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Instability, Crisis, and Statecraft in Conservative Britain, 2010-24

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Abstract

This article examines how the Conservative Party dominated British politics from 2010 to 2024 despite this period being one of instability and crisis. It argues that a key source of this turmoil was the Conservative Party itself, which under a succession of Prime Ministers struggled to formulate an effective statecraft strategy. While these leadership failings have been well documented the underlying difficulties run deeper, reflecting tensions for the self-proclaimed natural party of government in adapting its statecraft to the rise of populist and anti-politics pressures. The article exposes these through the lens of statecraft theory, which is applied to the largely overlooked constitutional dimension of Conservative statecraft. This reveals a persistent willingness to prioritise partisan statecraft strategy over adherence to constitutional norms, which portends a slide into populism now the party has returned to opposition.

Keywords: Conservative Party; statecraft; Westminster Model; British Political Tradition; populism.

Introduction

This article contemplates the paradox of how the Conservative Party dominated British politics between 2010 and 2024 whilst also overseeing a tumultuous period of instability and crisis. It suggests that Conservative statecraft was characterised by attempts to reassert and maintain centre autonomy, but that the search for governing competence was undermined by party management problems and a populist legitimisation strategy that served to destabilise a Conservative view of the state underpinned by the British Political Tradition (BPT). While continuing to proclaim a commitment to parliamentary sovereignty, the Conservatives embraced a popular sovereignty that undermined this traditional outlook. The party's statecraft further suffered from its attempts to defend a conception of the Westminster Model adrift from the reality of the UK's increasingly complex governance structures, limiting the Conservatives' ability to manage the twenty-first century state effectively.

The Conservative Party has long regarded itself as the 'natural' party of government. It is intimately associated with the institutions of the British state and the Westminster system of government, which it seeks to uphold and defend. Conservatives admire the Westminster Model for its capacity to deliver stability and accountability, typically through single party majority governments which enjoy a significant degree of autonomy but are subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The Westminster Model is

also lauded by Conservatives for its flexibility and responsiveness, with periodic general elections meaning that governments are alert to public opinion without being beholden to it (Norton, 2012). In his seminal work on the party, Bulpitt (1986) argues that the foremost concern of Conservative statecraft is the maintenance of the governing autonomy of the Centre, particularly over matters of 'high politics'. Preserving the Westminster Model has consequently been a key feature of Conservative statecraft, and vital for the continuation of the Conservative nation and the associated British Political Tradition. In this article, I interpret the 2010-2024 era of Conservative government through the lens of statecraft theory, characterising it as a struggle to maintain centre autonomy in the face of anti-politics and populist pressures from both within and without the party. Successive Prime Ministers attempted to formulate an effective statecraft strategy capable of sustaining the Conservative Party in office, but each was ultimately engulfed by instability and crisis.

The article consequently represents one of the first theoretically driven interpretations of the 2010-2024 period of Conservative rule in its entirety, offering a holistic analysis of the transition of the party from the era of Cameronite modernisation to the populism and division of the 2020s. Understanding this is crucial for any account of the instability and crisis in British politics and the UK state during this time. The article begins with a conceptual discussion of statecraft, the Westminster Model, and the British Political Tradition (BPT). It then goes on to analyse the statecraft of successive Conservative Prime Ministers, namely David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak. The Brexit referendum is identified as a critical juncture, but is located within an understanding of Conservative statecraft which sought to utilise the tool of plebiscitary democracy to uphold centre autonomy. In some ways leaving the European Union facilitated the reassertion of a Conservative understanding of the Westminster Model, but the Brexit process also unleashed volatile populist forces within the party which disrupted its statecraft. In short, the article sheds light on the puzzle as to how the Conservatives maintained longevity in office whilst also overseeing a period of instability and crisis.

