The



question for Cameron is whether this socially liberal image can be successfully balanced (or maintained) with a strong family policy.

Cameron gave a speech entitled 'Stronger Families' to Relate, the family counselling service, in June 2008. In it, he echoed William Hague's comments a decade earlier, when he noted that 'for too long, politicians here have been afraid of getting into this territory, for fear of looking old-fashioned or preachy' (Cameron, 2008). His message that he wished to see marriage once again as a 'positive social norm' was one that could have appeared in a speech by any of his three predecessors as leader of the opposition. The family, he observed, is the 'best institution' for raising children, and (again echoing policy under Hague) reiterated his commitment to delivering a tax break for married couples, a pledge he first made during his leadership campaign.

Yes, I do think it's wrong that our benefits system gives couples with children more money if they live apart – and we will bring an end to the couple penalty. And yes, I do think it's wrong that we're the only country in the western world that doesn't properly recognise marriage in the tax system – and I will ensure that we do. So we will change tax and benefits to make them more family-friendly. (Cameron, 2008).

He also made clear, however, that any tax cuts for married couples would also apply equally to people in civil partnerships. This represents a significant shift in the Conservatives' attitude towards homosexuality, and fits with Cameron's efforts to rebrand the party as more socially inclusive and tolerant. To this end, the Conservatives have also actively recruited gay prospective parliamentary candidates and given them priority in winnable seats (Woolf, 2006). The party has also signed an agreement with Stonewall (the gay rights pressure group) to become part of its 'Diversity Champions' programme of gay friendly employers (Grimston, 2006).

In essence, however, Cameron's position remains fundamentally Conservative and consistent with that of his predecessors, in that he regards marriage as the best model of family life and believes that the state should recognise and promote it in some way. For some modernisers this is the cause of unease. John Bercow, whilst pleased with Cameron's broadly socially liberal disposition, sees 'some tension' between this and his family policy:

He takes what I think would be regarded as a traditionalist view of marriage and the family. That is reflected in some of what he has said about wanting to reward marriage through the tax system, and I have grave reservations about that. But overall, he is very much more socially liberal than his predecessors. (Bercow Interview).

Bercow also notes how to-date, Cameron 'has managed to maintain both positions without incurring any political penalty' and offers two explanatory factors for this. Firstly, it reflects Cameron's 'impressive presentational skills'; and secondly, 'it may also be a reflection of that fact that we have not yet got to specifics' (Bercow Interview). In other words, once detailed tax changes are revealed and the winners and losers calculated, the Conservatives might face a backlash, either from, or on behalf of, the penalised groups.

Tim Yeo also questioned the fairness of weighting the tax system in favour of marriage, and warned that effectively discriminating against many families with single or unmarried parents 'would be seen as wrong' and would thus backfire on the Conservatives (Tory Diary, 2006). A report for the Centre for Policy Studies found that this apprehension amongst Conservative MPs was widespread, as many saw the electoral risk of being perceived as 'victimising single mothers'. This timidity, the report's author cautioned, meant that 'there is a serious danger that, in this area at least, the "modernising" of the party's image... could simply be a cover for political cowardice and a retreat from what elected politicians personally believe to be right for the well-being of society' (Daley, 2006: 3).

However, as his recent speech to Relate demonstrates, Cameron has not been timid on this issue and has stuck consistently to his pledge to recognise marriage in the tax system, although he has still to reveal the details of how this will be implemented. As under Iain Duncan Smith, supporting marriage has been explicitly linked by Cameron to the issue of social justice and his stated aim to renew the societal fabric. Commenting on the publication of the Social Justice Policy Group's report *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG, 2007), Cameron said: 'I welcome this report's emphasis on the family, and on marriage, as the basis for the social progress we all want to see' adding that: 'If we can get the family right,

we can fix our broken society' (Conservatives.com, 2007). The report itself argues, in effect, that unmarried couples are damaging society, as 'the ongoing rise in family breakdown affecting young children has been driven by the dissolution of cohabiting partnerships', the majority of which 'are less stable than marriage' (SJPG, 2007: 3). Family breakdown is correlated with crime, drug abuse, educational failure and anti-social behaviour. The state should therefore 'create a positive policy bias in support of marriage' and end the 'downgrading' of marriage in official discourse which fails to recognise the 'marked discrepancies in the stability of married and cohabiting couples' (SJPG, 2007: 5-6).

For Toynbee, this represents a return to traditionalist, socially authoritarian conservatism designed to appease the *Daily Mail*. She argues that: 'His marriage policy is their victory, boxing him into their own moral agenda without any idea yet how it can be done, at what cost – and with what collateral damage'. It is 'reactionary mood music' that risks alienating supporters attracted to the fold by Cameron's ostensibly liberal outlook (Toynbee, 2007). To portray Cameron as having sold out to the traditionalists is a little strong, however, as it represents only one element of his strategy. The question is more one of whether he can successfully balance potentially competing objectives. Widdecombe praises his focus on the family, but also concedes that this is part of a two-pronged approach by Cameron which also involves changing the party's image:

He [Cameron] is doing two things. You heard him a couple of weeks ago in the wake of Iain Duncan Smith's paper on the family saying that the best background against which to bring-up children is marriage, here are the statistics which prove it, we just have to go on saying that – it doesn't matter if you distort that into being an attack on the single mothers – we're going to go on saying it. That speech would have resonated with just about everybody who has ever voted Conservative and who is over 35 or so. But he is also at the same time, for example, (and I don't approve of it, but he is) espousing the causes of civil partnerships, and of shortlists which have equal numbers of men and women. I regard the second as ludicrous. If you look at the list, it's about three-quarters male and a quarter female, roughly speaking. Therefore you cannot have a list drawn-up on merit which is 50-50. It doesn't make any sense at all. So it is real positive discrimination, I hate it. But as far as I am concerned, that isn't worth keeping Blair in power for. So I think it's a question of proportionality. To do anything about anything, you've got to get there [into power]. I've been nagging on about that for a very long time, but I think generally now it's an accepted view, you've got to get there. (Widdecombe Interview).

What Widdecombe highlights is the broad nature of Cameron's modernisation strategy. It not only involves modifying the party's stance on moral and sexual issues such as gay rights and civil partnerships, but goes beyond this to a much broader transformation of the party's image. For Bercow, 'quite apart from the fact that it is right in itself to be socially inclusive, it was important for the Conservative Party to become so in order to gain permission to be heard on a much wider range of issues' (Bercow Interview). To the irritation of traditionalists such as Widdecombe, this has involved attempts to change the public face of the party through priority selection of female, gay, and ethnic minority candidates, but it has also encompassed a major push on issues not traditionally associated with the Conservatives such as the environment. For example, Cameron's focus on the issue of climate change has been a major feature of his message that 'there's more to life than money' and his 'General Well Being' agenda (Cameron, 2006c). Central to Cameron's policy modernisation has been 'an explicitly avowed departure from Thatcherism' on the grounds that however vital it was to solving the problems of the 1970s and 1980s, it is no longer the most appropriate tool for addressing contemporary challenges (Dorey, 2007: 142). For Dorey, this has been signalled in two ways: through a return to the centre ground via the assertion of a 'new mode of Conservatism' which is plural, tolerant and compassionate, and 'by openly disavowing particular policy stances adopted by the Thatcher Governments during the 1980s and acknowledging that these were, at least with the benefit of hindsight, unnecessary or unwise' (2007: 142-3).

