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British Conservatism after the vote for Brexit:

the ideological legacy of David Cameron

Richard Hayton

Abstract

Following the referendum on membership of the EU, this article assesses the ideological legacy of David Cameron on Conservative politics in Britain. It focuses on three areas of ideological tension in contemporary conservatism, namely European integration, the divide between social liberals and traditionalists, and the future of the Union post-Brexit. Applying the concept of heresthetics to offer a theoretically informed account, it argues that while Cameron enjoyed some successes in 'the art of political manipulation' (Riker 1986) with electoral benefits, his desire to modernize conservatism was ultimately undone by his failure to restructure the key issue dimensions animating his party's ideology. Ultimately this failure undid his premiership, leading to his downfall.

Keywords

Brexit; Conservative Party; conservatism; European integration; David Cameron; heresthetics

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Introduction

It was not meant to end this way. Following his unexpected triumph in the 2015 general election, David Cameron outlined his plans for his next term of office in a statement outside Number 10 Downing Street. In it, he spoke of his desire to 'bring our country together', which meant 'giving everyone in our country a chance, so no matter where you're from you have the opportunity to make the most of your life. It means giving the poorest people the chance of training, a job, and hope for the future' (Cameron 2015a). The Prime Minister hoped that a focus on social justice and this life chances agenda, which he would flesh out further in a speech in the following January (Cameron 2016a), would come to define his final term of office. However, the Conservatives' largely unforeseen outright victory in the general election also meant something else for the new Cameron government, to which he dedicated a single line: 'And yes, we will deliver that in/out referendum on our future in Europe' (Cameron 2015a).

The promise of a vote on UK membership of the European Union (EU) was 'borne from tactical considerations concerning party management and party competition' (Lynch 2015, 200). When he made this pledge in January 2013, Cameron was exercised by the rise in support for the UK Independence Party, and the not unrelated growing restiveness amongst Eurosceptics on his own backbenches. Warned in November 2012 by the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, that his plan to renegotiate British membership of the EU and hold a referendum was 'hugely risky', Cameron replied 'You may be right. But what else can I do? My backbenchers are unbelievably Eurosceptic and UKIP are breathing down my neck' (quoted in Laws 2016, 237). Cameron's

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undertaking was, theoretically at least, dependent on securing a Conservative majority at the next election, and commentators accordingly speculated that the Prime Minister would happily trade it away in a future round of coalition negotiations. However, in practice he knew that if the 2015 election were to deliver another hung parliament and he sought to lead a second coalition, a failure to secure agreement to hold the referendum would in all likelihood enrage enough of his backbenchers to scupper any such deal. Cameron consequently signalled that the referendum pledge would be a red-line in any future coalition negotiations. Senior Liberal Democrats were also aware of this and were prepared to concede it, should the situation arise. As one of the party's special advisers in Downing Street later commented, 'we were definitely going to go along with it, [and] had basically said so in public' (Kemp 2016).

Following his 2015 win it was soon reported that Cameron wished to bring forward the date of the referendum, which he had pledged in the Conservative manifesto to hold by the end of 2017. Government sources indicated days after the election that they wished to 'accelerate the process' (Watt 2015), and the EU Referendum Bill was the most prominent feature of the Queen's Speech outlining the new administration's programme a few weeks later. During the 2015 general election campaign David Cameron had let slip in a television interview that he did not plan to fight another, although he insisted he planned to serve 'a full second term' (BBC News 2015). Conscious no doubt of the clock ticking on his tenure in Number Ten, the Prime Minister exuded the appearance of a man in a hurry, keen to get the referendum over with so that he could focus in his remaining years at the top on the wider legacy of his premiership. Tragically for him, his place in history is condemned to be indelibly defined by the issue of Europe and the nation's decision, against his fervent advice, to leave the European Union. Like

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Thatcher and Major before him, Cameron's premiership was ultimately destroyed by his party's fissure over Europe.

This article considers the Cameron legacy for conservatism by analysing it along three aspects that have been central to defining it in recent years. The first is the issue of European integration, which has been the key rift within the Conservative Party since the late-1980s (Gamble 1996, 22). The second is the union between the nations of the United Kingdom, which was one of the pillars of Conservative hegemony during the twentieth century (Gamble 1995), but has been under increasing strain in the twenty-first. And the third is the morality divide between social liberals and traditionalists, which has been particularly prominent over the past decade (Hayton 2012; Heppell 2013). It should be noted at the outset that 'conservatism' is used here to refer primarily to the ideology of the British Conservative Party. This is not to deny the broader field of conservative political thought that lies beyond this, but this is outside of the scope of this article.