In defence of the British Political Tradition? Conservative Statecraft and the Westminster Model

Whilst its application to constitutional management in this paper is a novel one, the statecraft approach is established in the academic literature as a useful way of analysing political leadership in Britain in general (Buller and James, 2012) and the politics of the Conservative Party in particular (Gamble, 2015; Hayton, 2021). The latter was the focus of Jim Bulpitt's seminal formulation of the statecraft framework in his analysis of the Thatcher government, in which he pithily defined it as 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office' (1986, p. 21). The core dimensions of successful statecraft were thus identified by Bulpitt as party management; building a 'winning electoral strategy'; achieving 'political argument hegemony'; and establishing a reputation for competent government (*ibid.*). As such, the analytical attention of the statecraft approach is firmly on the office seeking (and retaining) ambitions of political elites, which has led critics to claim that it has an overly instrumentalist view of ideology that underplays its role in shaping the strategic decisions of political actors (Griffiths, 2016). The focus on party elites has also been criticised as insufficiently 'sensitive to the broad range of causal forces in social phenomena' (James, 2012, p. 73), and to the power relations within states that are emphasised for example by the study of policy networks. Giving analytical priority to elite actors does not however necessitate neglecting the structural context within which they operate, and is arguably an 'essential step in the

process of developing a more joined-up analysis of macro-governance' (James, 2012, p. 75). It is also an apposite stance when seeking to understand the actions of party elites.

Andrew Gamble once observed that although the Conservatives 'learnt to become a movement of the nation, they were always primarily a party of the state, and they approached politics from that standpoint – the state's institutions, functions and requirements' (1979, p. 26). As one former Conservative Cabinet minister observed, traditionally, 'the nature of British politics and the nature of the Conservative Party were closely aligned' (Gauke, 2023, p. 1). As the dominant party of the British state, upholding the Westminster Model has long been a central part of Conservative statecraft. Securing autonomy for the centre in matters of 'high politics' is, as Bulpitt (1986) observed, vital to party statecraft, as a strategy for establishing a reputation for governing competence and retaining office at subsequent elections. This desire for centre autonomy has been widely explored as a key feature of territorial politics in the United Kingdom (Bulpitt, 1983; Bradbury, 2010) and in relation to the party's unionism (Convery, 2016). The broader constitutional dimension of Conservative statecraft has, however, been subject to less attention, which is something this article aims to rectify. The Conservative defence of the Westminster Model is, I suggest, an essential part of the explanation for the enduring structural inequalities that continue to define British politics and society (Marsh *et al.*, 2003; 2024). The defence of economic and social inequality has long been a defining feature of British conservatism (Dorey, 2011) and, as the Asymmetric Power Model (APM) demonstrates, the elitist, centralising mode of governance of the Westminster Model, is both reinforced by and helps to reproduce structural inequalities. In short, accounting for the persistence of the British Political Tradition (BPT) in shaping the outlook and actions of the core executive requires an appreciation of the role of the Conservative Party as a party of the UK state.

The traditional Westminster Model is an archetypal power-hoarding majoritarian regime, with executive dominance of the legislature, an adversarial political culture, and a secretive Whitehall. The principle of parliamentary sovereignty underpins the system and is the basis of the power that the centre enjoys. New Labour brought about wide-ranging constitutional reform, including devolution, electoral reform, freedom of information, the Human Rights Act, and the creation of the Supreme Court. These changes placed some new limits on executive power and strained the Westminster framework but did not break it. This was fortunate for the Conservatives, who had long resisted constitutional reform but, plunged into crisis by landslide defeat, were unable to mount an effective rear-guard action against it. Their opposition to the removal of the (overwhelmingly Conservative) hereditary peers from the House of Lords resulted in a compromise whereby 92 were retained, but the failure to reform the upper chamber properly resulted more from Labour's inability to agree on the desirability or shape of change, and the governing party's own attachment to the Westminster Model, rather than to the strength of Conservative opposition (Dorey, 2018). The reform the Conservatives most feared – the introduction of a proportional voting system at Westminster – although contemplated, was not pursued by New Labour in office. While the Conservatives came to accept some of these reforms – perhaps most notably devolution, which they had strongly opposed – they did so while retaining their attachment to parliamentary sovereignty and the British Political Tradition (Convery, 2016).

