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## **The British Conservatives and their competitors in the post-Thatcher era**

*Richard Hayton*

### **Abstract**

Since the end of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives have struggled to regain hegemonic position they enjoyed under her leadership. This chapter analyses these travails in relation to the silent revolution and the silent counter revolution, which have presented difficulties to parties on the right across Western Europe. It argues that, as a classic catch-all party, the Conservatives have had to battle to hold together a sufficiently broad electoral coalition, challenged in the political centre by the Liberal Democrats and (for a time) New Labour, and on the right by Eurosceptic populists in the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and more recently the Brexit Party. As the chapter explores, the Conservatives in opposition after the 1997 general election responded initially to the silent counter revolution, attempting to shore-up their support on the right. Ongoing electoral defeat saw the party under David Cameron embrace modernisation in an effort to signal catch-up with the process of value change identified in Inglehart's (1977) 'silent revolution' thesis. In more recent years, and especially since the 2016 vote for Brexit, the Conservatives have sought once again to contain, and arguably have embraced, the silent counter revolution of the populist right.

### **Introduction**

The Conservative Party is the most successful political party in British electoral history. Since 1886 – the start of what Seldon and Snowdon (2001: 27) labelled the 'long Conservative century' – the Conservatives have governed for one hundred years, and been out of office for just thirty-three. No wonder then, that a self-image as the 'natural party of government' has become deeply embedded in the Conservative Party's psyche. Much of the academic work on the party consequently emphasises its capacity for effective statecraft and political renewal. Since the end of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, however, the Conservatives have struggled to regain the hegemonic position they enjoyed under her leadership. This chapter analyses these travails in relation to the silent revolution and the silent counter revolution, which have presented difficulties to parties on the right across Western Europe. It argues that as a classic catch-all party the Conservatives have had to battle to hold together a sufficiently broad electoral coalition, challenged in the political centre by the Liberal Democrats and (for a time) New Labour, and on the right by Eurosceptic populists in the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and more recently the Brexit Party. As the chapter explores, the Conservatives in

opposition after the 1997 general election responded initially to the silent counter revolution, attempting to shore-up their support on the right. Ongoing electoral defeat saw the party under David Cameron embrace modernisation in an effort to signal catch-up with the process of value change identified in Inglehart's (1977) 'silent revolution' thesis. In more recent years, and especially since the 2016 vote for Brexit, the Conservatives have sought once again to contain, and arguably have embraced, the silent counter revolution of the populist right.

While today the party has been in power for almost a decade, enjoying victories (of sorts) at three successive general elections against a weakened and divided Labour Party, this has not been a period of unbridled Conservative hegemony. David Cameron led his party back to power after 13 years in opposition in 2010, but lacking an overall majority formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats (Hayton, 2014). Another hung parliament was the widely anticipated result of the 2015 general election, but Cameron defied expectations to secure a small majority of 12 seats. This slender majority evaporated, however, in the 2017 general election called by Cameron's successor, Theresa May, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Even as the Conservatives' vote share rose to 42.4 percent (its highest level since 1983) a surge in support for Labour caused a net loss of 13 seats for the governing party, leaving them dependent on a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland to stay in power (Tonge, 2017). The last time the Conservatives secured a comfortable overall majority was Margaret Thatcher's third election victory in 1987, more than three decades ago. Although this was followed by a surprise victory under John Major in 1992, his 21-seat majority had melted away by the time the party stumbled into the 1997 election, riven by factionalism (Heppell, 2008). In short, the political, ideological, and electoral dominance of the Thatcher era has not been something the Conservatives have come close to replicating since.

Like much of the mainstream right across Europe, the British Conservatives therefore currently find themselves under severe pressure. Most immediately this relates to Brexit, which threatens a realignment of the UK party system and to rupture both major parties (Gamble, 2019). However, the vote to leave the European Union can be seen as a symptom of a deeper crisis afflicting British politics, and the strain that the Conservatives in particular were already under as they sought to adapt to the challenges brought about by the silent revolution and silent counter-revolution. This chapter explores this in the following way. The first section considers the electoral challenge that faced the Conservatives in the post-Thatcher period, arguing that in opposition after 1997 the party's response was primarily driven by the silent counter revolution. The second section looks at the process of adaptation towards a more centrist 'liberal conservatism' under David Cameron, which is interpreted as a response to the silent revolution, which succeeded in returning the Conservatives to office. The third section examines argues that in seeking to rebuff the challenge posed by UKIP and the Brexit Party the Conservatives have once again framed their response in relation to the silent counter revolution.