In theoretical terms this article starts from the position that 'ideology matters', and that ideological positioning continues to be an 'an important concern for political parties' and those that lead them (Buckler and Dolowitz 2012, 576), even if rhetorically party leaders in recent decades have engaged in 'ideological quietism', fuelling the perception that politics has become less ideologically driven than it once was (Dommett 2014). As such it contributes to the growing body of scholarship that has challenged this view (Finlayson 2012; Griffiths and Hickson 2010; Buckler and Dolowitz 2009, 2012; Kerr 2007), and indeed the persistent (and more longstanding) one that the Conservative Party is somehow non-ideological (Green 2004).

It builds on previous scholarship that has argued that contemporary Conservative politics needs to be understood in terms of the ideational debates that underpin it, as well as questions of leadership and electoral context (Hayton 2012, 2016).

Moreover, the article deploys the concept of heresthetics to analyse the Cameron legacy for conservatism. Originally formulated by William Riker (1983), heresthetics has been utilised in more recent years to analyse a range of political figures including former Conservative leaders Margaret Thatcher (McLean 2001) and Stanley Baldwin (Taylor 2005). Central to the concept is Riker's contention that politicians will attempt to structure the political world to their advantage, through political manipulation of issue dimensions (Riker 1986, McLean 2002). In Riker's words, it is 'the art of setting up situations – composing the alternatives among which political actors must choose – in such a way that even those who do not wish to do so are compelled by the structure of the situation to support the heresthetician's purpose' (1983, 55). We can understand heresthetics as encompassing the 'attempts of political actors to set or control agendas, reformulate procedures, transform policy or issue space and redefine situations so as to create new possibilities' (Finlayson and Martin 2008, 451). This often involves denying adversaries 'policy or political space' (Bennister 2015, 168). In terms of the ideological legacy of a leader on their party, our attention is directed towards how they have attempted to transform issue spaces, control political agendas and debates, and close off issue space to ideological opponents.

Of particular relevance to this study is the article by Heppell (2013a) analysing the party leadership of David Cameron between 2005 and 2012 through the prism of heresthetics.

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Heppell argued that Cameron attempted to bring about a realignment of British politics through the formation of the Coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, seeking to occupy and redefine the political centre-ground. He credits Cameron with successful manipulation of his coalition partners – a view that was vindicated by the 2015 general election result. Here however, I contend that Cameron ultimately failed as a heresthetician in his management of the issue dimensions of Europe, social liberalism, and the politics of the Union. Ideological divisions have been a persistent source of political and electoral difficulties for the Conservative Party, and Cameron bequeathed his party a problematic ideological legacy and failed to entrench his agenda of ideological modernization.

Social liberalism

From the outset of his campaign for the party leadership in 2005, Cameron had stressed his desire to see conservatism modernized (Dorey 2007; Bale 2010). The need for modernization derived from his diagnosis that the Conservatives found themselves out of step with the trajectory of contemporary society and thus in need of a process of catch-up. Central to his agenda for modernization was an emphasis on social issues, where he sought to signal a decisive shift in what was broadly regarded as a socially liberal direction, at the expense of more traditionalist Conservative stances. As Heppell (2013b, 341) noted, for 'Cameron and the modernizers, Thatcherite social conservatism created a negative image which reinforced an impression that they were socially intolerant', so instead the party would attempt to demonstrate a marked change of attitude across a range of issues with which it was not usually associated. Social liberalism is understood for the purposes of this paper not in the

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sense of a willingness to use the state to achieve social objectives, but in relation to what Inglehart (1977) labelled 'post-materialist' values. These 'include equality, democracy, a clean environment, and a more permissive, tolerant culture', and mean that social liberals are more likely to endorse 'increased rights for minority groups, the protection of civil liberties, less repressive law and order measures, [and] greater personal freedom on moral and lifestyle matters' (Zipp 1986, 302). Social liberalism was signalled across a range of issues during the early phase of Cameron's party leadership. He attempted to soften the party's image on crime with the call to 'hug a hoodie', opposed the government's plans to introduce 42-day detention without trial on civil liberties grounds, and on the issue of climate change was photographed hugging a huskie on a visit to the Arctic. His short-lived dalliance with the notion of 'General Well-Being', arguing that the Conservatives needed to focus 'not just on GDP, but on GWB', also implied a desire to engage more with post-materialist politics (Cameron 2006; Hayton 2012, 104.)

However, as one of his ministerial colleagues in Coalition observed, 'much of this 'compassionate Conservative' agenda did not survive for long once in government' (Laws 2016, 560). While themes Cameron had promoted in opposition such as the 'Big Society' did prove to be rather hollow in office, one standout socially liberal victory was achieved by the Coalition government, namely the passage of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013. This measure was closely associated with Cameron himself, and it is notable that he chose to cite it in his statement the day after the referendum, and in his final words as Prime Minister on departing Downing Street, when he defended his record in office:

> I believe we have made great steps, with more people in work than ever before in our history, with reforms to welfare and education, increasing people's life chances, building a bigger and stronger society, keeping our promises to the poorest people in the world, and enabling those who love each other to get married whatever their sexuality. (Cameron 2016b).