The influence of the dominant British Political Tradition helps explain the de-radicalisation of New Labour's agenda for constitutional change once in office (Marsh and Hall, 2007). The two most significant elements of the BPT are its elitist view of democracy and a 'conservative notion of responsibility' which stresses the importance of autonomy for the centre to govern in the 'national

interest' rather than responsively to popular pressure - in short it 'legitimises executive power' (Hall *et al.*, 2018, p. 367). These BPT norms inform both elite and popular understandings of British politics, and act as 'ideational, institutional and cultural parameters within which actors operate and change and continuity occurs' (ibid, p. 368). The asymmetric power relationships that characterise the British state (Marsh *et al.* 2003, 2024) are consequently buttressed by the BPT. It is unsurprising therefore that the Conservative Party seeks to defend the BPT, which is fundamentally conservative in nature and aligns with its own statecraft objective of maintaining central autonomy (Bulpitt, 1986). However, as Hall *et al.* (2018) suggest, in recent years the BPT has come increasingly under pressure, particularly from Brexit, anti-politics, and the strains on the Union of the United Kingdom. Given its attachment to the BPT this posed particular challenges to the Conservative Party, whose statecraft in office is analysed in the sections that follow.

Cameron, Coalition, and the quest for centre autonomy

In the late-1990s the Conservatives found themselves in the depths of the worst crisis the party had faced in almost a century (Gamble, 1995). Three consecutive general election defeats followed, which provided the backdrop to the selection of David Cameron as party leader in December 2005. His programme of Conservative modernisation aimed to re-establish the party as a credible electoral force that could once again challenge Labour for office. In this he succeeded, guiding the Conservatives back to power at the 2010 general election. Having fallen short of an overall majority, Cameron forged a Coalition with the Liberal Democrats that secured the position of the new government in parliament. Heppell (2019, p. 2) portrays Cameron as an 'adept political manipulator' who took a series of calculated political risks to advance his statecraft objectives. Coalition formation was his first big gamble, through which he hoped to establish centre autonomy for his new government. This was a partial success, as the Coalition had a healthy majority with which to legislate, and which also offered some insulation to Cameron from his own parliamentary right (Hayton, 2014). However, it created other party management difficulties for the new Prime Minister, leaving him with fewer ministerial posts to distribute amongst his MPs and augmenting the political space available to UKIP to the Conservatives' right (ibid., p. 16).

Coalition formation also necessitated the opening of Cameron's inner 'Court' (to use Bulpitt's term) to the Liberal Democrats, two of whom (the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury) sat alongside two Conservatives (the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer) in 'the quad' at the very heart of the government. While this was welcomed by uber-modernisers who hoped for a permanent realignment of the party towards liberal conservatism, it curtailed Cameron's freedom of manoeuvre in a number of key areas (Cameron, 2019). The coalition agreement, while dominated by Conservative priorities overall (Bale, 2012), did include notable compromises by the larger party on constitutional reform. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011 was backed by both parties as a means to stabilise and embed the Coalition, shoring up the autonomy of the centre in the immediate term but depriving Cameron of the power to call an election at the time of his own choosing. It also removed the ability of Prime Ministers to designate a vote as one of no confidence (Norton, 2016, p. 13). This stripped Cameron of a useful disciplining tool over his backbenchers, and would later have profound consequences for his successors in relation to Brexit.

A greater concession to the Liberal Democrats was the promise of reform to the House of Lords. In 2012 proposals were advanced to transition towards a largely elected upper chamber. This was fiercely

opposed by many Conservatives and prompted a major rebellion, with 91 defying a three-line whip to vote against the second reading of the House of Lords Reform Bill, and a further 19 abstaining (Dorey and Garnett, 2016, p. 206). This enraged the Prime Minister, not because of his attachment to the substance of the plans but because of the blowback it caused with his Coalition partners, who then moved to block the equalisation of constituency boundaries which the Conservatives anticipated would be advantageous to them at the next election. Moving towards a situation in which most members of the Lords were elected was a major constitutional change which would have led in time to the upper house challenging the supremacy of the Commons, and with it the autonomy of the executive. Cameron's casual disregard for tradition infuriated backbench critics such as the organiser of the revolt, Jesse Norman, who described himself as a constitutional loyalist and argued the proposals 'would have destroyed the legislative balance of the constitution' (Norman, 2016). They also serve to illustrate the short-term outlook of Cameron's statecraft, attempting to trade a long-term loss of centre autonomy for near-term governing capacity.