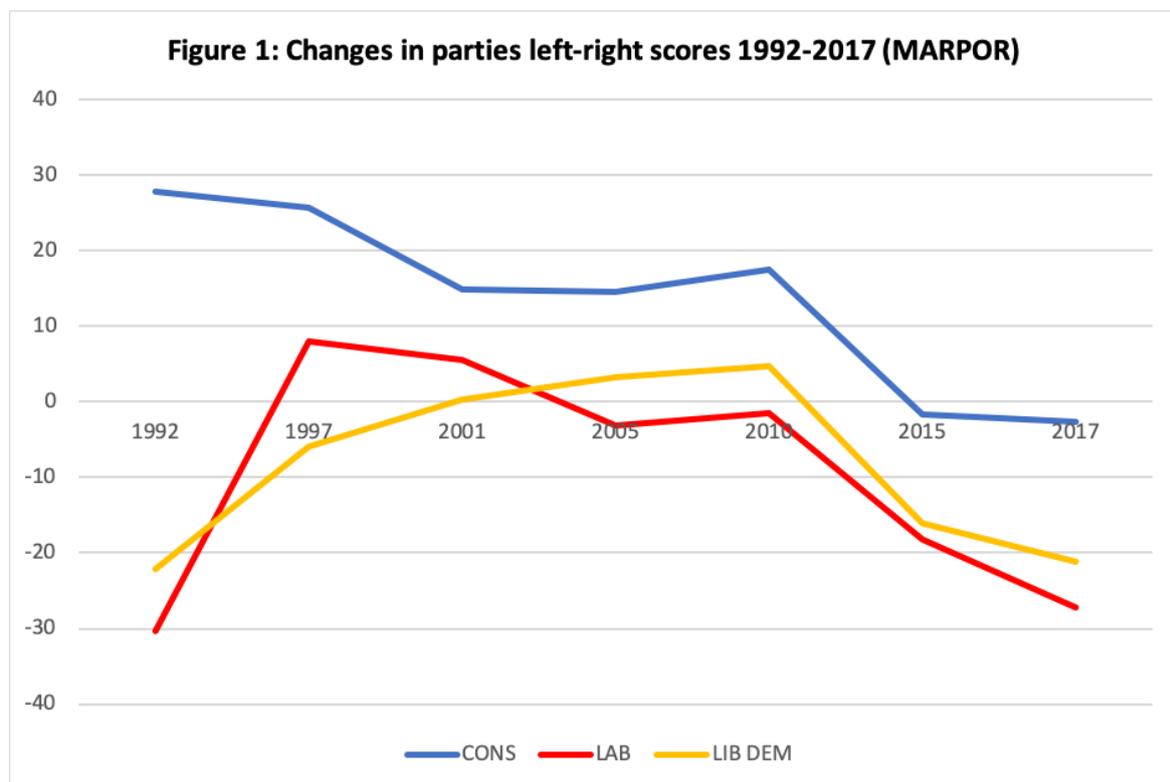
## The Conservative Crisis

Under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives returned to power with a 43-seat majority in 1979 and went on to secure landslide re-elections in 1983 (majority of 144) and in 1987 (majority of 102). In the seven general elections since then they have secured small overall majorities twice (21 in 1992, and 12 in 2015) and finished as the largest party on two other occasions, in 2010 and 2017 (see Table 1). A landslide victory for New Labour (majority 179) swept the Conservatives from office in 1997, who were able to add just one seat to their total in 2001. A partial Conservative recovery in 2005 was not enough to deny Tony Blair his third consecutive general election victory, with a majority of 66. So, while Thatcherite statecraft delivered a long period of Conservative hegemony the end of this era left the Tories with a series of electoral and ideological difficulties (Hayton, 2012). The title of one academic assessment of the party after 1997 neatly summed up the situation: *The Conservatives in Crisis* (Garnett and Lynch, 2003). For the first time in well over a century, the Conservatives' very 'survival as a significant political force was open to serious question' (Garnett and Lynch, 2003: 1).

TABLE 1: SEATS (AND % VOTE SHARE) AT UK GENERAL ELECTIONS

	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017
<b>CONS</b>	336 (41.9)	165 (30.7)	166 (31.7)	198 (32.4)	306 (36.1)	330 (36.9)	317 (42.4)
<b>LABOUR</b>	271 (34.4)	418 (43.2)	413 (40.7)	355 (35.2)	258 (29.0)	232 (30.4)	262 (40.0)
<b>LIB DEM</b>	20 (17.8)	46 (16.8)	52 (18.3)	62 (22.0)	57 (23.0)	8 (7.9)	12 (7.4)
<b>UKIP</b>	n/a	0 (0.3)	0 (1.5)	0 (2.2)	0 (3.1)	0 (12.6)	0 (1.8)

The puzzle regarding the electoral performance of the Conservative Party after 1992 is not why they lost the election in 1997. After a record 18 years in office the electoral pendulum was already well overdue to swing back in Labour's favour, a fate made inevitable by the loss of any semblance of governing competence in the dying years of the Major government, and the emergence of a charismatic leader of a modernised opposition in the shape of Tony Blair and New Labour. Rather, the intriguing question is why it took the Conservatives so long to recover power, or even begin to make a credible move back in that direction. A key aspect of the answer is the extent to which the Conservatives were disorientated by the New Labour project, which simultaneously seized the centre-ground of British politics in left-right terms and embraced the post-materialist values of the silent revolution. Labour's shift to the political centre is captured the left-right scale of the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2018) which illustrates the dramatic rightward shift the party took in 1997 (Figure 1). Although there was a slight leftward drift in the three manifestos that followed, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats, on this measure retained centrist positions, with the Conservatives noticeably further to the right. For a time, this effectively neutered the traditional Conservative appeal to the electorate as the anti-socialist party.