Although Cameron succeeded in passing the equal marriage legislation in 2013, there is limited evidence that his premiership has transformed his party into a socially liberal one. The new intake of MPs, some of whom had been selected via the priority candidates list (or 'A-list') instituted by Cameron as Leader of the Opposition, were more socially liberal than the colleagues they joined in the Commons. Analysis by Heppell (2013b, 349) found that 42% of new entrants could be classified as liberal on social issues, compared to 17.9% of returning Conservative parliamentarians. So as a means to transforming the PCP the A-list enjoyed at least partial success (McIlveen 2009) although it left it deeply divided on social liberalism. Matt Beech describes attitudes to gay marriage as 'the contemporary litmus test for whether a Conservative is more socially liberal or socially conservative' (2015, 8). On this basis, the PCP was split down the middle (127 Conservative MPs voted for the measure at second reading and 136 voted against it) and the legislation was saved only by the votes of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs (Beech 2015, 8). Among the wider party membership, six out of ten opposed the government's policy (Bale and Webb 2016, 144). Cameron acknowledged the extent of this intra-party division in a conversation with his Deputy Prime Minister in April 2013: 'Gay marriage has been an absolute disaster. It has totally split my party. It has been as bad for me as tuition fees were for you, Nick' (quoted in Laws 2016, 105).

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Beyond this totemic issue Cameronite modernization also sought to exhibit its socially liberal distinctiveness from Thatcherism across issues such as 'the environment; feminisation; international aid; the NHS; and poverty and social justice' (Heppell 2013b, 341). However, a wide-ranging assessment of Cameron's leadership found that 'what had emerged initially as a relatively bright and promising modernization strategy had been either eventually abandoned altogether, or widely blown off course, in the lead up to the 2010 general election and beyond' (Kerr and Hayton 2015, 115). Although some emblematic policies were maintained, for example the undertaking to spend 0.7 per cent of GDP on overseas aid, they remained vulnerable to extensive criticism from Cameron's own party, particularly as many other areas of government spending faced substantial cuts. Part of the explanation for this lies in the economic context within which the Coalition was formed, and the decision at that time to prioritize deficit reduction, which made pursuing what might ordinarily be labelled 'compassionate' policies all the more difficult. For example, in relation to poverty and social justice, benefits for working age claimants were heavily squeezed, with further cuts planned for this parliament. Similarly, the emphasis Cameron placed on the importance of the environment as leader of the opposition did not translate into government, and he was criticized for failing to provide leadership on the issue as Prime Minister (Carter and Clements 2015, 220), with the Liberal Democrats acting as the primary advocates of green issues in the Coalition.

Cameron failed to convince a majority of the PCP of the merits of social liberalism: Heppell's study found that half the 2010 PCP could be classified as socially conservative, one in five as

socially agnostic, and less than a third as socially liberal (Heppell 2013b, 345). As Beech (2015, 7) puts it, when it comes to social liberalism, the 'battle for the soul of the contemporary Conservative Party has yet to be won'. An important part of the explanation of the failure to embed social liberalism more deeply in contemporary conservatism is the lack of ideological coherence to the modernization agenda. A series of policy positions adopted to differentiate it from Thatcherism do not add up to an alternative ideational prospectus, which might have provided greater resistance to them being downgraded in the face of a range of internal and external pressures. While for Beech the motive for the same-sex marriage legislation was that 'Cameron and his modernizers saw an opportunity to change a key aspect of British society – the definition of marriage – in line with their liberal ideology' (Beech 2015, 9), the regret Cameron expressed about his decision to champion the issue suggests a lack of firm ideological commitment (D'Ancona 2013; Laws 2016).

Cameron's decision to drive through the same-sex marriage legislation can therefore be interpreted as a heresthetic move that aimed to change public perceptions of the Conservatives, which might incur some sort-term damage (the appearance of divisions in public) but with the longer-term benefit of putting the party in greater alignment with public opinion, and possibly even credited as leading it. Clements (2014) has demonstrated a clear trend towards greater public support for same-sex marriage between 2008 and 2012. The Prime Minister also knew that he could rely on the support of a large majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs to ensure the legislation's save passage, even in the face of a sizable Conservative rebellion. However, if Cameron hoped that championing this largely symbolic measure (same-sex couples already had access to the legal rights related to marriage through

