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Reply: The strange survival of Tory conservatism

Richard Hayton

It is always gratifying to discover that academic colleagues have read your work, and even more so to find that they have been sufficiently enthused (or perhaps, occasionally, enraged!) to review it. To have one's book discussed at length in a journal symposium is therefore particularly flattering, especially by reviewers as considered and munificent in their commentary as Mark Garnett and Murray Leith. As such I would like to thank them both, but especially the former given that he had already made a number of very generous remarks about my work in a wider review essay elsewhere (Garnett, 2013). During my time as a doctoral student Garnett's work did much to stimulate my thinking about the state of Conservative Party politics, and while I sometimes demurred from his conclusions, I continue to greatly admire not only its intellectual depth but the unfailing lucidity of his prose.

It is nonetheless the role reviewers to engage in critical dialogue, and there are several pertinent points raised that I would like to take the opportunity to respond to. One substantial issue raised by both Garnett and Leith relates to the theoretical standpoint that guided the research, namely the strategic-relational approach (SRA). The concern of both reviewers is similar: for Garnett my application is 'unduly agency-orientated' (2014: 2), whereas Leith is worried that it 'somewhat ignores the actual weighting of key factors and downplays the role of the national, and the electorate' (2014: 2). The obvious rejoinder is that the study explicitly set out to examine in detail a relatively small group of people. As I noted on the first page of the introductory chapter, the book 'is concerned with the actions, perceptions and strategies of the Conservative Party elite leadership in opposition, between 1997 and 2010' (Hayton, 2012: 3). Consequently, other broader factors which undoubtedly were important contributors to the Conservatives' electoral travails - the revitalisation of the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair for example - were not the focus of the study, which instead sought to shed light on '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' (ibid: 4).

How much space should therefore be dedicated to exploring the broader context? This is a question which I'm happy to acknowledge I spent some time debating, and the inherent difficulty involved in settling on a definitive answer is perhaps one reason for the relative paucity of empirical studies that have attempted to employ the SRA. For me though a valuable attribute of the SRA is that it directs our attention to the way political actors perceive and interpret their strategic-context, which not only implies that any particular set of circumstances could be understood in a number of different ways, but also allows us to consider how ideology influences these interpretations. Hence the stress on ideology in the analysis, and also the emphasis on how politicians *felt* enabled or constrained, rather than necessarily were. Garnett also suggests that wider contextual research beyond the scope of this

particular study, for example a party membership survey comparable to that undertaken by Whitely *et al.* (1994) two decades ago, would be of great value to scholars in this field. With this I could not agree more wholeheartedly, so we can only hope the research funding councils are similarly persuaded. Both reviewers shy away from the rather more fundamental criticism of whether or not the SRA can effectively be applied to a leadership-focused study – as far as I am aware this is the first such attempt – which I would like to think indicates that while further refinements maybe required, the approach is one others working in the field of party politics may take up and develop.

The broader context Leith is concerned with is the national one, particularly in relation to sub-state constitutional structures and identities. He bemoans the absence of ‘real discussion of Scotland and Wales as anything other than geographical locations and occasional GE results’ and would have liked to see ‘an examination of the sub-state national legislatures’ (2014: 2). Although such an assessment would no doubt be of great worth, its omission from a book concerned with the contemporary Conservative party elite does not seem to me to require a great deal of explanation. As Leith goes on to observe, by 1997 support for the Conservatives was geographically circumscribed, with the party failing to win any seats outside of England. This is a long term structural problem for the party which even the upturn in performance and return to office at the 2010 election only partially reversed. In that contest, the Conservatives secured the highest share of the vote in just five regions (the South East, South West, Eastern, East Midlands and West Midlands); failing to win the remaining six in Great Britain (London, the North East, North West, Scotland, Wales, and Yorkshire and the Humber). In Northern Ireland (which oddly appears to be beyond Leith’s purview) the Conservatives’ ill-fated electoral pact with the Ulster Unionist Party failed to deliver any seats, and the alliance was soon after dissolved.

In this context, the puzzle the book addresses is why the Conservative elite at Westminster was reluctant to dispense with the party’s traditional unionism and embrace an identity politics and electoral strategy that more closely reflected their actual support. The machinations of day-to-day political life in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, while no doubt fascinating, are simply not of anything other than tangential relevance to this question. As Alan Convery has argued, both Labour and the Conservatives at Westminster have pursued a strategy of ‘centre autonomy management’. Consequently, ‘as long as the devolved administrations and Welsh and Scottish Conservatives stick to their low politics remit, territorial policy divergence and autonomy remain mostly irrelevant to the centre’ (2014: 25). Whether this *ought* to be the case is of course a very different question, but the book did not set out to make that kind of normative judgement.