Furthermore, New Labour effectively tapped into the progressive sensibilities of (often middle class) voters on post-material questions such as climate change and environmental protection, women's rights, minority rights, an 'ethical' foreign policy, and international aid. In the Conservative Party, where the ideological legacy of Thatcherism remained potent, many of these developments were ones that much of the party found disagreeable, even if (perhaps sensing the shifting public mood) the leadership was sometimes unwilling to strongly attack them. In essence, the Conservatives faced a strategic choice. Should they seek to neutralise New Labour's electoral advantage by sticking closely to the political centre, and presenting themselves as a viable, moderate alternative administration when the sheen of the new government inevitably began to wear off? Or should the Conservatives seek instead to put 'clear blue water' between themselves and Labour, by reinforcing the appeal to their own 'core vote'? Otto Kirchheimer's (1966) catch-all party thesis implies that the former strategy would be pursued, to the detriment of 'meaningful political opposition and of ideology' (Williams, 2009: 539). However, academic analyses of the Conservatives between 1997 and 2005 concur that efforts to reach out to the median voter were, at best, severely limited (Bale, 2010; Garnett and Lynch, 2003; Hayton, 2012; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005). Successive party leaders – William Hague between 1997 and 2001; Iain Duncan Smith between 2001 and 2003; and Michael Howard between 2003 and 2005 – either rapidly retreated to a core vote strategy after encountering resistance to other approaches, or, in Howard's case, made not even a token gesture in the direction of the political centre ground. Central to explaining this political choice, but something implicit rather than explicit in the

existing literature, was the Conservatives' understanding of and response to the silent counter revolution (Ignazi, 1992).

In part, the choices made by Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard reflected the party management constraints that each faced. The priority for Hague, elected to the leadership in the aftermath of a crushing electoral defeat, was to hold the party together and to attempt some organisational reform, rather than to start the painful task of confronting some of the Conservatives' core beliefs. Iain Duncan Smith suffered from the twin handicaps of his own ineptitude as a political leader and communicator, and a narrow support base within the parliamentary party, which gave him little in the way of political capital with which drive forward the agenda of 'change' which he had at least identified as necessary (Hayton and Heppell, 2010). Succeeding Duncan Smith less than 18 months out from a general election, effectively as an interim leader, Michael Howard's only concerns were to restore a sense of discipline, unity, and credibility to his party, and he regarded a core vote strategy as the only way to do that (Hayton, 2012: 54-8). Critics were therefore justified in suggesting that even after eight years in opposition, the Conservatives had failed to learn 'the major lesson, that power will only be gained and retained by capturing and retaining the centre ground of the electorate, rather than merely courting the Conservative core vote, however ideologically satisfying and pleasing to the right-wing press that might be' (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005: 740).

The analytical frame of the silent counter revolution helps us provide a fuller explanation of why this was the case. In the original formulation of the thesis, Piero Ignazi (1992) argued that a conservative backlash against the revolution in post-material values on the left was facilitating the (re)emergence of extreme right-wing parties. However, this shift towards party competition along primarily cultural rather than economic lines had implications for the mainstream right too. Ignazi highlighted 'the rise of a new "neo-conservative" cultural mood' (1992: 16) as an essential ingredient in the emergence of the silent counter revolution, and the UK had been at the forefront of this in the form of Thatcherism. While the Thatcherite project is best remembered for its radical programme of neoliberalism in the economic sphere, as a hegemonic project it was also engaged in an ideological battle to counter the rise of leftist post-material values. Characterised by Stuart Hall (1983) as 'authoritarian populism', Thatcherism consequently emphasised the importance of law and order, social discipline and tradition, and limiting immigration. This restricted the political space available for the extreme right in Britain, where the fascist National Front and British National Party were squeezed to the very margins. However, over the space of two decades Thatcherism had a transformative effect on the outlook of the Conservative Party itself, critically influencing the strategies adopted in opposition from 1997.

The Conservatives' 'continued adherence to Thatcherism' was, critics suggested, an 'obstacle' to adaptation (Heppell, 2014: 103). This was perhaps most starkly illustrated by the party

leadership elections, where on Europe in particular ideological acceptability overrode other considerations such as public appeal, experience, or leadership skills. The most well-known and well-liked Conservative MP, Ken Clarke, was consequently passed over for the leadership on three separate occasions. The ideological grip of Thatcherism on the party in the 1990s was similarly demonstrated by the fact that its default core-vote position was firmly Thatcherite, whether that be on Europe, immigration, taxation and the role of the state, or social issues. Unfortunately in electoral terms, on salient issues such as spending on public services this left the Conservatives as the party furthest party from the median voter (Norris and Lovenduski, 2004: 85). An important driver of this seemingly irrational positioning by an office-seeking party was 'selective perception' which left Conservative politicians more likely to 'miss the target' when attempting to locate the political centre ground (Norris and Lovenduski, 2004: 85). Indeed, 'To those in charge before David Cameron, change was not merely difficult, it was by no means clear to them that it was even rational' (Bale, 2010: 367).