Whereas Cameron's three predecessors had all, to varying degrees, experimented with elements of this approach, none were able to do so with his apparent conviction or authenticity, so tended to slip back onto more familiar territory when opinion poll ratings failed to improve (Dorey, 2007: 139). The fragility of Cameron's project was briefly exposed in summer 2007, when Gordon Brown's arrival in Downing Street substantially cut the Conservatives' opinion poll lead. Cameron's wide lead had 'kept the diehards quiet for a while' but as it faded away they began to argue more forcefully that his project was failing (Portillo, 2007). 'Lamentably', Portillo noted, 'the signs are that Cameron is now caving in to Tory pressure' (2007). Crucially for Cameron, Conservative fortunes revived in the autumn, when Brown failed to call the general election and was hit by a series of

negative headlines. The maintenance of this poll lead has been a key factor enabling Cameron to stick to a modernising agenda, and is a luxury that was not enjoyed by his predecessors.

Widdecombe argues that in policy terms, Cameron does not represent a rejection of Conservative tradition, but can be better understood as a new application of core principles. To represent Cameron's agenda as a victory by modernisers over diametrically opposed traditionalists is therefore inaccurate, but (damagingly in her view) is an interpretation that has seduced many Conservatives:

If you look at Conservative policy through the ages it has always been mixed. There are some policies which inevitably appeal more to very traditional Conservatives, and some which appeal more people who are not necessarily Conservatives, there is absolutely nothing new about that. But I think it became a major issue for us, almost as if there was no choice, you had to be either A or B. In a way we were driven by the press, particularly people like Gove, who had his 'Mods versus Rockers' nonsense. And so you never actually assessed policies on their merits, it was always which of these two categories do they fall in to. I don't think we had to go along with that, but we did, rather too much. (Widdecombe Interview).

Cameron has offered some reassurance to Conservative traditionalists with his strong message on the importance of the family. This aspect of his policy programme remains compatible with the fundamental tenants of Thatcherism, and has thus been the cause of some unease amongst the modernisers. Where he differs from his predecessors, however, is that to date, it appears that his broader programme of modernisation to change the Conservative Party's image has allowed him to make marriage and the traditional family the centre of his social policy without appearing intolerant to other groups, and thus undermining the whole project. The risk remains for Cameron that as the details of a future Conservative government's policy programme become clear, and the winners and losers of proposed tax reforms are calculated, voters may react against this and his modernising efforts will be undermined. This is the essence of Brown's charge that Cameron is 'all style and no substance' and that in fundamental policy terms he is no different to his predecessors. The extent to which the electorate will study party policy is doubtful however, so Cameron's success in changing the 'mood music' is likely to prevail. This affords him the opportunity to succeed where Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard failed,

namely by satisfying his own party and core support with a Conservative approach in key policy areas such as the family, whilst also rebranding the party to reach out to a much wider constituency.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

The most significant division in the Conservative Party is now along the social, sexual and moral policy divide. Cameron's rebranding of the party as more tolerant and inclusive cannot disguise the fact that over the past decade on issues such as Section 28, civil partnerships and gay adoption the Conservatives have been deeply divided. Unlike in the economic sphere, the ideological ascendancy of Thatcherism is far from complete, but socially authoritarian spokespeople for 'Victorian values' remain vocal on the party's backbenches.

Over the past decade the debate between modernisers and traditionalists on social issues has also become inextricably intertwined with the wider question of how the party should seek to revive its electoral fortunes. A consensus quickly emerged in the party that a key factor in the electoral success of New Labour was the perception that Conservatives were disinterested in, and unable to offer solutions to, problems beyond the economic sphere. Conservatives did not agree, however, on how to address this problem. Should they seek to extend the economic liberalism of Thatcherism into the social sphere, or aim to 'remoralise' politics in a manner akin to American Republicans? (Ashbee, 2003).

Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all quickly abandoned initial tentative moves towards social liberalism when they failed to yield positive opinion poll results and came under fire from within the party. A renewed emphasis on the family did occur under Hague's leadership, although along strictly traditionalist Conservative lines, involving an implicit (and occasionally explicit) criticism of the Thatcher and Major governments for failing to do enough to support marriage, particularly through the tax system. Combined with his hard-line on Section 28, this amounted to a populist appeal to the Conservative core vote. Under Duncan Smith, a significant broadening of the party's agenda on social issues

occurred, particularly in terms of his efforts to position the party as concerned with poverty, social exclusion and 'championing the vulnerable' (Chapter 4). If this strategy had been pursued for longer, it may have helped dispel the Conservatives' image as selfish and socially exclusive. However, in some ways the socially conservative approach taken on these issues (for example the emphasis on marriage) may have actually reinforced public perception that the party was old-fashioned and stuck in the past, and risked alienating support amongst excluded groups such as single parents. Duncan Smith was also undermined by his tactical ineptitude, particularly his disastrous handling of Adoption and Children Bill. Howard's policy of free votes saw the party attempt to downplay divisions on the social, sexual and moral policy divide, and although it did not solve them it was more successful in party management terms. Public disunity between mods and rockers subsided, and the party went into the 2005 election with the vague pledge to 'govern in the interests of everyone', whether they be 'black or white, young or old, straight or gay, rural or urban, rich or poor' (Conservative Party, 2005: 1).

Cameron has enjoyed a more favourable context than his three predecessors for the successful pursuit of a modernisation strategy. Most of New Labour's legislative programme for sexual equality was complete by the end of their second term, so he could reasonably argue that the Conservatives simply have to accept this new reality, as it would be very difficult to reverse it. Failure at three previous general elections also gave him more room for manoeuvre by undermining the argument that the party simply needs to do what it has been doing previously. Most fundamentally however, Cameron has benefitted from a much more propitious electoral context – firstly with the final years of the tired Blair premiership, and latterly with the extraordinary implosion of Brown's. It has been these auspicious circumstances and the accompanying Conservative poll leads that have muted criticism from traditionalists and allowed Cameron to maintain his modernising course.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusions**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This study has focused on the Conservative Party leadership in opposition, between 1997 and 2005. The aim was to comprehend and explain the strategies employed by elite party actors in this period, in order to develop a better understanding of the Conservatives' electoral failure. Central to this was the role of ideology, and the research examined key areas of ideological tension in contemporary conservatism, and how the party sought to reconcile these into viable political strategies. To make sense of this complex picture, the thesis advanced and deployed an appropriate theoretical framework – the strategic-relational approach – which informed the analysis throughout. In conclusion to this research, the wider analytical implications of this approach are considered. The chapter then returns to the key arenas highlighted by the strategic-relational approach in Chapter 2, namely the parliamentary party, the wider party (membership), the electorate, and ideology. Strategy in relation to each of these across the 1997-2005 period is considered. Finally, it reflects on what this may tell us about the future direction and prospects for the Conservative Party under Cameron in the years ahead.