The biggest Liberal Democrat 'win' in the coalition agreement was the referendum on replacing the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system with the alternative vote (AV). This threatened to remove a key pillar of the Westminster Model, which was already subject to 'constitutional stretching' towards a form of 'modified majoritarianism' (Matthew, 2011). Analysis suggested that the implications of AV for the Conservatives could be profound, dramatically decreasing the prospects of them securing a parliamentary majority in the future (Curtice, 2013). Cameron gambled correctly that the Conservatives could defeat AV in the public vote, and in so doing arguably buttressed the Westminster Model by knocking electoral reform off the political agenda for the foreseeable future (Heppell, 2019, p. 111). Yet his willingness to embrace the tool of referendums to advance his political objectives was arguably short-sighted and indicated something of a disregard for the Westminster Model as the bedrock of Conservative hegemony. The AV referendum was only the second time a UK-wide referendum had been held, and the first under a Conservative government. Conservatives were traditionally suspicious of national plebiscites as they undermine parliamentary sovereignty. Cameron's decision to hold referendums on changing the voting system, on the question of Scottish independence, and – fatally for his premiership – membership of the European Union, were a form of procedural populism that 'consecrated the principle of popular sovereignty' in his party and the country (Alexandre-Collier, 2022b, p. 540). As such, it laid the ground for the more substantive populist approach of his successors (*ibid.*). As Matthews (2017, p. 607) argued, the growing reliance on referendums 'entrenched a pattern of 'constitution-by-consent', and in doing so has created a competing source of legitimacy and authority'.

While much of the agenda for democratic reform contained in the coalition agreement fell by the wayside, one area of notable change was in relation to local and regional government. The 2010 Conservative manifesto envisioned a 'Big Society' in place of big government, and its emphasis on localism was reflected in the coalition agreement, which contained a commitment to 'radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups' (HM Government, 2010, p. 11). The Coalition moved swiftly to dismantle the architecture of regional governance, abolishing the Regional Development Agencies, Government Offices for the Regions, Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Assemblies in 2010. Justifying this decision, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles argued that: 'The Government Offices are not voices of the region in Whitehall. They have become agents of Whitehall to intervene and interfere in localities, and are a fundamental part of the 'command and control' apparatus of England's over-

centralised state’ (quoted in DCLG, 2010). In making this argument, Pickles was drawing on a strand of localist thinking that had grown in influence in Conservative circles over the previous decade, for example through think-tanks such as Policy Exchange.

Despite this bellicose rhetoric, Cameron’s administration did little to challenge the power-hoarding nature of the Westminster Model or to forge a new democratic settlement that embraced subsidiarity. Indeed, in 2014 policy shifted instead in a more regionalist direction, as the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ initiative promoted a model of decentralisation to combined authorities (the first being Greater Manchester) headed by directly elected mayors. In practice the priorities of the Centre dominated these devolution deals, which were negotiated with the Treasury within the parameters of the BPT (Richards and Smith, 2015). To date, English devolution has taken place within a dual polity framework that has upheld centre autonomy (Ayres *et al.*, 2018). Nonetheless, directly elected mayors have created an alternative source of legitimacy and authority away from Westminster which look likely to endure and may come to be seen as one of the most substantive institutional legacies of the post-2010 governments. As Warner *et al.* (2024) argue, these emergent governance structures may embed further political special inequality, adding further to instability in the UK political system.