civil partnerships) would mark a decisive victory embedding his modernization agenda he was mistaken. As he acknowledged, he underestimated the scale of opposition he would face, and was unable to manipulate the PCP into supporting the measure. Furthermore, the issue became a focal point for discontent in the wider party membership, amongst whom cultural conservatives were most likely to defect to UKIP (Webb and Bale 2014). On this issue dimension we can therefore credit Cameron with partial success as a heresthetician, achieving a key victory for his socially liberal view which looks unlikely to be reversed. This shift is certainly of significance, and it is difficult for example to imagine that an openly gay female politician such as Ruth Davidson would have been elected to a leadership position in the pre-Cameron Conservative Party. However, he failed more broadly to transform the Conservatives into a socially liberal party, leaving his successor to manage divisions over a range of social matters where liberal and more traditionally conservative attitudes clash. These include issues of gender, equality, marriage, adoption, abortion, penal policy, recreational drug use, and the debate over grammar schools (Beech 2015, 12).

Unionism

Commitment to the Union has long been a feature of Conservative statecraft, and was a key element of the party's political hegemony in the 'long Conservative century' from 1886 to 1997 (Seldon and Snowdon 2001). This Unionism was a core element of the Chamberlainite tradition, which brought the Liberal Unionists into the Conservative fold over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. Joseph Chamberlain promulgated a vision of a 'Greater Britain' based on imperialism, collectivism and protectionism (Gamble 1996, 21), and this subsumed an older

tradition of English Toryism (Gamble 2016). The latter has 'always considered the Union to be desirable, but it comes second in their thinking to the need to protect the sovereignty of the British state, the core of which is England and its traditional institutions' (Gamble 2016, 360). Contemporary Conservative ideology contains a growing cleavage between traditional unionism, which retains a powerful emotional pull, and an English patriotism which is less circumspect about asserting England's interests, even where they potentially put strain the bonds of the Union (Kenny 2014, 180-183; Hayton 2012, 81-101). One of the paradoxes of the Cameron premiership was that while he consistently articulated his own belief in the importance and value of the Union, the territorial integrity of the UK was imperilled to an extent not seen since the partition of Ireland.

As Leader of the Opposition, Cameron resisted the siren call of English nationalism, and diluted (but did not dispense with) his party's commitment to answering the West Lothian Question (Aughey 2010). This approach, while appealing to the traditional Conservative attachment to the Union, also dovetailed with Cameron's modernization agenda, as the language of the Union was more suited to an inclusive patriotic appeal (exploiting 'One Nation' rhetoric) than a more overt English nationalism. Given the 'shift which took place during the Thatcher years… towards a narrower English nationalism and a rejection of any compromise of British national sovereignty' (Gamble 1996, 35) this was also consistent with Cameron's strategy of rhetorically distancing from Thatcherism, drawing upon 'the "one nation" theme within conservatism that Thatcher had arguably eschewed' (McAnulla 2012, 168).

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The 2010 Coalition Agreement provided an opportunity to despatch the contentious issues of reforming the Barnett formula, and formulating a workable proposal for English votes for English laws, into 'the long grass' (Hayton 2015, 127). However, events elsewhere would force the future of the Union to the forefront of the political agenda. In the May 2011 Scottish Parliament election the Scottish National Party (SNP) unexpectedly won an overall majority, giving them a mandate to hold a referendum on Scottish independence. Legislation was enacted scheduling this for September 2014. The prospect of Scottish independence was 'regarded as a potential disaster by the leaders of the three main parties' (Laws 2016, 439). However, the consistent polling in favour of 'in' meant that it was not regarded as a 'high risk' in government (*ibid*.), until the polls dramatically narrowed in the closing weeks of the campaign, which led to 'a growing sense of panic' (Laws 2016, 441). Cameron reportedly 'remained in a state of near panic' and admitted to his Deputy that 'I am so incredibly nervous. I really cannot be the Prime Minister who oversaw the break-up of our United Kingdom' (Laws 2016, 444). Two days before polling day Cameron joined with Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband in jointly pledging an extensive further round of devolution should Scotland vote to remain in the UK.

This moment of unity between the three major party leaders was short-lived, as for Cameron it carried with it the implication that the English Question finally had to be fully addressed. On the day of the vote he told Nick Clegg: 'To me, England is now the missing bit of the jigsaw. And I need to keep my rather restive backbenchers happy' (quoted in Laws 2016, 447). The Deputy Prime Minister disagreed, arguing that: 'It doesn't make sense for us to turn the politics of grievance in Scotland into the politics of grievance in England' (quoted in Laws 2016,

448), but this did not deter Cameron from announcing the following morning that 'We have heard the voice of Scotland – and now the millions of voices of England must also be heard' (Cameron 2014). He therefore announced a commission to bring forward proposals to implement some form of English votes for English laws (EvfEl). According to the Conservative peer Lord Norton, this move was designed to 'shore up support among backbenchers, and outflank UKIP' who had struck an increasingly strident tone against the SNP (Norton 2015, 847). The Coalition was unable to reach agreement on EvfEl, so the measure instead found its way into the 2015 Conservative manifesto.