Given the scale of the defeat they suffered, and the damage done to the party's image and reputation by factional infighting and governance problems in the 1992-1997 parliament, they may have had a point. With New Labour occupying the political centre ground, the Conservatives were 'forced into a strategy of promoting a narrow range of their traditional strengths, representing a limited issue domain on which they have a chance of being rated more positively' (Green, 2011: 738). As such, the focus on core vote issues such as taxation, immigration and Europe should be understood not as the path of least resistance for a party overly attached to Thatcherite shibboleths, but can be understood as an attempt to exploit the 'party's remaining 'best issues' or their perceived 'owned issues'.' (ibid). Certainly, in the case of Michael Howard's relentless focus on reducing immigration in the 2005 election campaign, the high salience of the issue, and the Conservatives' substantial lead over Labour as the party best able to deal with it, provided a logical basis for the strategy. However, as Howard acknowledged, it also ran the risk of reinforcing negative perceptions of the party as 'pandering to the right' (quoted in Green, 2011: 760). Given the extent of the Conservatives' party image problem it ultimately probably did as much harm as good, and the party duly went down to a third successive defeat. Previous excuses, such as the charisma and popularity of the Prime Minister Tony Blair, could no longer be plausibly thought to account for the Conservatives' continued troubles. Howard had 'tested to destruction' the theory that an insistent and pugnacious core vote campaign would bend the electorate's preferences to fit those of the Conservatives, and persuaded more of them to give 'preference accommodation' a go (Bale, 2010: 376).

### **Catching-up with the silent revolution: party change through modernisation**

David Cameron was elected Conservative Party leader on an explicitly modernising platform. His pitch for the job stressed that the Conservatives must 'change to win', and he diagnosed the necessary process of adaptation as one that would take the party firmly towards more

moderate stances on a range of issues, relocating it on the political centre ground. He articulated this strategy in relation to Thatcherism, from which he sought to distance himself rhetorically. He pointedly refused, for example, to describe himself as a Thatcherite, and in a symbolic counterblast to Thatcher's oft quoted mantra insisted that 'there *is* such a thing as society, it's just not the same thing as the state' (Cameron, 2005).

Cameron's modernisation agenda encompassed a wide-ranging policy review, a concerted effort to improve party image and the Conservative 'brand', and ideological repositioning towards the centre-ground. Mindful of the problem acknowledged above by Howard, Cameron chose instead to downplay the habitual Conservative concerns of Europe, taxation, immigration, and law and order, and attempted to advance into Labour territory by focusing on issues such as the NHS (Bale, 2010: 315-316). Non-traditional issues such as the environment and climate change, poverty and social justice, and feminisation became central planks of Cameron's modernisation strategy, as did a positive attitude towards gay rights and racial equality. The focus on matters such as these was an explicit effort to signal Conservative catch-up with the process of value change identified in Inglehart's (1977) 'silent revolution' thesis, and to detoxify the Conservative brand so that it no longer repelled middle class professional voters who might be the party's natural constituency in economic terms, but were uneasy with its positioning in relation to their post-material values. Cameron and his fellow advocates of modernisation argued that their 'liberal conservatism' was the ideological and policy prescription the Conservatives needed to adapt to this context and compete successfully in elections in the twenty-first century. Even if many in their own party did not like it, they insisted that public opinion had moved in a socially liberal direction, and that this was in many ways consistent with the individualistic economic liberalism the Conservatives had championed since the 1980s.

In the early years of David Cameron's leadership, some observers accordingly argued that it had brought about a substantial shift in Conservative Party ideology, policy, and electoral strategy. Writing in 2007, Peter Dorey, for example, noted that:

Cameron has toiled tirelessly during his first year as Conservative leader to reposition the Party ideologically, and revive the 'one nation' strand which atrophied during the 1980s and 1990s. In so doing, he has explicitly eschewed Thatcherism, and effectively apologized for many aspects of it, while explicitly abandoning many of the policies implemented during the Thatcher-Major premierships. (Dorey, 2007: 162).

However, the consensus amongst academic evaluations of Cameron's modernisation agenda is that although there were clearly identifiable initial efforts to steer the Conservatives back towards the centre ground, these foundered relatively quickly, and proved insufficiently substantial to prevent a turn back towards an essentially neo-liberal programme in the context of the worsening economic circumstances from 2008 onwards. As one

comprehensive assessment put it, 'lacking a sufficiently robust and coherent core' Conservative modernisation 'proved insubstantial in both ideational and policy terms' (Kerr and Hayton, 2015: 129). This is explored here in relation to the four major policy challenges that mainstream right parties face today, namely European integration, immigration, moral issues, and welfare.

One of the most striking aspects of Cameron's leadership of the Conservative Party was his unwillingness to challenge its approach to the European issue. Clearly conscious of the fact that Euroscepticism was the biggest determinant of voting in the 1997 and 2001 party leadership elections, Cameron sought to burnish his own anti-integrationist credentials by pledging in his own bid for the job to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the main centre-right grouping in the European Parliament, the European People's Party (EPP) if elected. Analysis by Heppell and Hill (2009: 396) suggested that 181 of the 198 MPs eligible to participate in the election could be classified as Eurosceptic, and that 78 of these backed Cameron. Given this depth of Euroscepticism in both the parliamentary party and wider membership by 2005, it seems questionable that as the least Eurosceptic candidate on offer he would have secured the leadership without offering this assurance (which was duly fulfilled in 2009). However, as explored in the section on Brexit below, this Eurosceptic positioning would leave Cameron with little room for manoeuvre once in government.

