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Totalitarian Toryism

The Thatcherites have won the battle for the soul of the Conservative party and that has led to an identity crisis far more profound than the one facing Labour, argues Pete Dorey.

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The Conservatives have struggled electorally since the landslide victories of the 1980s. Since 1987, they have only won two general elections, in 1992 and 2015, both by small majorities, while in 2010 and 2017, the party was only able to govern with the support of the Liberal Democrats, and the Democratic Unionist Party respectively, due to its failure to win an outright majority. Some of these electoral difficulties reflect broader, long-term changes among British voters, which have affected Labour too, but the Conservatives also have a more fundamental ideological problem. - Some will doubtless say ‘so does Labour under Corbyn’, but the Conservatives’ difficulties have much longer antecedents and are therefore more deep-rooted.

Put simply, the Conservative party has been unable and unwilling to ‘move on’ from Thatcherism, and in this respect, its mindset is marooned in the 1980s. This is deeply problematic for three reasons. First, one of the strengths of the pre-Thatcher Conservative party was precisely its avowed rejection of ideology, by which it meant principles and policies derived from abstract ideas and theoretical blueprints for political change or radical social reconstruction. Conservatives boasted that they had no need of a right-wing equivalent of a Marx or a Lenin to guide them, because they were arch-pragmatists who governed according to circumstances. They were concerned to tackle problems as and when they arose, rather than create society anew on the basis of some intellectual utopian blueprint.

True, the party was always wedded to capitalism, private ownership, the profit motive and a market economy, but crucially, it was willing to acknowledge that these had to be tempered by a sense of corporate and social responsibility, either by employers or by the state itself. This stance was strongly reinforced by the pre-Thatcher dominance of One Nation Tories in the higher echelons of the Conservative party. They were inculcated with a sense of *noblesse oblige*; a recognition that those born into positions of wealth and privilege had a duty of care towards the ‘lower orders’. Not only was this morally virtuous (and even the Christian thing to do), it was politically expedient, because it would legitimise capitalism and parliamentary democracy in the eyes of the working class, and thus prevent socialist revolution. This approach reflected Disraeli’s 19th century warning that: “The palace cannot rest if the cottage is not

happy”, a clear harking back to feudal notions of reciprocal roles and responsibilities between the classes.

Since the late 1970s, however, the Conservative party has succumbed to a process of ‘Thatcherisation’, whereby ideology and the teleological pursuit of a supposedly brave new world have shaped its outlook and policies. Having hitherto rejected text-book theories as the basis of political programmes, a growing number of post-1970s Conservatives became infatuated with the ideas of Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman (and in the US, the writings of the arch-libertarian and individualist Ayn Rand have galvanised a growing number of right-wing Republicans). Initially, this shift proved electorally successful, as millions of British people in the 1980s welcomed tax cuts, curbs on strikes by trade unions, the right-to-buy council houses, restrictions on allegedly profligate local authorities, privatisation and the creation of a ‘share-owning democracy’, clamp-downs on welfare dependency, and an apparent ‘rolling back’ of the state in favour of individual liberty and ‘the market’. However, gradually and cumulatively, this programme created three longer term problems for the Conservative party.

First, the Conservatives became victims of their own apparent success; they had slain their perceived enemies. With nationalised industries sold off, council house stock depleted, local authorities eviscerated, trade unions emasculated, direct taxes repeatedly cut, individuals ‘liberated’ from state control, and the free-market economy firmly entrenched, Conservatives found it increasingly difficult to identify ‘enemies’ against which to mobilise voters. This problem was compounded with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, for this meant that a major external enemy had disappeared. Conservatives could no longer frighten voters with warnings of a Soviet invasion if defence spending was not increased, or allegations that a Labour government would be stooges of Moscow and the Kremlin. This is partly why the European Union assumed such importance for the Conservative right; it became the new external enemy against which to mobilise nationalist sentiments and divide British citizens into ‘patriots’ and ‘traitors’.