#### **8.2 Theoretical Implications**

The first chapter of this thesis considered how the academic literature has studied the Conservative Party in the past. It concluded that whilst it contains a great deal of value, Conservative historiography has tended to be heavily agency-focused, whilst the more recent political analytical tradition is more structurally inclined in its mode of explanation. It suggested the need for a more nuanced theoretical approach able to draw on the strengths of both sets of literature. By directing our analytical attention to the contextualised and reflective nature of strategic political action, the SRA has provided just such a framework for this case study, and helped to overcome the agency-structure divide identified in



Chapter 1. As such, it highlights the worth of this approach to future studies of the Conservative Party. The discussion of leadership strategy below (section 8.3) notes how it needs to be considered in relation to different contextual arenas. The SRA provides the conceptual tools to identify and analyse this multi-layered context. An appreciation of this was required for this case study of the party's electoral failure in opposition, but would also be requisite for any understanding of the development of a future governing statecraft, should the Conservatives succeed in this regard under Cameron.

Ideology has been an important feature of the analysis undertaken here. As Chapter 2 discussed, actors are not privileged with unmediated access to the strategically selective context in which they operate, and ideology is a key feature of the way in which they understand and interpret their reality. Political actors are engaged in a constant, dynamic process of reflecting on and reacting to context, as they seek to develop and implement effective strategies. By stressing the importance of these interpretations in strategic decision-making, the SRA provides an analytical mode sensitive to the ideational dimension without assigning ideologies an independent causality divorced from political actors. For analysts interested in the role of political ideas, the SRA therefore offers a hugely valuable frame for empirical analysis.

This research has also served to signal the importance of this approach more generally. The SRA offers a valuable theoretical basis for researchers interested in examining and understanding political action in a variety of contexts. The study of politics is, in large part, the study of decision-making processes. It examines how and why decisions are taken, and their implications. Consequently, the utility of the SRA is not confined to studies such as this which focus on party elites, but has the potential to be operationalised by analysts in many fields, who are interested in appreciating and unpacking the complex and contingent nature of political reality.

### 8.3 Leadership Strategy

Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all failed to develop an effective statecraft. The ‘art of winning elections’ eluded them, denying them the opportunity to try their hand at the premier objective identified by Bulpitt, namely ‘achieving a necessary degree of governing competence in office’ (1986: 19). During this eight-year stretch in opposition, the Conservatives were unable to present themselves as a credible and competent alternative governing force to Labour, and their leaders were unable to present themselves as serious and viable alternatives to Blair as Prime Minister. In spite of several attempts, they failed to articulate a new or convincing narrative of conservatism. In short, the party lacked a clear understanding of its rationale in the post-Thatcherite era, and was consequently unable to fulfil the basic requirements of opposition (Chapter 4).

As Heppell highlights, this may be part of a longer-term Conservative decline. In the modern era, the party’s history can be split in two halves: a period of undemocratic leader selection by the party elite (1922-1964), and a period of elected leaders, since the resignation of Alec Douglas-Hume. During the former the party had seven leaders, all of whom at some stage served as Prime Minister; during the latter, a further seven have led the party, but only three (Heath, Thatcher and Major) have reached Downing Street, and only Thatcher was able to sustain an effective statecraft (Heppell, 2008: 195-6). Contextualised in terms of the troubles of Heath (who lost three general elections and won one) and Major, whose government was almost paralysed by intra-party divisions, the difficulties since 1997 perhaps appear less exceptional.

Heppell identifies three key themes from his analysis of the post-1964 period. These are a failure of process (in terms of how leaders are elected); a failure of outcome (in terms of electing leaders who lack legitimacy and authority); and an obsession with ideology, which has clouded the judgement needed for leadership selection (2008: 197-8). In Heppell’s view:

When debating who their party leader should be, the Conservative parliamentarians (and latterly party members), should have been guided by one over-riding objective: which

Conservative candidate being presented to them is the best equipped to acquire and retain power... Rather than adhere to this outward looking consideration of what would appeal to the electorate the most, Conservatives have often been overly influenced by what was most acceptable to themselves first. (Heppell, 2008: 197-8).

This is undoubtedly a pertinent critique: in both 1997 and 2001 the party passed over candidates with greater electoral appeal (Clarke in 1997, and Clarke and Portillo in 2001) in favour of less well-known, less-experienced, and less adept media performers. This research confirms that of Heppell in that ideological considerations played an important part in these elections. However, to account for the broader strategic failure of these leaders once elected we need to look beyond this to the multi-layered context they sought to address.

As Chapter 4 demonstrated, Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all made some initial efforts to devise a narrative of conservatism to widen the party's electoral appeal. To differing extents, they each signalled their desire to 'reach out' to voters disillusioned by the Conservatives in 1997. However, in all three cases these endeavours were abandoned in favour of more traditional messages designed to appeal to the core vote. Under Hague and Howard, these were inchoate efforts, which were rapidly ditched. Duncan Smith's more sustained effort to develop the themes of renewing the public services and helping the vulnerable also came under pressure as the party's poll-ratings failed to improve. Had he won the vote of confidence in his leadership and stayed on until the 2005 election, the turn towards the core vote signalled shortly before his departure may have become much more deeply embedded, to the extent that a Conservative campaign under Duncan Smith might have been little different to that which was eventually fought by Howard.

All three leaders exhibited signs of strategic thinking, but ultimately failed to stick to the course of action that this implied. What has been referred to as 'core vote' strategy throughout this research, namely policies and rhetoric designed to appeal to the mainstay of Conservative Party support, has therefore been revealed as the Conservatives' default position. In this sense, 'core vote strategy' is not a strategy at all, but what the party reverts to when it lacks a clear direction or purpose, or when the party's leaders fail to convince it of the merits of an alternative strategic direction. This tells us something about the nature

of contemporary conservatism and how Conservative politicians both understand their role and view their support. The essence of contemporary conservatism, when not being purposefully led elsewhere, is pungently Eurosceptic, socially illiberal and narrowly nationalistic. In policy terms, this has translated to opposition to the single currency and the Treaties of Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon (as well as Lisbon's defunct predecessor, the proposed European constitution); calls for significantly tighter controls on asylum and immigration; and a defence of traditional social values such as marriage against liberalising tendencies. Conservative leaders, despite their lack of support in some areas of the United Kingdom and amongst some social groups, continue to view themselves as national figures with a duty to defend the nation's sovereignty, constitution, and cultural homogeneity. As such, the politics of nationhood remains a central component of conservatism. Their actions suggest a belief that these themes retain a potent electoral appeal, although divisions in the party between mods and rockers, and the sporadic concern to develop a more inclusive narrative, indicate that at least some Conservatives recognise the diminishing relevance (and potential unattractiveness) of traditional messages.