On immigration, in their analysis of the Conservatives' unsuccessful 2005 general election campaign, Philip Cowley and Jane Green (2005: 61) argued that the party 'had little choice' but to focus heavily on the topic, as it was one of the few issues where they had a clear lead over Labour, and its salience had risen substantially since 2001. Nevertheless, determined to learn the lessons of that failed campaign, Cameron, at least initially, sought to significantly downplay core vote issues such as Europe, crime, and immigration. On the latter, he appointed the liberal-minded Damian Green as the shadow minister responsible for policy development and modulated the party's rhetoric so that at least some forms of economic migration were discussed in much more positive language, stressing its benefits to society (Partos and Bale, 2015). This change of tone was part of a wider effort, central to the modernisation strategy, to combat the 'nasty party' image identified as a problem in 2002 by the then Party Chairman Theresa May. Given the wider societal value shift towards more widespread acceptance of multiculturalism, Cameron argued that by sticking to their traditional positions the Conservatives 'had lost touch with the country' (Cameron and Jones, 2010: 292). The sense that the Conservative brand was toxic and in need of decontamination was also reinforced by evidence suggesting that in a number of areas, including immigration, policy positions lost support when voters learnt they were Tory ones (Partos and Bale, 2015: 171). But as with the European issue, the substance of modernisation in this area was very limited, with the party retaining a relatively hard-line stance aimed at significantly reducing the overall level of net inward migration. Furthermore, the change of tone proved temporary, with 'tough' talk returning from late-2007 onwards (Partos and Bale, 2015: 172).

If the embrace of liberal values by Conservative modernisers on immigration was rather qualified, it was on moral issues, especially gay rights and gender equality, that they chose to engage in a full-frontal confrontation with traditionalists in the party. Most dramatically and symbolically, Cameron personally drove forward the introduction of equal marriage for same-sex couples in 2013, to the fury of Thatcherite social conservatives. Some 136 Conservative MPs voted against the legislation at second reading, with only 127 voting for it, meaning that it was carried only with the support of opposition parties (Hayton, 2018: 227). On gender equality, Cameron took steps as leader of the opposition to prioritise the selection of female (and BME) parliamentary candidates through a priority list mechanism, which helped raise the number of Conservative women in the House of Commons from 17 to 49 in 2010. In 2009, Cameron also pledged that by the end of his first term in office a third of his government would be female, although he ultimately failed to meet this target (Campbell and Childs, 2015: 154-5). This in itself is a reminder that Cameron's policy record in this area was mixed. On the one-hand championing 'the family' and marriage (albeit including for same-sex couples) demonstrated 'the limits of Conservative feminism in the social sphere' (ibid: 163); on the other hand, liberal feminist policies were promoted in areas such as women's participation in the workplace, for example flexible working and shared parental leave (ibid: 159). In short, while Cameron's approach was undoubtedly driven in significant part by a desire to change the face of his party for electoral reasons, it also marked a shift towards more open-minded positions on sociocultural issues such as gay rights and gender equality. Although the party (both in parliament and in the country) remains deeply divided on moral matters, the appetite for refighting battles issues such as same-sex marriage where legislative changes have been made seems limited, as other issues have risen to the fore.

If advocates of 'progressive conservatism' could feel comfortable with, or even proud of, the record of the Conservative-led Coalition government on moral issues, it is unlikely the same could be said in relation to welfare, where with an individualist outlook consistent with Thatcherism it downgraded the role of the state in reducing material inequalities (Griffiths, 2014). The welfare state became the target for genuinely significant spending cuts as part of the austerity agenda aimed at eliminating the deficit in the public finances, which was enshrined as the number one objective of the government in the 2010 Coalition Agreement (Hayton, 2014). In opposition, Cameron had appeared to distance himself from Thatcherite welfare policy through an emphasis on 'social justice' (a Social Justice Policy Group was established), and explicit recognition of the need to tackle relative as well as absolute poverty (Hayton and McEnhill, 2015: 140). However, as with immigration, in office this shift proved to be more rhetorical than substantive, with the Treasury-driven priority of reducing expenditure overriding the (often conflicting) policy ambitions of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Critics also accused the government of using welfare policy to create divisions for electoral advantage rather than to promote social cohesion (for example the relative protection afforded to pensioner benefits, received by older people who are more likely to be Conservative voters) and as way of masking a wider programme of neo-liberal retrenchment (Taylor-Gooby, 2016). In short, the bleak economic outlook from 2008 onwards prompted a return by the Conservatives to their default Thatcherite position of scepticism regarding the need to use welfare policies to proactively reduce inequality, with a focus on individual responsibility (for example to seek work) remaining absolutely central to the party's approach. In spite of the pressure on the government finances, large sums were committed to reducing income tax for lower and middle earners. So rather than giving precedence to post-material value concerns, the Conservatives used welfare policy as an aspect of an electoral strategy based on defending the material interests of the party's core electoral blocs, namely middle class and older voters.

Cameron's leadership of the Conservative Party can therefore be credited with modernising its appeal sufficiently to return it to power after thirteen years in opposition in 2010. It marked a significant alteration of leadership strategy from that pursued by his predecessors, predicated as it was on enthusiastically accepting, rather than bemoaning, the post-material value change which New Labour had for a period effectively represented. This shift enabled Cameron to form the Coalition government with the centrist Liberal Democrats, which would have been almost unimaginable prior to his leadership. It also helped Cameron cannibalise Liberal Democrat support at the following general election in 2015, capturing 27 seats from his partners in government to secure an unexpected overall majority. However, this modernisation strategy lacked ideological coherence, was at times inconsistently applied, and left the leadership exposed to party management difficulties (Kerr and Hayton, 2015). To a notable degree these limitations reflected not only the continued attachment to the core tenets of Thatcherism within the Conservative Party, but the unceasing challenge of holding together an electoral coalition appealing to centre-ground swing voters, while retaining core supporters sympathetic to (indeed part of) the silent counter revolution. The difficulties of doing so, in the face of intensifying party competition on the right, are analysed in the following section.