The final issue I would like to return to is ideology. One point on which the record needs to be set straight is Garnett’s erroneous claim about my use of the word ‘conservatism’, asserting as he does that ‘Hayton is apparently untroubled by the usage of the upper- and lower-case in relation to the word... [which] is used interchangeably in his book’ (2014: 4). As any curious reader can verify for themselves, the word is only ever deployed throughout the entire text in its small-c form, save for where it is contained within quotation marks, and where the word is the first of a sentence and capitalised in line with the normal conventions of written English. Even on the book’s front cover, where the malign

typesetters influence often leads to a seemingly uncontrolled propagation of upper-case characters, it is spelt with the diminutive form.

Leaving this aside, behind this misreading is a more significant argument, namely the suggestion that conservatism in the sense that I have utilised it 'can be equated with those beliefs which the Conservative Party happens to endorse at any given time' (*ibid.*). This takes us into the rather more philosophical territory of how conservatism can be defined, something which has been subject to extensive debate for many decades so is unlikely to be satisfactorily resolved through a brief exchange of ideas in this symposium. Nonetheless in my view – and this is perhaps where Mark Garnett and I will have to agree to disagree – the Conservative Party remains an essentially conservative one. While contemporary conservatism clearly owes a substantial intellectual debt to the classical liberal tradition, not least in relation to the role of the market and the desire for limited government, it remains a distinct ideology. Consequently variants of the New Right are commonly classified as part of the philosophical family of conservatism (Scruton, 2007: 475-6; Heywood, 2012: 86-95). Similarly, while many (although by no means all) members of the Conservative Party would be happy to acknowledge that they hold some liberal values, very few that do would see this as incompatible with their conservatism and reject the latter label. The most prominent exponent of such a position is of course David Cameron, who has proudly described himself as a 'liberal conservative' (Beech, 2011). In short, the Conservative Party continues to espouse a form of limited politics, which as Noël O'Sullivan (2013) has argued is the unifying theme of conservative ideology.

Garnett's view, that the Conservative Party 'has been shorn even of residual elements of conservative ideology, as traditionally understood' (2014: 4) derives from his acceptance of the view articulated by the One Nation 'wets' that Thatcherism was a fundamentally un-conservative alien dogma that infiltrated and captured the soul of the Conservative Party, exorcising authentic conservatism from its once natural home (see Hayton, 2012: 27-31). This position has been enunciated most eloquently by the late Ian Gilmour (with whom Garnett co-authored an excellent book) and in essence boils down to the contention that pre-Thatcherite British conservatism was never really ideological in the true sense of the word. Rather, the genuine conservative was suspicious of rationalist doctrine, and ideology was a pejorative term associated with socialists. Thatcher's One Nation critics swallowed her rhetorical flourish - 'the other side have got an ideology... we must have one too' (quoted in Gilmour, 2002) – and given her self-professed admiration for the work of Friedrich Hayek could also point to his famous essay 'Why I am Not a Conservative' (Hayek, 1960) as evidence of the incompatibility of neo-liberalism with conservatism. This dichotomous view of the two positions is though rather misleading. Elements of the liberal tradition had long been a key feature of the Conservative Party's outlook, and Thatcherism did not so much invade the party as develop through a cross-fertilization of existing beliefs with ideas from elsewhere, during a set of particularly propitious circumstances. As the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton has noted, 'Thatcherism can be seen as the first attempt to modernize British conservatism, by discarding the Butskellite consensus and acting from a consistent philosophical foundation' (2007: 686).

Garnett and I do, I think, agree more than we disagree on the transformative effect of Thatcherism, both on the Conservative Party and beyond. Indeed, as both reviewers in this symposium identified, this is a central thesis of the book. My argument however, is that the ideological legacy of Thatcherism has been to restrict the parameters within which British conservatism can seek to renew itself, with damaging effects not only for its intellectual vibrancy but also for the party's electoral health. The impact of this on David Cameron's leadership of the Conservatives has been clear to see, both before and after he led the party back to power in 2010. In opposition, his modernisation of the party was devoid of real depth and he largely failed to alter the trajectory of contemporary conservatism, which remains essentially neo-Thatcherite. In office, while forming the Coalition provided the Conservative leader with significant freedom of manoeuvre in statecraft terms (Hayton, 2014) it has not manifested itself as a radical reforming liberal administration that the one would have expected to result from the ideological coherent 'logical and natural' partnership portrayed by Garnett (2013: 520). Whether it be on welfare, immigration, taxation, public services, or relations with the European Union, the Conservative-led Coalition has, I would contend, been a profoundly conservative government. In the Tory Party conservatism, in its current neo-Thatcherite guise, lives on.

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