Following the general election, EvfEl was implemented through changes to the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, requiring the consent of English MPs for provisions of Bills which have been certified by the Speaker as concerning England only (Kelly 2015). In its first year of operation despite the remonstrations of the SNP this has not had a radical impact on the workings of Parliament, with eight Bills utilising the new procedures without a major issue (HC 569, 2016). Indeed, it could be argued that the move represents a pragmatic response to address some of the most glaring asymmetries of devolution and help sustain the Union, and in that sense consistent with the tradition of Conservative unionism.

The most striking departure under Cameron from the unionist tradition came instead during the 2015 general election. During the campaign, the Conservatives focused remorselessly on the possibility of an SNP-Labour 'coalition of chaos' in which the former would hold the latter to ransom (Tonge and Geddes 2015, 257). This was a strategic and tactical calculation by the Conservatives, but one which underlined how unperturbed in ideational terms the party now is

with an explicit appeal to Englishness. According to Cowley and Kavanagh (2016, 172), more than six out of ten of the press releases issued by Cameron's party mentioned either the SNP or its leader, Nicola Sturgeon. Ed Miliband was slow to tackle this head on, only firmly ruling out a possible deal with the SNP late in the campaign. The message to voters in England was clear – only the Conservatives could protect English interests from being sold out by Labour. While some psephologists have found 'little robust evidence that attitudes towards the SNP and expectations about a hung parliament resulted in gains for the Conservatives' (Green and Prosser, 2015) many of those involved in the campaign believed that the issue was a live one on the doorstep, and reported conversations with voters who cited it as their reasoning for voting Conservative (for example Laws 2016, 540). Even if it had little discernible impact on the result, it painted the Conservatives as a party that would put England (and in some contexts England and Wales) first, downgrading the centrality of the Union to conservatism.

Assessed in terms of heresthetics, Cameron had scarce control of the wider political context of rising Scottish nationalism and the electoral success of the SNP in Scotland, so had little choice but to grant the independence referendum, and was successful in securing his desired outcome. However, he allowed the referendum aftermath and 2015 general election to embed the drift within his party towards a more explicitly English politics, and failed to articulate a modernized Conservative national identity politics which might have countered this – for example through a new vision for Britishness based on a federal constitutional settlement. Such a view has been promulgated by Conservatives such as the Welsh Assembly Member David Melding (2013) who has warned that without it the union's future is far from certain (Convery 2016). Instead, Cameron left a conservatism that increasingly struggled to speak

meaningfully with one voice to all the nations of the United Kingdom, illustrated by the radically different messages offered by the Conservatives in Scotland under the leadership of Ruth Davidson. The referendum prompted the party north of the border to move firmly in favour of further devolution as an alternative to independence, even though Davidson had initially been elected 'as the continuity candidate' (Convery 2016, 41). This trend was reinforced further after the vote for Brexit, which prompted Davidson to defy the wishes of Downing Street to campaign effectively on her own platform at the 2017 general election. The Scottish Conservatives' success in gaining twelve seats (in contrast to the party's wider fortunes) prompted speculation that the party in Scotland would breakaway completely and become an independent organisation (Cochrane and Johnson 2017), as Murdo Fraser had previously proposed in the 2011 party leadership election (Convery 2016, 48). The Cameron legacy in terms of unionism has therefore been to leave the Union itself in something of a parlous state, while hollowing out the capacity of conservatism to defend it. His tenure as leader failed to shift the current of his party's thinking about national identity in a modernized direction or revitalise its unionism, which in the context of Brexit is a resource his successor would like to be able to draw upon (May 2016b).

Europe

That Europe is an issue that divides the Conservative Party has become one of the truisms of British politics. The vote for Brexit is the culmination of longstanding tensions that can be traced to the key ideological shift that took place in the Conservative Party in the Thatcher era (Gamble 2003). Thatcherism brought with it an exclusivist view of national sovereignty which