### **Not so silent: Brexit and the divide on the right**

The origins of UKIP lie in the divide on the right over the issue of European integration that opened up in British politics over the Maastricht Treaty in the early-1990s. Growing Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party under Thatcher exploded into internecine warfare over the ratification of the treaty, pushing John Major's government to the brink of collapse. UKIP was formed in 1993 as a hard-Eurosceptic party committed to withdrawal from the EU, mainly by disaffected Conservatives many of whom had been involved the Bruges Group (Tournier-Sol, 2015: 142). However, most Conservative Eurosceptics remained in their party,

and UKIP struggled to break through from the fringes of British politics. Most obviously it was constrained by the first-past-the-post electoral system, but it also faced numerous difficulties in terms of its strategy, internal organisation and leadership (Usherwood, 2008). Although some Conservatives became increasingly concerned about the potential split in the centre-right vote, the party leadership 'consistently rebuffed' any suggestion of forming an electoral pact with UKIP (Usherwood, 2008: 259).

The shift to proportional representation for elections to the European Parliament facilitated UKIP's breakthrough onto the national political stage, winning 3 seats in 1999, 12 in 2004, 13 seats (and finishing second) in 2009, and 24 (putting them in first place) in 2014. As David Cutts *et al.* (2019: 3) highlight, the long-term trend of declining vote-share for the two main parties since the 1970s was intensified at European elections by the change of electoral system, to the extent that 'by 2004 fewer than half of all voters were voting for one of the two main parties'. This trend continued, with the Conservatives and Labour receiving just 22.4 percent of the vote between then in 2019. UKIP's rise was also undoubtedly assisted by increasing immigration, particularly following the 2004 enlargement of the EU and the decision by the UK government not to impose immigration controls on citizens from the ten new member states (Evans and Mellon, 2019). This facilitated the fusion of Euroscepticism with the issue of immigration as the salience of the latter rose.

However, arguably at least as important to the rise of UKIP was the strategy of the Conservatives in opposition from 1997 onwards, who, driven by the silent counter revolution as discussed above, 'first fused populism and Euroscepticism' (Bale, 2018: 263). As Bale argues, Hague 'moved the party onto unashamedly populist territory' with unmistakably nativist, authoritarian, and Eurosceptic refrains such as his 'foreign land' speech (Bale, 2018: 266). With New Labour sweeping up voters who identified with centrist, liberal and progressive values, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Conservatives orientated themselves towards an audience more receptive to the silent counter-revolution (Ignazi, 1992). These values were, after all, already ingrained in the ideology of the party in the form of Thatcherism, which combined a neo-liberal approach to economic issues, with social authoritarianism and nationalism. However, the about-turn in strategy marked by Cameron's election as party leader 'created a vacuum that a skilfully led, out-and-out populist party could rush in to fill' (Bale, 2018: 265). Moreover, as discussed above, although this modernisation strategy was not sustained for as long or with the vigour of its early promise, the 'hiatus proved to be a critical juncture: by the time the Tories tried to return to that strategy after 2007, they had lost their monopoly on it' (Bale, 2018: 274). The fact that early in his leadership Cameron had dismissed UKIP as 'a bunch of fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists, mostly' (BBC News, 04 April 2006) set the tone for the future difficulties he would have convincing voters inclined to give UKIP a hearing that even when he talked tough on the issues of Europe and immigration that he could be trusted to deliver.

If the early years of Cameron's leadership made countering UKIP more problematic for the Conservatives, the formation of the Coalition government with the centrist Liberal Democrats reinforced the opportunity structure for the radical right party to exploit. UKIP presented itself as the obvious home for traditionalist Tories disgruntled with their party's drift in a more socially liberal direction, and sought to capitalise on dissatisfaction with the government's failure to meet its promises to reduce immigration, and used the issue of free movement of people as a way to link this with the question of EU membership. A 2013 survey of Conservative Party members found that more than half of them were willing to contemplate voting UKIP, with 28.9 percent describing themselves as likely UKIP voters (Webb and Bale, 2014: 964). Ideologically, that section of the Conservative membership viewed themselves as closer to UKIP than to David Cameron, strongly favouring lower immigration, withdrawal from the EU and opposing their leader's support for gay marriage (Webb and Bale, 2014: 965). The expression of such sentiments in local associations, and the general rise in support for UKIP in the opinion polls, only increased the motivation for Conservative MPs to demonstrate their own Eurosceptic credentials by backing calls for a referendum on EU membership. Cameron gave in to this pressure in January 2013, announcing that the Conservatives would legislate for a referendum if re-elected with a majority enabling them to do so. It is almost inconceivable that he would have conceded to this vote without the presence of UKIP on the populist right.

