

Will the Tory party implode?

Peter Dorey says factionalism, infighting and fratricide coupled with electoral defeat could see the disintegration of the Conservative Party

For much of the 20th century, the Conservative Party was widely admired for its 'statecraft', which referred to its relative cohesion and unity, its ability to devise electorally successful strategies with a broad-ranging appeal to diverse socio-economic groups, its reputation for governmental competence, loyalty to its leaders, and its frequent ability to determine or dominate the policy agenda or terms of political debate, aided, of course, by a largely loyal and compliant press. The relative absence of open divisions and disunity was partly due to the Conservatives' frequent claims to be a non-ideological party, which meant that it was often spared the damaging doctrinal arguments, schisms and allegations of 'leadership betrayal' which afflicted the Labour Party. This naturally reinforced the Conservatives' reputation for party unity, loyalty to its leaders, and competence in government.

Then, during the last quarter of the 20th Century, the Conservative Party did become more ideologically divided, and openly so too. This schism was between those Conservatives who coalesced around Thatcherism, and embraced its blend of (economic) neo-liberalism and (social) authoritarianism (such as Keith Joseph, Nigel Lawson, Cecil Parkinson, John Redwood, Nicholas Ridley, and Norman Tebbit), and those MPs and Ministers who continued subscribing to One Nation Conservatism (like Ian Gilmour, Michael Heseltine, Douglas Hurd, Chris Patten, Francis Pym, Peter Walker). The Thatcherites wanted a radical departure from the Keynesian and paternalist policies of the post-war years, whereas the One Nation Tories wanted to persevere with them, in spite of the problems they encountered in the 1970s. During the 1980s and 1990s, these ideological divisions were overlaid and reinforced by deepening divisions over Britain's relationship with the European Community/Union, with the Thatcherites becoming increasingly critical, giving rise to the term Eurosceptic.



Credit: Peter Piro

During David Cameron's leadership, the division between Thatcherites and One Nation Tories became less sharp, simply because the latter were superseded by the former. Various academic studies revealed that most Conservative MPs were now Thatcherites and/or neoliberals, and that the One Nation Tories had largely faded away or died out (many of them associated with the old aristocracy, and often symbolising noblesse oblige). Similarly, the Conservatives' pro-Europeans were replaced by two broad groups of Eurosceptics, the 'hard' Eurosceptics who wanted Britain's complete withdrawal from the EU, and the 'soft' Eurosceptics who favoured continued membership, but on a looser and more flexible basis, and with no further ceding of sovereignty unless approved via a referendum.

It might have been expected that with the 'Thatcherisation' of the Conservative Party and its almost total embrace of neoliberalism, coupled with Britain's departure from the EU, and four successive election 'victories' since 2010, the Conservatives would be relatively upbeat and united. Yet new arguments and divisions have emerged, as many Conservative MPs have either suspected the Party leadership of backtracking on aspects of Thatcherism, or of not

being vigorous enough in fighting 'culture wars', of which the so-called war against Woke is the latest example, along with the obsession with 'people in boats' (asylum seekers) in the English Channel.

In times of economic or social crisis, the Right needs to identify or manufacture enemies to blame for the country's problems. The aim, to divert attention from the culpability of Thatcherite Conservatism and neoliberalism for increasing poverty and inequality, corporate greed and corruption, the myriad failings of privatisation, and the disintegration of constantly underfunded public services.

The 2020-21 Covid lockdowns highlighted new divisions in the Conservative Party, between those MPs who were supportive of this measure, to halt or slowdown the spread of the pandemic and minimise the number of victims, and those who opposed the supposedly draconian curbs on economic activity and freedom of movement that each lockdown entailed. Some of these critics complained that the lockdowns would cause more long-term economic damage than Covid itself. They were also horrified by the furlough schemes that then Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, operated, paying subsidies to employers whose businesses were temporarily closed under Ministerial orders. These payments, to cover staff

wage and operating costs and thus prevent bankruptcy, were criticised as a massive expansion of State control and taxpayer-funded subsidies. Thus did 63 Conservative MPs write to the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in early 2021, demanding that all Covid lockdowns and restrictions be lifted by April 2021.