was incompatible with the notion of ever closer union, derived from a Powellite view of the state (Smith 1999, 188; Lynch 1999, 28-3; Wellings 2007). Somewhat ironically, the most significant dilution of national sovereignty understood in this way was the far-reaching extension of Qualified Majority Voting agreed by Margaret Thatcher herself when she signed the Single European Act (SEA) in 1986, a decision she later claimed to regret (May 2013, 74; Snowdon 2010, 16; Gamble 2003, 123). Thatcher had endorsed the SEA as she saw the economic advantages to the UK of a single European market, which the Act created. However, Conservative hostility to the EU grew as they perceived greater threats to 'the forms of political identity which they have traditionally promoted [which] have been closely linked to an appeal to the sovereign British nation state (in particular parliamentary sovereignty)' (Baker et al. 2002, 401; Buller 2000). Following Thatcher, Conservative intraparty debate over Europe would largely be conducted in zero-sum terms, namely over how much sovereignty could be sacrificed in return for the economic benefits of membership of the single market. What Andrew Gamble labels the 'Chamberlainite tradition' which embraced European cooperation as an 'extended sphere for British influence' (1996, 22), had dominated twentieth century Conservative politics prior to the advent of Thatcherism, but had been almost completely marginalized by the start of the twenty-first. This left British Conservative politics bereft of voices making a fundamentally positive case for membership of the European Union.

The narrowing of the parameters of ideological acceptability for the Conservative Party on Europe was illustrated by the tightrope Cameron walked on the issue during his eleven-year tenure as party leader. The issue was a notable absentee from his modernization agenda (Lynch 2015; Lynch and Whitaker 2016). Although he had appealed to his party to 'stop

banging on' about Europe in 2006, this was a request to turn down the volume of intraparty debate and temper some of the rhetoric, rather than a substantive policy shift. If anything, while Cameron struck a different tone he effectively retained the 'harder but quieter' stance on European integration adopted under the leadership of Iain Duncan Smith (Bale 2006), reflecting 'the deepening Eurosceptic consensus within his own party' (Vail 2015, 120). Mindful perhaps of the 2001 leadership election, which saw the pro-European Ken Clarke defeated by the firmly Eurosceptic Duncan Smith largely because of the European issue, Cameron was careful to signal his own Eurosceptic credentials during his campaign for the party leadership in 2005. He pledged to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the federalist European People's Party (EPP) grouping in the European Parliament, which he eventually did in 2009. In opposition he also called for a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, although he declined to hold one retrospectively once elected, arguing that the ratification process had been completed.

As a heresthetician Cameron conclusively failed to effectively manage the European question, leading directly to the termination of his premiership. At the root of this failure were decisions he took at the very outset of his leadership in two key areas: Euroscepticism and immigration. On the first of these, his accommodation with Eurosceptic opinion within his party (discussed above) led to the manifesto pledges designed to pacify it. These were the promises to introduce a referendum lock on any new treaties, a sovereignty Bill, and 'to renegotiate the return of various powers from the EU to Westminster, which logically had to involve negotiations for either a new treaty or revision of an existing one' (Thompson 2017, 443). Although the sovereignty Bill fell by the wayside, the Coalition government did introduce a referendum-lock on any future transfers of sovereignty to Brussels. The robustness of this was

dissected by Conservative Eurosceptics (Gifford 2014, 520-521), but as Helen Thompson (2017, 443-446) demonstrates, it effectively closed off the possibility of a significant renegotiation of Britain's position in the European Union, weakening Cameron's hand during the run-up to the referendum. Rather than transform the issue space of Europe within the PCP Cameron steered a course which further embedded Euroscepticism, which is one of the enduring ideological legacies of Thatcherism on the Conservative Party. The strength of Eurosceptic feeling is demonstrated by analysis of the PCP during the Coalition government which found that just seven MPs could be classified as 'Europhile', 64 were 'agnostic', and 234 were 'Eurosceptic'. In the latter grouping, 81 were 'Hard Eurosceptics', who had advocated withdrawal from the EU and/or rebelled against the party whip to demand a referendum on membership, while 154 were 'Soft Eurosceptics' (Heppell 2013b, 345).

On the issue of immigration, while Cameron softened the tone of his party's rhetoric and (in contrast to the 2005 election) sought to downplay it as a campaign issue, the Conservatives retained a firm policy line, pledging in the 2010 manifesto to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands (Hayton 2012, 89-96). This was arguably a tougher policy than that contained in the 2005 election manifesto under the leadership of Michael Howard, which featured the issue prominently and used the language of 'control' (which would recur in the Brexit referendum), but said that the actual limit would be set annually by parliament. The policy position adopted by Cameron was in line with public sentiment, but was not one he was in a position to deliver while the UK remained a member of the European Union (barring a highly unlikely radical reform of EU treaty law). Cameron consequently had set up the circumstances for him to be attacked years later in the referendum campaign over the immigration issue, by Conservatives,

UKIP and others who prioritised controlling it over any other issue (Ford and Goodwin, 2017). The issue dimension of immigration therefore represents a key heresthetic failure by Cameron, and forms a central component of his ideological legacy to Theresa May, leaving her with little room for manoeuvre on the issue in the Brexit negotiations without facing a major backlash.