If Cameron hoped this promise would take the wind out of UKIP's sails and diffuse the pressure in his own party, he would soon be disappointed. Accompanied as it was by an undertaking to renegotiate the terms of British membership of the EU, it effectively legitimised the complaints about it that had long been advanced by UKIP and Eurosceptics in his own party. For Copey and Haughton (2014: 79) this represented the culmination of what they term 'issue capture' – whereby by the terms of the debate came to be 'determined by the vocal, Eurosceptic minority'. Cameron consequently set himself up to fail in the renegotiations, where whatever he proved able to achieve (which in the end was not a great deal) would never be sufficient to satisfy the hard Eurosceptics. UKIP's prominence continued to increase as its support rose, leading to its victory in the 2014 European Parliament elections and the defection of two Conservative MPs, who both then went on to win back their seats in by-elections as UKIP candidates. Under Cameron, despite his desire to play down the issue, the Conservative Party followed a path of 'Eurosceptic radicalisation' (Alexandre-Collier, 2018). The referendum pledge fuelled rather than quelled this, as it forced Conservative Eurosceptics to confront the choice of remaining or leaving in the EU. In the end, some 140 Conservative MPs backed Vote Leave, a significantly larger number than had been anticipated by the leadership.

In the UK case, the silent counter revolution thus found its voice in the form of opposition to membership of the EU, culminating in the vote for Brexit in 2016. Both UKIP and the Conservative strategy discussed above fermented and facilitated this outcome. One reading

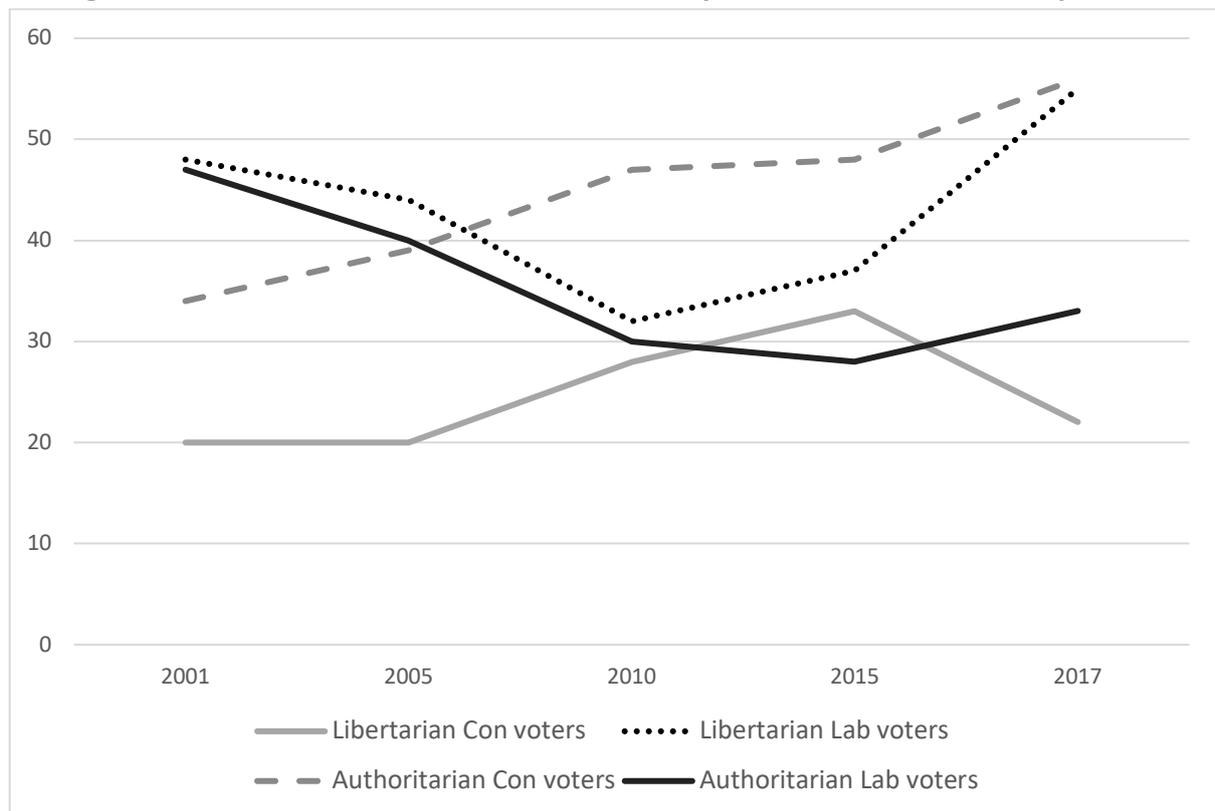
of the Conservatives' handling of UKIP is that in the face of surging support for the radical right the governing party gave ground, seeking to adopt elements of its position to diminish its support. However, of at least as much importance to understanding the Conservatives' approach to the European question, and UKIP, is the extent to which Euroscepticism had become ingrained in the party's post-Thatcherite DNA. As UKIP and a series of external factors helped to raise the salience of the issues of Europe and immigration, the Conservative response was inevitably framed through a Eurosceptic lens. Further evidence for this can be found in the continued Eurosceptic radicalisation of the Conservative Party, including the leadership, in the aftermath of the referendum (Alexandre-Collier, 2018: 213-6). However, the risks with this approach were highlighted at the 2017 general election. While support for UKIP collapsed, and was largely folded into that for the Conservatives, support for the main parties became more sharply divided on Remain versus Leave lines. With Leave voters being more likely to be older, white, and socially conservative, moving in this direction risked undoing the progress Cameron made in adapting to the silent revolution and appealing to the median voter.