The second problem for the Conservative party born out of the Thatcherite policies pursued with increasing hubris from the 1980s onwards was that relentless individualism, marketisation and ‘modernisation’ were destructive of all that traditional Conservatives revered. As the political theorist John Gray noted in the mid-1990s, the Thatcherite revolution grievously

undermined authority, continuity, established communities, order, stability, and wisdom based on experience accrued over generations. The deification of 'the market' reduced human relations to the cash nexus (just as Marx had predicted), such that interactions became transactional, citizens were transformed into consumers, economic rights superseded social responsibilities, and monetary gain transcended morality. Meanwhile, the relentless promotion of labour market flexibility, management's right to manage, the paramount needs of business, and Sunday trading, paid no heed to workers wanting to spend time with their families, or engage in virtuous community or charitable activities in the evenings or at weekends. Everything and everyone had to be subordinated to the needs of 'the market' and relentless profit maximisation.

In the 1990s, John Major (echoing Stanley Baldwin) mooted his romanticised vision of an idyllic England in which old maids (sic) cycled along country lanes to church, while men played cricket on the village green or supped warm ale. He was oblivious to the extent to which Olde England had already been destroyed by the rapacious commercialism and relentless competition venerated by his predecessor and her growing number of acolytes. The country lane was now a motorway bypass, the church was three-quarters empty - shopping became the new religion, and out-of-town malls the new places of worship – the village green was now covered by a new housing estate or superstore, and the local pub was now part of a McPub chain selling expensive 'designer' lagers – or had been closed down to be turned into residential apartments.

This brings us to the third problem afflicting the Conservative party today; the extent to which Thatcherism has become the dominant, default, ideology in the party. Academic studies have shown that in general elections since 1987, the intake of Conservative MPs has increasingly been Thatcherite, particularly on economic issues. Far from returning to the centre ground after Thatcher's downfall, the Conservative party has continued to move to the right, dragging the ideological centre with it – it is a sign of how much British politics has shifted to the right that Corbyn is widely viewed as a hard left Marxist revolutionary, whereas in mainland Europe, he would be considered as a moderate socialist or social democrat. Nor is it just Conservative MPs who are more right-wing on many issues than 20 or 40 years ago; the constituency parties which select them as candidates are also on the right of the party, with well over half of them currently defining themselves as Thatcherites. During the 2019 leadership contest, a majority of the Conservative party's ageing members declared that they would be willing to see the

British economy damaged, Scotland become independent, conflict re-emerge in Northern Ireland, and the Conservative party itself destroyed, if these were the price to pay to achieve Brexit. This is a party which has moved so far rightwards that is beyond reason – or rehabilitation.

This Thatcherisation of the Conservative party, and the virtual evisceration of the One Nation Tories, means that its instinctive response to the problems facing Britain today is to offer more of the same – more tax cuts for big business and the rich, more deregulation, more privatisation, more curbs on welfare (even the disabled and terminally-ill are no longer deemed to be ‘deserving poor’), more attacks on employment protection and workers’ rights, more scapegoating of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and more smearing of the party’s critics and opponents as extremists, traitors, enemies within, or purveyors of the politics of envy. Meanwhile, the Brexit-related attacks on the integrity of the BBC, civil servants, the judiciary, universities, and parliament itself, are the antithesis of pre-Thatcherite Conservatism, which venerated such institutions.

The Conservative Party has morphed into a right-wing version of Marxism, and embraced the very errors it once accused the former Soviet rulers of. Having succumbed to an ideology, the party cannot conceive that this itself might be flawed and based on false premises. To its adherents, the free market looks perfect on the printed page, so must be capable of being implemented in practice. If any problems arise in the process, there can only be two reasons: either the ideology is not being imposed with sufficient enthusiasm, purity and vigour, or it is being undermined by individuals or institutions failing to act as the ideology requires them to act – they must therefore be identified, and forced to comply, for the good of the regime. Welcome to the brave new world of totalitarian Toryism.