When, in January 2013 Cameron made the commitment to a referendum on EU he would have known that it carried significant risks for his premiership, not least in party management terms. Relative unity was assured in the short-term, as the bulk of Conservatives could coalesce around the promise of a referendum, but in the medium term it threatened to reopen the ideological schism that had plagued previous Conservative Prime Ministers. Two Conservative MPs, Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless, did defect to UKIP in the second half of 2014, but their respective triumphs in the by-elections they triggered did not lead to the flood of further defections Nigel Farage hoped for. Following the election however, party unity soon began to fray. In June 2015 a new group 'Conservatives for Britain' was founded, with the support of over 50 Conservative MPs. Ostensibly, the group supported Cameron's efforts to renegotiate the terms of UK membership of the EU, but it was clear from the outset that they were unlikely to be satisfied by any deal the Prime Minster was likely to be able to secure. The group's co-chair, Steve Baker MP said: 'We wish David Cameron every success but, unless senior EU officials awake to the possibility that one of the EU's largest members is serious about a fundamental change in our relationship, our recommendation to British voters seems likely to be exit' (quoted in Ross 2015).

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As the re-negotiation process continued, the Prime Minister was obliged to make clear that collective responsibility would be suspended during the referendum campaign, to allow government ministers to campaign to leave the EU without resigning their positions. In the event, twenty-one ministers, including six who sat in Cabinet, declared that they would oppose the government's position. In the PCP as a whole, 144 MPs sided with Leave (Heppell et al., 2017, 9). This was a much higher number than had been widely anticipated, but reflected the fact that the Conservative Party, including the PCP, had already transformed itself into a Eurosceptic one, with what could be regarded as the pro-European views typical of many leading figures in the 1980s all but completely side-lined. The positions Cameron had adopted throughout his leadership condoning hard Euroscepticism and a hard-line position on immigration contributed to the legitimation of the anti-EU position so many Conservative MPs eventually took, as it was plausibly consistent with the stance the party had taken on immigration and sovereignty. If anything, the wider party membership was more strongly Eurosceptic, with 60 per cent indicating they would vote to leave in the light of the deal secured by Cameron (Bale et al. 2016).

The importance of retaining full access to the single market would ultimately become the most powerful argument of the Remain campaign in the 2016 referendum, with significant downside economic risks being predicted if membership of it were lost (Ford and Goodwin 2017, 24). However, the European Commission made clear that membership of the single market could not be divorced from the principle of free movement of people within it. The Leave campaign was forced to accept the reality of this position, and suggested instead that the UK should pursue a free trade agreement with the EU outside of the single market.

Ultimately for many voters, curtailing free movement took priority over single market membership (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). The potent rhetoric of the Leave campaign, that the UK could 'take back control', particularly over national borders and immigration, is rooted in a zero-sum, Thatcherite understanding of sovereignty, and echoed rhetoric used in the 2005 election by the Conservative campaign (Seldon and Snowdon 2005). Given the referendum campaign and debate took place largely on the right of British politics, played out to a notable degree as a battle between wings of the Conservative Party, with the UK Independence Party providing supporting fire for Leave, there was little space for, or effective articulation of, the notion of pooling sovereignty to assert greater national control through cooperation via international institutions.

Following the announcement of the referendum result, the Conservatives moved quickly to accept, and buttress, the new political reality it represented. Within an hour of the official declaration of the result, Cameron stood in Downing Street giving his resignation statement. In it, he was keen to stress that while it meant the end of his career, 'The British people have voted to leave the European Union and their will must be respected' (Cameron 2016b). Other Conservative politicians quickly adopted this line, notably Theresa May, who pronounced firmly that 'Brexit means Brexit' as she launched her leadership bid six days later (May 2016a). The apparent ease with which the party was able to cohere around this position reflected the extent to which pro-European sentiment had diminished in Conservative ranks. The depth of Eurosceptic feeling in the PCP suggests that had the referendum result been reversed, with Remain prevailing by a small margin, David Cameron would have faced acute problems holding his party together. Many Eurosceptics would not, as Nigel Farage had indicated during the

campaign, have accepted that such a result meant that the issue was closed. A narrow victory for Remain would also most likely have left the government with a policy out of line with the majority of Conservative voters: polling after the referendum indicated that 58 per cent of those who voted Conservative in 2015 went on to vote to leave the EU (Ashcroft 2016). Similar polling at the time of the 2017 general election found that 68 per cent of those who voted Conservative had voted Leave in the referendum (Ashcroft 2017).