The default core vote position also illustrates the continuing hold of Thatcherism on the party. Its central components are firmly Thatcherite, based around a strong but limited state and economic liberalism (most commonly illustrated in policy terms by calls for the party to promise tax cuts), and social authoritarianism. The main objective of Thatcherism – reversing national economic decline – is no longer of primary concern, but the perceived need to defend national sovereignty (against encroachment from the EU) and address social and moral decline draw directly from the party's Thatcherite heritage. The continuing hold of Thatcher's aura on the party was illustrated by the significance of her endorsements in the 1997 and 2001 leadership elections, and her expression of displeasure with Lilley's R. A. Butler lecture in 1999. The importance of the manner of Thatcher's eviction from office cannot be understated, and is a lesson plotters against Gordon Brown would do well to heed. It left a scar on the Conservatives' collective psyche, and ironically reinforced the ideological hold of Thatcherism on the party. As Kenneth Clarke commented:

I think the Conservative Party's problems really stem from the fall of Margaret Thatcher and the circumstances of it... That's what destroyed the equilibrium of the party. Of course, the disputes became about other things, but we never came to terms with that. The wound was quite dreadful, it caused bitterness on all sides. (Clarke, interview in Portillo, 2008).

As Michael Portillo graphically stated, some Thatcherites 'feel that a murder was committed, and I think that has made them cling all the more dearly to this very literal and unreconstructed idea of Thatcherism' (Portillo Interview). Significantly, David Cameron is the first of her successors not to receive Thatcher's public endorsement, and he may be the first to step out of her shadow. For Heppell, Cameron's election, over the more ideologically pure David Davis, suggests the Conservatives are 'ending their self-destructive obsession with ideology' (Heppell, 2008: 206).

When measured against the most important outcome for a political party – electoral success – the leadership of Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard falls short. As Chapter 1 noted, agency-centred analyses that stress the importance of leadership thus tend to ruthlessly condemn this failure. However, a better understanding of the circumstances and process that led to these displays of strategic inconsistency and confusion can be gained by considering the different contextual arenas that leaders seek to address.

### 8.3.1 *The Parliamentary Party*

The parliamentary party is a key arena which any Conservative leader must successfully manage. Leaders are dependent upon parliamentary support for their legitimacy. This is particularly the case for leaders of the opposition, who cannot claim the electoral mandate conferred by victory at a general election. Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard each expended significant energy managing the parliamentary party.

Hague enjoyed some success in managing his parliamentary colleagues. Firstly, he kept the party together as a single entity. This was vital if the Conservatives are ever to return to office a recognisable party, but their survival in this form was far from guaranteed in 1997. The most divisive issue facing the party when Hague became leader was European

integration. As Chapter 5 discussed, Hague hardened Conservative resistance to the single currency, stating that the party would oppose British membership in the current parliament and the next, effectively ruling it out for a decade. This policy attracted derision, as Hague could neither say that he opposed joining the currency on principle, or that he would offer a referendum even if the case for membership appeared compelling. However, it was a success in that it was a position (possibly the only position) that the vast majority of his MPs could subscribe to at that time.

Hague was unable to convince the bulk of the parliamentary party, or even his shadow cabinet, of the merits of his early attempts to reach out to a wider constituency of voters, notably the proposal for 'Kitchen Table Conservatism' (KTC). As Harris notes, the demise of this strategy 'can be attributed to its non-acceptance within the party leadership'. Even Hague himself 'did not sufficiently believe in the strategy to force its implementation' (Harris, 2005: 270). Traditionalists were unhappy with this early approach and sought to undermine it. However, Hague's later strategy was successful in party management terms in that modernisers (notably Portillo) were accommodated within the shadow cabinet. Hague reduced dissent by not making the core vote strategy explicit. In the run up to the general election, Hague 'paid lip service to the demands of the modernisers by including but not emphasising, the party's policies on social inclusion and the public services' (Harris, 2005: 276). A degree of public unity was thus maintained.

Duncan Smith failed to manage the parliamentary party, and was eventually unseated by it. Like Hague with KTC, he was unable to persuade either his shadow cabinet or the parliamentary party of the virtues of his strategy. He was undermined by a lack of legitimacy, having secured the support of less than one third of his parliamentary colleagues in the 2001 leadership election (Heppell, 2008: 148). Following the more Eurosceptic line instituted by Hague, Duncan Smith was able to successfully harden the party's position on the single currency to one of opposing membership in principle, and to reduce the prominence of the politics of nationhood in Conservative discourse. Whilst leader, he was also able to successfully guide party strategy away from a focus on core vote issues. However, his handling of the question of adoption rights for gay couples was a

cataclysmic failure of party management, and became symbolic of the wider sense of his failure as leader. His tactical ineptitude brutally exposed ideological divisions and led directly to the end of his leadership. Despite his efforts to widen electoral appeal by developing the party's policies on public services and social justice, Duncan Smith was unable to gain support from the modernisers. This reflected his own limitations as a leader. As David Cameron's success has shown, Conservative MPs can be led into unfamiliar territory if they have been convinced of the electoral benefits of doing so. However sound the logic of his approach, Duncan Smith was hampered by his poor communication and media skills. On what Hay (2008: 6) labels the 'performative dimension' of political action Duncan Smith was a failure. Encumbered by his own rebellious past, he could not inspire the confidence or loyalty of his colleagues.

Howard, by contrast, was a successful party manager. He made instilling discipline his overriding priority, and under his leadership the Conservatives enjoyed a degree of public unity not seen for a decade. Howard's professional manner earned him the respect, if not the affection, of the parliamentary party. His approach to leadership was premised on the belief that unity was an essential prerequisite for electability. Whilst he has been strongly criticised for failing to develop Duncan Smith's agenda on the public services and social justice (Chapter 4), he balanced both modernisers and traditionalists in his shadow cabinet and kept public dissent to a minimum. He also managed moral issues much more effectively than his predecessor, offering free votes on potentially divisive subjects such as civil partnerships. Like Hague, he paid lip service to the modernisers' concerns. He won some plaudits for his decision to vote in favour of civil partnerships, which was interpreted as a signal to his colleagues that he favoured a more liberal conservatism. Similar signals were given in his speech announcing his candidature for the party leadership, delivered in the ultra-modern setting of the Saatchi Gallery and penned by Francis Maude. Then, Howard stated that the Conservatives are at their best when 'broad in appeal and generous in outlook' and pledged to 'lead this party from its centre' (Howard, 2003).

Howard's approach was to address the concerns of the modernisers early in his tenure so that he could then move on to more traditional Conservative concerns as the election

approached. This did not enable him to develop a wider electoral appeal and did not satisfy the demands of the modernisers: as one commented, in 2005 ‘we came across as limited in our ambition and unattractive’ (Bercow Interview). However, Howard conceded enough ground to mute criticism and maintain unity, allowing him to fight a disciplined election campaign. With the benefit of hindsight, Howard’s style of leadership and focus on discipline (if not Howard himself) was perhaps what the Conservatives required in 1997. In party management terms, he laid a solid foundation for his successor, and in this respect marked a substantial turning point in the Conservatives’ recovery.