Johnson's successor, albeit for just 49 days, Liz Truss, proudly proclaimed her Thatcherite credentials, having co-authored, in 2012, 'Britannia Unchained', an economically libertarian manifesto which called for a revival of Thatcherism (the implication being that David Cameron, and Theresa May had abandoned it), and which claimed that British workers were among the laziest in the world. She was forced to resign, along with her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, following the extremely negative reaction to a tax-cutting mini-budget in September 2022 – some of the greatest hostility was from 'the City', which was usually a close ally of the Conservatives. Truss has complained that her premiership was undermined by the 'deep state'. Subsequently, in her 2024 book, 'Ten Years to Save the West' – bookshops really ought to stock it under the categories of Comedy or Fantasy – she complained that since she had first been elected in 2010, there had been a continued shift to the Left in the Conservative Party, such that many of its MPs are 'shapeshifters... conservatives in name only (CINOs)', who seem to be 'engaged in appeasing the left' on issues like climate change/net zero, higher taxes, public health paternalism/manny state, sexual identity, and Wokeism.

Conservative in-fighting, and

accusations of betraying Thatcherism, has bedevilled the premiership of Rishi Sunak, despite his insistence that he is instinctively a low-tax, small-State, Thatcherite. Like Truss, the Conservative peer, Lord (Peter) Cruddas, has accused Sunak of dragging the Party leftwards, to the extent that it had ceased even to be a centre-Right party. On the contrary, Cruddas alleged, what was occurring under Sunak's leadership was 'a coup and a hijacking of the Conservative party by centre-left leaning people' (The Guardian 17 December 2022).

Much of this alleged shift to the Left under Sunak's leadership is blamed on infiltration of Britain's key institutions, such as the BBC, Church of England, civil service, police, and universities, by 'Woke', this having also spread to much of the business community too, as indicated by the prevalence of (LGBTQ+) rainbow logos and stickers adopted by many companies. According to Conservative MP Gareth Bacon, Britain is under cultural and ideological attack, as its history, institutions and traditions are infiltrated by the Woke, and the rise of Leftist anti-British, anti-western and anti-capitalist attitudes and values, against which the Conservative Party has been too slow or half-hearted in launching a counter-attack.

The Thatcherite Right's determination to reverse the Conservative leadership's alleged complicity in this purported Leftward drift has spawned a number of new groups and factions in recent years, such as Blue Collar Conservatism, Common Sense Group, Covid Recovery Group, and the Net Zero Group. Most recent is the Popular Conservatism

(PopCon) group, co-founded by Liz Truss, and whose inaugural meeting was attended by Lee Anderson (since defected to Reform UK), Nigel Farage, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Priti Patel.

These new groups and factions reflect the growing frustration inside the Conservative Party that it has allegedly diluted, or diverged from, Thatcherism, by failing to be sufficiently economically libertarian, morally traditionalist, and socially authoritarian. The response to any electoral defeats or poor opinion poll ratings is to insist that the Conservative leadership needs to double-down on pursuing Thatcherite policies like deregulation, limiting immigration, law-and-order, privatisation, tax cuts, reducing workers' rights, trade union curbs, and yet more welfare cuts.

The substance and bitterness of the arguments and in-fighting among Conservative MPs reveal the extent to which the Party has become riven by ideological conflicts and schisms over who are the true disciples of Thatcherism, and who are the traitors and heretics. Even among the Thatcherites, there are disputes over who is the purest or most loyal, all of which is destroying Party unity, and making effective leadership, and governmental competence, impossible. The Party is increasingly redolent of Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, with its dispute between *The People's Front of Judea*, and the *Judean People's Front*, over which of them are the true disciples and who are the heretics. In a surrealist film, the factional dispute is laughable; in a governing political party, it is tragic, and deeply damaging for Britain and its people. **2**

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