Under Cameron's successor, Theresa May, the question for Conservatives rapidly became not whether the UK should leave the European Union, but what Brexit can and should look like. There is scope for major intraparty divisions and disagreements over this – between those who would like to retain as much privileged access to the single market as possible for economic reasons, and those who see the reassertion of the primacy of UK sovereignty as the essence of Brexit which should not be compromised. This is revealing of Cameron's failure as a heresthetician in his management of the European issue. He was unable to manipulate a large section of the PCP into supporting his desired position in the EU referendum, having been unwilling to confront the tenets of Thatcherite Euroscepticism at any point during his leadership. Critically, having allowed the terms of the debate to be framed in Thatcherite lexicon, especially in terms of sovereignty, he leaves his successor with little ideological space or resources with which to present the compromises and complexities that are likely to be a feature of the Brexit negotiations, and of any deal acceptable to both sides.

This is reflected in the language used by Theresa May to discuss Brexit. At the Conservative Party conference in October 2016 May said Brexit meant becoming 'a fully-independent,

sovereign country' freed from … [with] the freedom to make our own decisions on a whole host of different matters, from how we label our food to the way in which we choose to control immigration', and rejected the notion that there was 'trade-off' to be struck between single market access and immigration control (May 2016c). Discussing the issue in her first major interview of 2017 the Prime Minister struck a similar tone, claiming 'We will be able to have control of our borders, control of our laws, this is what people were voting for' (May 2017). It is striking how in formulations such as this of what her critics have labelled 'hard Brexit' the Prime Minister's language emulates Thatcherite critiques of European integration, and channels a narrow conception of national sovereignty drawn from the Westminster Model (Smith 1999). Others in the Conservative Party are fearful of the economic risks of Brexit, and in the light of the 2017 general election result, which has greatly weakened the Prime Minister's authority, have begun to more vocally resist 'hard Brexit'. So while Cameron has left his successor a party largely willing to accept the principle of Brexit, it remains deeply divided over what that means in practice.

Conclusion: conservatism after Cameron

David Cameron's project to modernize the Conservative Party brought electoral success, but did not involve a fundamental reappraisal of the party's ideology (Hayton 2016). This article has found this to be a failure of heresthetics, as on the key issue dimensions that divide contemporary conservatism, Cameron did not succeed in restructuring those to his advantage, or in ways that helped resolve the tensions the party has been grappling with in the post-Thatcher era. So, while Heppell (2013a, 277) could conclude that Cameron was a successful

heresthetician as he had 'demonstrated his skill' in manipulating the Liberal Democrats in the coalition negotiations and over the Alternative Vote referendum, here I conclude that while that earlier analysis holds up in terms of Cameron's more short-term political management and electoral success (demonstrated by the 2015 general election victory), a more sceptical picture emerges when assessing Cameron's legacy in terms of the deeper ideological undercurrents in contemporary Conservative politics. As noted in the introduction, these are an important, if often overlooked aspect of political leadership and of the prospects of political parties.

At the outset three key divides in contemporary conservatism were identified, over European integration, unionism, and social liberalism. These all predate the Cameron era, but in each case they are left unresolved by his leadership. This is important as it has implications for Cameron's professed objective of modernizing conservatism. Shifts in Conservative ideology were required to embed modernization into the party's DNA – to restructure it, in Riker's terminology. In terms of social liberalism, Cameron enjoyed some success, most notably his victory over traditionalists on same-sex marriage. However, on the union he missed the opportunity to offer a modernized Conservative vision of British national identity in response to the growing appeal of Scottish nationalism and instead sought to politicise English identity in the 2015 election (Kenny 2016), a path which might yet see the party north of the border effectively breakaway. And on European integration he could not – or would not – challenge doctrinaire Euroscepticism, and in attempting to appease it structured the political environment in such a way as to lead to his own downfall.

Assessing Cameron's leadership, Philip Norton (2015, 475) concluded that it lacked a 'clear set of ideological beliefs'. This meant that under his direction conservatism steered within, rather than against, the prevailing ideological legacy of Thatcherism, and did not find a clearly defined new course. It is evident that Cameron's successors will face key dilemmas not only in attempting to deliver Brexit, but in balancing liberal and traditionalist attitudes within the party, and reformulating its approach to unionism given the political divergence of Scotland and Northern Ireland with England and Wales in the referendum (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2017; McHarg and Mitchell 2017). As this article has demonstrated, the complexity in doing so reflects the fact that party leaders face a 'two-level' heresthetic game (Putnam 1998, 434; Dardanelli 2009, 54) in which attempts to manage one level (the party) can have unpredictable consequences for efforts in relation to the other (the electorate). Successful management of these tensions as the Brexit process unfolds will require a degree of heresthetic skill of enormous proportions, should Cameron's successors as Conservative Party leader wish to avoid his fate of being undone by the issue of Europe.

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