### 8.3.2 *The party membership*

With his first Party Chairman, Cecil Parkinson, William Hague oversaw a substantial internal reform programme. This radically changed the position of the membership, who gained the final say in leadership elections. In the short-term, Hague’s strategy in this arena was very successful. One of his first initiatives after becoming leader was to subject his leadership and ‘principles for change’ to a ballot of party members. With no other candidates on offer, unsurprisingly this was overwhelmingly endorsed.<sup>1</sup> However, this strengthened Hague’s position, allowing him to claim the dual legitimacy of backing from both members and the MPs who had elected him. He used a similar tactic to gain backing for his *Fresh Future* reforms, single currency policy, and draft manifesto. Hague used these plebiscites to enhance his legitimacy and authority over his MPs and wider party. On Europe in particular this was an important step along the road to becoming a firmly Eurosceptic party.

However, Hague’s reforms were criticised for failing to stimulate an enduring reinvigoration of party organisation. His target of doubling the number of party members was not met, with numbers actually dropping. For Kelly, the reforms were part of the problem: ‘Hague’s reorganisation may well have exacerbated Tory losses by demoralising, and thus diminishing, the party’s constituency membership’ (Kelly, 2002: 38). The new

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<sup>1</sup> The 1997 ballot on Hague’s leadership and ‘principles for change’ saw a turnout of 45.1 percent, with 80.8 percent backing him.



structure failed to attract new members or support. Hague hoped that by reforming the party he would demonstrate that it was inclusive, modern, and changing in response to new challenges. In the event, it did nothing to change the image of the Conservatives as old-fashioned and out of touch; it was not his 'Clause Four moment'. This wider aspect of Hague's party management strategy was not a success.

The most commented on aspect of Hague's organisational changes were the new rules for electing a leader, under which Iain Duncan Smith was chosen. After the field of candidates had been reduced to two by the parliamentary party, an all-party ballot made the final choice. Duncan Smith won this convincingly, securing 60.7 percent of the vote to Ken Clarke's 39.3 percent (Heppell, 2008: 147). The margin of this victory over the pro-European Clarke helped Duncan Smith to both harden party policy on Europe, and reduce its prominence, with little dissent. However, he was unable to use this mandate to secure his own legitimacy and authority with his parliamentary colleagues, although he appealed to this 'overwhelming' endorsement in his call for the party to 'unite or die', after the rebellion over gay adoption (Duncan Smith, 2002e). Unlike Hague, he did not seek to use party ballots to bolster his position. This was a tactical mistake, but lacking the confidence of his parliamentary colleagues and shadow cabinet his leadership was always doomed. Duncan Smith's leadership serves to illustrate the power imbalance between the parliamentary party and the membership, even after Hague's One Member, One Vote reforms. A leader may garner extra legitimacy from the membership, but this does not provide an independent source of authority enabling the leader to act without parliamentary support.

Michael Howard originally signalled his intention offer the membership a formal ballot on his appointment as leader, even though no challengers came forward. In the end however, it was subject only to an 'informal consultation' (Tempest, 2003). He drew his authority from his support amongst MPs and his own performances and political stature. Having lost the 2005 election, he also attempted to change the party's rules to return the final say in future leadership elections to MPs. This proposal, although supported by a majority of Conservative MPs and party members, failed to gain the necessary two-thirds support in a

constitutional college, so the election went ahead under the system that had elected Duncan Smith (Heppell, 2008: 176-7).

### 8.3.3 *The electorate*

Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all failed to devise a successful electoral strategy, as the general election results and poor opinion-poll ratings showed. Hague looked to exploit the European issue, calculating that on the question of closer integration the Conservatives were closer to public opinion than the government. His populist stance led the Conservatives to a dramatic win in the 1999 European Elections, a significant achievement just two years after the 1997 landslide. However, as Chapter 4 discussed, despite being achieved on a very low turnout, this was a key event convincing Hague of the electoral potential of a core vote strategy and his abandonment of efforts to develop a more inclusive appeal.

To the surprise of many observers, Duncan Smith showed an appreciation of the limitations of Hague's later strategy. In April 2002, Kenneth Clarke, who had branded his rival 'a hanger and a flogger' during the leadership election campaign, expressed his 'surprise and delight' with the direction his vanquisher was leading the party, which he contrasted favourably with Hague's approach (Murphy, 2002). However, as noted above, Duncan Smith's limitations as a political performer hindered his ability to communicate his approach to the electorate. A good strategy is of little use without the necessary skills to implement it, and he could not survive to put it to test at a general election.

Michael Howard's approach to the electorate was tactical rather than strategic. He lacked the time to develop a long-term strategic vision for conservatism of his own, but chose to move away from the agenda set by Duncan Smith. He perceived this to be failing as it had not been accompanied by improvements in the opinion polls, and doubted his own likelihood of making it work. Instead, he utilised the expertise of Australian election strategist Lynton Crosby to develop a tightly focused campaign aimed at neutralising Labour's strengths and exploiting the highly salient issue of immigration (Chapter 6). In

this respect Howard had some success: intensive targeting of certain seats reaped rewards, adding 33 MPs to the Conservative benches, despite little advance in terms of vote share. In one of the most dramatic gains, Justine Greening regained David Mellor's former seat of Putney for the Conservatives, with a swing of 6.5 percent. However, they were unable to repeat this performance on a wide scale, recording just a 3 percent swing nationally, largely due to a fall in the Labour vote (BBC News, 2005).

Agency-focused analyses have strongly criticised Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard for failing to develop the Conservatives' electoral appeal, with Howard being especially blameworthy (Chapter 1: 4-5). Certainly, the caustic nature of the 2005 campaign cannot be denied, and was clearly ineffective in advancing the Conservatives' vote-share. However, the evidence from David Cameron's leadership is that this has not done lasting damage to the party. Cameron has been able to pursue a different course and change the image of the party. Notwithstanding his own role in devising the 2005 manifesto and campaign, he has successfully portrayed it as 'the past' in contrast to his seemingly new Conservative prospectus. Perversely, Howard's leadership may actually be advantageous to Cameron as it serves to highlight the dissimilarity with his own, accentuating his claim that under him the party is changing.

For Quinn (2008), the key electoral problem facing the Conservatives since 1997 has been their party image. The fact that the party had an image problem was recognised early on. Hague's baseball cap, his visit to the Notting Hill Carnival, and his *Fresh Future* reforms were all aimed, in part, at changing the Conservatives image. Similarly, Duncan Smith's efforts to downplay the issues of tax, Europe and immigration were derived from his recognition that even if Conservative policies were in line with a significant swathe of public sentiment, highlighting them reinforced the negative image of the party as right-wing, extreme, and out-of-touch. It is puzzling that the Conservatives did not stick more doggedly to a strategy aimed at shedding their 'nasty party' image. That they did not suggests an unwillingness to acknowledge the scale of the problem, and a lack of a clear idea of how it could be effectively addressed. Both William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith struggled to present themselves as in touch with modern Britain. In this respect Michael

Howard's strategy was perhaps more realistic. He sought to portray the Conservatives to the electorate as united, disciplined, and competent, which reflected his own strengths.