TABLE 2: PROFILE OF 2017  
 CONSERVATIVE VOTERS

<b>All voters</b>	44 (+6)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	44 (+6)
Female	43 (+6)
<b>Age</b>	
18-24	27 (-1)
25-34	27 (-6)
35-44	33 (-2)
45-54	43 (+7)
55-64	51 (+14)
65+	61 (+14)
<b>Social class</b>	
AB	47 (+2)
C1	44 (+2)
C2	45 (+13)
DE	38 (+12)
<b>Ethnic group</b>	
White	45 (+6)
All BME	19 (-4)
<b>Education</b>	
No qualifications	52
Other qualifications	46
Degree or higher	33

SOURCE: Bale and Webb (2017: 54).

**Figure 2: Conservative and Labour vote choice by libertarian-authoritarian position**



SOURCE: data from *British Social Attitudes 35: Voting* (2018: p. 20).

The 2017 general election provided an unexpected brief return to two-party politics, with the Conservatives and Labour winning their highest combined vote share (82.4 percent) since 1970. The overall 6% rise in Conservative vote-share was not, however, evenly distributed, with the party actually losing ground amongst the under-45s and BME voters (Table 2). Liberals who had moved towards the party under Cameron also dropped away, while support amongst more authoritarian voters increased (Figure 2). The precariousness of the support for the two main parties was brutally exposed by the elections to the European Parliament in 2019. In that ballot, Labour received 13.6 percent, and the Conservatives just 8.8 percent, the worst result in the latter's history (Cutts *et al.* 2019: 2). The election was won by the Brexit Party, which had been formed just six weeks earlier, by the former leader of UKIP Nigel Farage. This new outfit, which advocated a no-deal 'hard' Brexit from the EU secured 29 seats and 30.5 percent of the vote. Remain voters meanwhile flocked to the resurgent Liberal Democrats (16 seats, 19.6 percent) and the Greens (7 seats, 11.8 percent). Analysis of vote-switching at the 2017 general election attributed the rise in support for the Conservatives to their 'compelling appeal' to Leave voters after the referendum, which 'removed the main obstacle to a credible Conservative policy on immigration' (Mellon *et al.* 2018: 727, 733-4). The failure to deliver Brexit by the long-promised (and self-imposed) deadline of 29 March 2019 destroyed this credibility, and drove the surge in support for Farage's new party.

## **Conclusion: 'do or die'**

Unable to secure parliamentary support for the withdrawal agreement she had negotiated with the EU, and faced with electoral humiliation Theresa May, Conservative Prime Minister since Cameron's post-referendum departure in the summer of 2016, resigned. Boris Johnson, who had led the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum, won the leadership election that followed, becoming the first Conservative leader to be elected with the support of a majority of both the party's MPs (51.1%) and members (66.4%). Johnson was adamant that the UK must leave the EU by the end of the Article 50 extension period (31 October 2019) with or without a deal, and secured the leadership on this basis. His insistence that Brexit was 'do or die' for the Conservatives reflected the views of the party membership, more than half of whom believed that failing to deliver exit from the EU would damage the party to the extent that it would never lead a government again (YouGov, 2019). Their depth of ideological commitment to Brexit was strikingly illustrated by the fact that a majority (54%) of members surveyed prioritised it over the survival of the Conservative Party, and almost two-thirds (63%) favoured leaving the EU even if it meant the break-up of the United Kingdom (YouGov, 2019) – the defence of which union was traditionally part of the party's *raison d'être*.

Boris Johnson's strategy therefore appears to be to position himself, and the Conservative Party, as the standard bearer for the silent counter revolution symbolised by Brexit. Primarily this necessitates completing the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, in the hope of dislodging the Brexit Party and monopolising once again the right of the political spectrum in Britain. However, this strategy carries multiple risks. A chaotic exit from the EU could rapidly destroy the Conservatives' reputation for governing competence, perhaps for decades. A hard Brexit and a drift to the right on other issues could also leave the Conservatives struggling to retain more the liberal, centrist voters courted by David Cameron, who were critical to majority victory at the general election in 2015. Although 68% of Conservative voters in 2017 had previously voted to leave the EU, 30% had voted to remain, providing clear political space for the Liberal Democrats or another centrist party to potentially exploit in the event of a disruptive Brexit. Moreover, a no deal Brexit threatens to split the parliamentary party. At the other end of the political spectrum, if Brexit fails to live up to the hopes and expectations of many voters who supported it, the populist right (whether that be in the form of UKIP, the Brexit Party or other) could see a resurgence.

This chapter has shed light on where the Conservatives find themselves under Johnson by exposing how the party post-Thatcher has understood and responded to the silent counter revolution, which it has proved more willing than most to embrace compared to centre-right parties across Western Europe. The explanation for this lies in the ideological legacy of Thatcherism, the particularity of UK Euroscepticism and the centrality of nationhood to British conservatism (Hayton, 2012). The future of the British party system is now intertwined with

Brexit, making the outlook profoundly uncertain. However, the choice the Conservatives have made in embracing a populist Brexit now looks clear, even if its consequences are not.

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