As noted above, between 1997 and 2005 Conservative leadership strategy was confused and inconsistent. In part this reflects the competing demands faced by party leaders, particularly the high priority that must be ascribed to party management. It also reflects uncertainty and disagreement about how best to communicate with the electorate, and what sort of messages potential Conservative voters would respond to. This was illustrated by the case studies of the party's approach to Europe, national identity and the English Question, and social and moral issues. On Europe, Hague allowed the Conservatives' own fixation with the issue to override the fact that other issues were accorded much higher priority by the electorate. The national identity question betrayed the party's doubts over whether to exploit or ignore an increasing sense of English identity. Debates such as the retention of Section 28 exposed disagreement between mods and rockers in the party. These differences were not merely strategic but ideological, as the next section explores.

#### 8.3.4 *Ideology*

Ideology cuts across all aspects of the strategic context faced by political actors, and also influences their interpretation of it. Leaders must manage the ideological demands of their parliamentary colleagues and party members, and project a narrative of their political ideas that is electorally appealing. As Chapter 1 noted, Conservative Party historiography has traditionally emphasised its non-ideological, pragmatic approach to politics. This reflected the sympathetic disposition of many Conservative historians, and their view of conservatism as a practical creed. However, later work on Thatcherism highlighted its ideological nature, and the importance of ideas in achieving political hegemony. Since 1997, academic analyses have tended to point to ideology as a factor inhibiting the leadership's room for manoeuvre, harming party image and inhibiting electoral recovery. Stephen Evans, for example, argues that even David Cameron has had his hands tied hands tied 'by the hostility of local Conservative associations and the prevailing balance of power within the parliamentary Conservative Party' (Evans, 2008: 313).

Resistance to change in the Conservative Party has undoubtedly been ideologically motivated. However, as Cameron has demonstrated, change is not impossible, if a clear lead is offered. Cameron has also been careful not to repudiate Thatcherism; rather he has tried to present himself as moving on from it in order to address contemporary concerns. In a sense he is presenting himself as emulating Thatcher's radicalism, just in different circumstances. Thatcher, he argued, offered 'an absolutely modernising futuristic message' and his objective is 'to do the same thing in very different circumstances, where a lot of the future changes are about dealing with social problems rather than economic problems, but also understanding a fantastically rapidly changing world' (Cameron, interview in Portillo, 2008).

Whilst Cameron has enjoyed much more favourable circumstances (in the face of three consecutive defeats, even the most ardent traditionalists are more inclined to concede the need for change) his record is an indictment of his predecessors. Under Hague, the Conservatives were not constrained to core vote themes and rhetoric simply by ideology, but by a lack of commitment to change by Hague and other members of the shadow cabinet, who failed to clearly articulate an alternative approach. Duncan Smith showed a greater degree of personal commitment to his own vision of how the Conservatives needed to change, but failed to communicate it effectively and persuade others of his case. Howard enjoyed a much more authority than his predecessors, making his failure in this respect greater. Rather than challenge the party to change its ideological parameters, he chose to work within them.

Either by accident or design, the leadership of Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard oversaw significant ideological change in the Conservative Party. Most strikingly, as Chapter 5 highlighted, European integration has ceased to be the source of a major ideological schism. As noted above, this was the result of relatively successful management of the issue by the leadership. It also reflected the fact that with the prominent exception of Kenneth Clarke, very few pro-Europeans remained on the Conservative benches after the 1997 landslide. Even under David Cameron, who is deliberately amorphous about his

ideology on other issues, the Conservatives remain firmly Eurosceptic. The issue retains the capacity to cause difficulties, such as the recent dispute over whether Conservative MEPs should be in or out of the European People's Party (EPP), and will inevitably cause some friction if and when the Conservatives return to office. However, it no longer has the destructive virulence seen in the 1990s. The debate in the Conservative Party is now about degrees of Euroscepticism, not Europhiles versus Eurosceptics. In the long-term the party leadership may face backbench pressure to move towards a policy of withdrawal from the European Union, but for now that remains very much a minority position.

The other highly significant and increasingly noted ideological change in this period has been the intensification of the debate between social liberals and social conservatives, along what Heppell labelled the 'social, sexual and moral policy divide' (2002: 312). This is not a new division amongst Conservatives: the party has always encompassed a variety of views on such matters. However, wider societal changes since 1997, driven in part by New Labour's progressive liberalism on social issues, served to accentuate the Conservatives' image as a divided, old-fashioned and out-of-touch party. As Chapter 7 noted, these disagreements became linked the debate about electoral recovery, as leading modernisers argued that social liberalism was a prerequisite for any Conservative revival. These divisions increased under William Hague, characterised by his own mixed-messages on social and moral issues. They peaked under Duncan Smith, and eventually contributed to his downfall. His own social conservatism was a key factor in convincing modernisers that he was not, as he claimed, intent on changing the Conservative Party. However, Michael Howard and David Cameron have shown more effectively how these divisions can be diffused and contained through effective party management, particularly free votes on moral and sexual legislation.

Cameron has also succeeded in maintaining his own liberal image whilst placing the family at the heart of his politics. Key to this has been his redefinition of family, most notably his willingness (unthinkable for a Conservative leader a decade earlier) to extend any tax benefits offered to married couples to gay couples in civil partnerships. However, this is likely to emerge as a political difficulty in the future. Any tax change generates

relative losers: those excluded from the benefit. If Cameron advances specific proposals to promote marriage through the tax system, he risks the accusation that he is discriminating not against gay couples but against single parents. It is thus a risky political calculation as to whether the electorate, after a decade of Labour's relative social liberalism, are ready for such a change. This is unlikely, however, to be the source of an intra-party dispute on anything like the scale caused by Europe in the 1990s. Whilst ideological divisions on social, sexual and moral issues have increased, the evidence is that these can be managed. Positioning on these issues, unlike for American Republicanism, is not a central defining feature of contemporary British conservatism.

Linked to the question of tax cuts for married couples, another possible source of ideological friction in the Conservative Party under Cameron is the economic policy divide, over the wider question of the overall level of public spending. This has been a muted debate of late, and is unlikely to re-emerge in the short-term as the worsening economic situation means that any incoming Conservative government is unlikely to enjoy much scope to either increase expenditure or reduce taxation. However, since 1997 Labour have overseen a sustained increase in spending, bringing about a quiet revolution in public sector investment. The Conservatives' Economic Competitiveness Policy Group, chaired by John Redwood, argued that this has resulted in a 'lack of tax competitiveness' and argued that cuts are essential to sustain economic growth (Redwood and Wolfson, 2007: 78). They suggested cuts in income tax, stamp duty, corporation tax, capital gains tax, and the abolition of inheritance tax. The Shadow Chancellor, however, fearful of the charge of cutting public services, made it clear that the Conservatives would not go into a general election offering upfront tax cuts unless they were paid for by increases elsewhere. In other words, the overall tax burden would remain the same (Montgomerie, 2007). Whilst this is unlikely to satisfy the party's right-wing, this debate does not rival that seen in the 1970s. The party leadership's caution in offering tax cuts reflects pragmatic electoral calculation rather than fundamental ideological difference – neo-liberalism reigns supreme.

#### 8.4 The Conservatives under Cameron

In his analysis of the transformation of the Labour Party into New Labour, Adam Lent suggested that important early causes and aspects of that transformation are often overlooked. Typical analyses, he claimed, 'begin in the period after the 1987 election defeat, and less commonly after the 1985 conference' (Lent, 1997: 9). By contrast, Lent argued that the initial signs of transformation could be found much earlier, in the period immediately following the party's nadir at the 1983 general election. There is a risk that if and when the Conservatives return to power, analysts of their electoral recovery may make a similar error, dating the beginning of the process to Cameron's victory in the 2005 leadership election, or perhaps to the return of party discipline under Howard.

In fact, although the 1997-2005 period has been one characterised by strategic mistakes and electoral failure, it is vital to any understanding of the trajectory of the party under Cameron. One effect of this time in opposition was to make Cameron's leadership pitch of 'change' more attractive in 2005. Thatcherism was made possible by the fact that Heath was seen to have failed. To the discomfort of traditionalists, electoral failure in 1997 and 2001 once again made the party open to a more radical agenda. The seeds of this message can be seen further back however, in the debates the party has been having since 1997. A modernisation strategy based on acceptance of difference, social liberalism and tolerance owes something to Hague's early efforts to forge an inclusive approach, as well as to Duncan Smith's efforts to downplay traditional Conservative strengths in favour of social justice and public services. The genesis of Cameron's family politics and call to fix Britain's 'broken society' can be found in this agenda. The need for the parliamentary party to be more representative of modern society was highlighted by Hague in 1997.

The Conservatives have faced a rapidly transforming political, social and economic context since 1997, so it is perhaps unsurprising that they have struggled to keep up. The party Cameron inherited had shifted significantly from that bequeathed by Major to Hague. Since then, the party has accepted the minimum wage; tax credits; independence for the Bank of England; greatly increased public spending levels; constitutional reform, including



devolution to Scotland and Wales and House of Lords reform; the abolition of Section 28; and civil partnerships and adoption rights for gay couples. The expansion of the European Union has led to higher immigration from the new member states, whilst New Labour's embrace of globalisation changed the terms of the economic debate. Cameron has thus been able to argue (correctly) that the party faces a different set of challenges compared to twenty years ago, and thus requires a different set of solutions.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Cameron's conservatism is its focus on the environment. This has been at the forefront of his efforts to detoxify the party's brand image, and portray Conservatives as compassionate and caring. In this respect, Cameron's success has been remarkable compared to his predecessors. He has presented the Conservatives, for years defined by their approach to the economy and taxation, as being concerned with social as well as economic well-being. As Reeves has noted, Cameron's mantra that 'there is such a thing as society, it is just not the same thing as the state' is a 'deliberate wedge between himself and Thatcher' (Reeves, 2008: 64). Focusing on environmental issues, particularly climate change, is an effective way for Cameron to show his concern for the good of society as a whole, countering the supposition that Conservatives are preoccupied with individualistic self-interest.

Cameron has already achieved the most important part of his strategy for Conservative electoral revival. Indeed, this was largely complete by the time of Gordon Brown's arrival in Downing Street. He has persuaded the electorate that he (if not his party) is a credible, viable alternative, and worth listening too. By July 2008, 50 percent of people polled regarded Cameron as 'a good leader' of the Conservative Party, and 37 percent named him as their preferred Prime Minister (over 18 percent for Brown and 7 percent for Nick Clegg). Cameron was regarded as 'caring' by 52 percent, 'effective' by 44 percent, 'competent' by 51 percent, and 'likeable' by 57 percent (YouGov, 2008: 3). In part, these figures reflect Cameron's charisma and skills as a politician: on the performative dimension he outranks his three immediate predecessors. But it also reflects the success of a comprehensive and sustained rebranding strategy since Cameron became leader. This has distanced Cameron from Thatcher, emphasised issues not traditionally associated with the

Conservatives, and sought to present the party as contrite about past mistakes. As Reeves notes:

This first stage of the Cameron project has been like a sorbet between courses, intended to cleanse the electorate's palate of late Thatcherism. Now that the bitter taste is gone, tougher policies on welfare, immigration and public services can be pursued without being dismissed as typical products from the 'nasty party' (2008: 64).

Once achieved, the Conservatives are able to move back onto their traditional issue strengths without appearing extreme, old-fashioned, or out-of-touch; and are better placed to take advantage of events such as government failure. Cameron has effectively earned the right, which eluded his predecessors, to be listened to by the electorate. Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard never broke through this carapace, so were poorly positioned to capitalise on Labour's unpopularity. This was most visibly demonstrated at the 2005 general election, when Labour's share of the vote fell substantially whilst the Conservatives' remained almost static.

It would be wrong, however, to regard Cameron as un-Conservative. On the economy he is essentially neo-liberal, and on Europe as sceptical as Thatcher before she left office. As Finlayson has noted, he 'combines his acceptance of contemporary standards in personal morality, and his embrace of do-gooder liberalism, with familiar Conservative commitments: to the family, to social entrepreneurs rather than the state, to individual freedom, aspiration and national pride' (2008: 4). What Cameron adds to Thatcherism (whether genuine or contrived) is a focus on society and social problems. His difficulty is in providing convincing answers that do not involve centralised direction and state intervention, which has been at the core of his critique of the New Labour decade.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

This thesis opened with a simply stated question. Why has it taken the Conservative Party so long to get back into a position to challenge for power? It has sought to shed light on this through an examination of the party in opposition over two full parliaments, between 1997 and 2005. The strategic-relational analytical approach directed our attention to the

contextualised nature of leadership strategy. This has exposed the complex and contingent nature of political events, and the difficulties inherent in devising effective political strategies. Explanations which ascribe culpability solely to party leaders are inadequate. The equation of electoral failure with leadership failure only paints a partial picture, as leaders orientate strategy towards various (and sometimes competing) aspects of the multilayered context they face.

Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly the case that between 1997 and 2005 the Conservatives have been characterised by uncertainty of strategic direction, and this can be seen as a failure of leadership. This stems, however, not merely from the inadequacies of key personnel, but from a wider ideological malaise in Conservative politics after Thatcher. The party has struggled to redefine its purpose and message: it has lacked a clear understanding and narrative of what post-Thatcherite conservatism is for. This lack of a shared vision led to disagreement over the causes of defeat and the appropriate response. In part, this reflects the success of New Labour under Tony Blair. By monopolising the political centre-ground Blair neutralised weaknesses on issues such as taxation and crime that had previously been susceptible to Conservative attack, whilst at the same time denying them issue space on the key battleground of the public services. It also reflects the party's own unwillingness and inability to challenge the parameters of Conservative politics set by Thatcherite statecraft.

The 1997-2005 period was not one of absolute leadership failure. William Hague succeeded in holding the party together as a single entity, a status which was far from guaranteed. We shall never know whether, as many Conservative MPs believe, the party would have split under the leadership of the Europhile Kenneth Clarke. But by choosing instead the candidate closest to the party's centre they may have avoided this fate. Iain Duncan Smith began the policy renewal and process in earnest, and began to forge a new statement of conservatism. Michael Howard restored party discipline and some sense of unity and professionalism. These were all essential prerequisites for an electoral revival, but it is remarkable that it took three different leaders and eight years to achieve such relatively modest steps.

Since Thatcher, the Conservatives have taken the long road to renewal. Whether Cameron can rebuild Conservative hegemony on anything like the scale of Thatcherism is yet to be seen. The challenge for the left will be to find new and appealing means to counter a Conservative politics finally stepping out of Thatcher's shadow. Cameron's greatest challenge, as Macmillan observed, will be events.

## Appendix: Interviewee Biographies

### **The Rt Hon Michael Ancram QC MP**

Michael Ancram joined the Shadow Cabinet after the 1997 election, serving as Constitutional Affairs spokesman. In June 1998 he became Deputy Party Chairman and in October 1998 became Chairman of the Conservative Party, a position he held until shortly after the 2001 general election. He was a candidate in the ensuing leadership election, and was eliminated along with David Davis after the re-run of the first round of voting (having initially tied with Davis for fourth place). The eventual winner, Iain Duncan Smith, appointed him as his deputy and Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, a position he held until 2005. He retired from the frontbench following the election of David Cameron as party leader.

### **John Bercow MP**

John Bercow was elected to Parliament in 1997, and joined the frontbench in June 1999. He became a member of the Shadow Cabinet under Iain Duncan Smith in September 2001, resigning in November 2002 over the issue of gay adoption. He returned to the Shadow Cabinet under Michael Howard, serving as Shadow Secretary of State for International Development between November 2003 and September 2004.

### **Douglas Carswell MP**

Douglas Carswell was elected MP for Harwich in May 2005. He is a leading moderniser and co-author of the influential *Direct Democracy: An Agenda for a New Model Party* pamphlet published in the same year. He is a vocal Eurosceptic, and has publicly called for Britain to withdraw from the European Union.

### **The Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP**

Iain Duncan Smith became the Conservative MP for Chingford and Woodford Green at the 1992 election, following the retirement from the House of Commons of Norman Tebbit. A committed Eurosceptic, he achieved some prominence as one of the Maastricht rebels in the 1992-1997 parliament. After the election of William Hague as party leader in June 1997 he was appointed to the Shadow Cabinet as Shadow Secretary of State for Social Security, and became Shadow Defence Secretary in the June 1999 reshuffle. He became party leader on 12 September 2001, having convincingly defeated Ken Clarke in a ballot of Conservative Party members. He lost a vote of confidence in his leadership on 29 October 2003 and was replaced by Michael Howard eight days later. In December 2005, David Cameron appointed Duncan Smith as Chair of the Social Justice policy review group.

### **Damian Green MP**

Damian Green became the Conservative MP for Ashford in 1997. In 2001 he joined the Shadow Cabinet, serving as spokesman for Education and Skills (2001-3), and Transport (2003-4). After the May 2005 election he managed David Davis's leadership campaign, and in December 2005 was appointed Shadow Minister for Immigration. He professes to be a 'One Nation' Tory and is a Vice-President of the moderate Tory Reform Group.

### **The Rt Hon Michael Howard QC MP**

Michael Howard was a senior member of John Major's government, serving as Secretary of State for Employment (1990-2), the Environment (1992-3), and as Home Secretary (1993-7). Following the 1997 election he became Shadow Foreign Secretary, a position he held until his retirement from the frontbench in 1999. Under Iain Duncan Smith he returned to the frontbench as Shadow Chancellor, a position he held until his 'coronation' as party leader in November 2003. He announced his decision to stand down as leader the day after the 2005 general election, but stayed on until the election of David Cameron in December.

### **The Rt Hon Peter Lilley MP**

Peter Lilley was Secretary of State for Social Security between 1992 and 1997. After the election he stood for the leadership of the Conservative Party, but withdrew from the race after the first round of voting. In William Hague's first Shadow Cabinet he became deputy leader and Shadow Chancellor. Francis Maude became Shadow Chancellor in June 1998, but Lilley was retained as deputy leader and remained responsible for policy renewal. In the June 1999 reshuffle he was sacked from the Shadow Cabinet.

### **The Rt Hon Theresa May MP**

Theresa May was elected as Conservative MP for Maidenhead. She became Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment in June 1999, a position she held until the election of Iain Duncan Smith. Since then she has held various Shadow Cabinet posts, but it was during her tenure as Party Chairman (2002-3) that she attracted a degree of controversy, for her conference speech that commented that the Conservatives had come to be seen as the 'nasty party'.

### **The Rt Hon Lord Parkinson**

Lord Parkinson became William Hague's first Party Chairman in 1997, a position he had last held under Margaret Thatcher between September 1981 and October 1983. Under Hague he held this position for a year and helped to initiate internal party reforms.

### **John Penrose MP**

John Penrose was elected Conservative MP for Weston-super-Mare at the 2005 election. Since then he has been Parliamentary Private Secretary to Oliver Letwin, who became head of the Conservative Research Department and head of the Party's Policy Review upon the election of David Cameron in December 2005.

### **The Rt Hon Michael Portillo**

Michael Portillo was widely tipped to succeed John Major as leader of the Conservative Party, but any such ambitions were thwarted by the electorate at the 1997 general election. He re-entered Parliament in 1999 at the Kensington and Chelsea by-election, and was Shadow Chancellor between February 2000 and September 2001. After his unsuccessful bid for the leadership in 2001, he returned to the backbenches, and retired from the House of Commons in 2005.

### **The Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC MP**

Malcolm Rifkind joined the Cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland in 1986, a post he retained until Margaret Thatcher's departure from Downing Street. He was a senior member of John Major's government, serving as Secretary of State for Transport (1990-92), Secretary of State for Defence (1992-95), and as Foreign Secretary (1995-97). He lost his seat at the 1997 election, returning to the Commons as MP for Kensington and Chelsea in 2005. He briefly served as Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and stood in the 2005 leadership election, after which he returned to the backbenches. He has been a prominent exponent of the need to address the West Lothian Question and has given evidence to Ken Clarke's Democracy Taskforce on the issue.

### **Gary Streeter MP**

Gary Streeter entered Parliament in 1992 and served as a Junior Minister in the Major government. He was a member of the Shadow Cabinet under William Hague, serving as Shadow Secretary of State for International Development (June 1998 – September 2001). He was co-director (with Oliver Letwin and David Lidington) of the internal 'Renewing One Nation' social policy group. In 2002 he edited *There is such a thing as society*, a collection of essays by Conservative MPs, strategists and activists.

**The Rt Hon Lord Tebbit**

Norman Tebbit retired from frontline politics after the 1987 general election, and entered the House of Lords in 1992. He was a prominent critic of John Major's government and has continued to voice his opinions on the future direction of Conservative politics whilst in opposition.

**The Rt Hon Anne Widdecombe MP**

Anne Widdecombe entered Parliament in 1987 and served as a Minister in John Major's government. After the 1997 election she served as Shadow Health Secretary and later as Shadow Home Secretary under William Hague. Her vigorously expressed traditionalist views ensured that she was widely identified as the Shadow Cabinet's leading 'rocker' during this period. She retired from the frontbench in 2001.



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