In some respects, Cameron was an effective tactician who exploited his Coalition partners to sustain him in office and then to win an unexpected majority in 2015. In Bulpitt’s terms, his administration fostered a reputation for governing competence in relation to the economy and a winning electoral strategy in part through the politics of austerity (Gamble, 2015). Yet his statecraft can also be understood as a struggle to establish and maintain centre autonomy, characterised by a willingness to engage in opportunistic constitutional bargaining – which in some areas (electoral reform and the reform of the Lords) he arguably got away with – but which came to a head over the question of Europe. His willingness to risk the territorial integrity of the UK in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 was extraordinary given his own instinctive unionism and the historic centrality of the Union to the party’s statecraft (Gamble, 1995). For Convery (2016, p. 21) this ‘demonstrated a pragmatic Conservative attitude to territorial management’ but it more likely represented a failure to comprehend the risk of a ‘Yes’ vote. The gamble he took with the Brexit vote was driven by populist pressure in the form of UKIP and his desire to contain intra-party divisions. This short-sighted and instrumentalist approach to the constitution failed to recognise the extent to which Conservative statecraft traditionally rested on the Westminster Model and the BPT, and served to further embed challenges to it. In short, while Cameron brought a veneer of stability to his tenure in Downing Street, in reality it was at the root of the crises that followed. His now infamous tweet from the 2015 general election, suggesting that the alternative to his re-election as Prime Minister was ‘chaos with Ed Miliband’ (Cameron, 2015), became an ironic epitaph for his own government.

Theresa May, populism, and the loss of centre autonomy

If the Cameron era had infused procedural populism into the British political system the tenure of his successor, Theresa May, only served to further entrench the notion of popular, rather than parliamentary, sovereignty. The shock of the vote in favour of leaving the EU prompted a sense of crisis which Cameron’s immediate resignation served to reinforce, and which May’s offer of ‘strong, proven leadership’ promised to rectify (Atkins and Gaffney, 2021, p. 298). The implosion of her principal rivals saw May win the leadership election convincingly, and the arrival of the new Prime Minister in Downing Street for a brief period at least brought a sense of calm authority to the office. With a

mandate from her MPs and an overall majority in parliament, May ought to have enjoyed a fair degree of political agency. The elevation of ‘the will of the people’ expressed through the referendum significantly curtailed her freedom of manoeuvre, particularly as her route to the Conservative Party leadership as a ‘reluctant Remainer’ had been to pronounce that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ and to rhetorically box herself into a relatively hard Brexit position quite early on (Marlow-Stevens and Hayton, 2021). At her first party conference as leader, she horrified her Chancellor with a speech on Brexit ‘straight out of the populist playbook’ (Bale, 2023, p. 22). While populism did not suit her political style or cautious instincts, May did little to stem the tide. For example, when the right-wing press resorted to hysterical attacks on the Supreme Court judges as ‘enemies of the people’ after their November 2016 ruling that the government needed parliamentary consent to trigger Article 50, she responded with an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* headlined ‘Why I will not allow the British people’s vote for Brexit to be sabotaged’ (May, 2016).

While the legal ruling in the first Miller case was not significant in shaping the outcome of the Brexit process (when asked to, parliament voted overwhelmingly to trigger Article 50), the fact that the government battled the decision served as an early illustration of May’s statecraft approach, which sought to present her government as the unyielding advocate of the ‘will of the people’ legitimised through the referendum, not parliament (Baldini *et al.* 2022, p. 339). Ultimately however, May needed to secure the consent of parliament for her Brexit deal, and she came to recognise that the majority she had inherited from David Cameron would be insufficient to guarantee its passage (Byrne *et al.* 2021, p. 708). After repeatedly denying that she had any plans to do so, on 18 April 2017 she accordingly announced a general election. May’s memoirs claim that she wanted a ‘snap election’ with a short campaign, but that ‘the Fixed-term Parliaments Act didn’t, in practice, allow for that’ – an unintended consequence of Cameron’s constitutional horse-trading (May, 2023, p. 50).

The Prime Minister proved to be a maladroit figurehead for the Conservative campaign, and the outcome was a disaster – with her majority lost, she was left dependent on the DUP for a majority in Parliament. This emboldened both opponents of Brexit who hoped to force a second referendum (a ‘People’s Vote’) on any eventual withdrawal agreement, and the hard Eurosceptics in her own party who hankered after a ‘no deal’ departure from the EU. As a result, the main groupings in the parliamentary battle that ensued (see Russell and James, 2023, for the definitive account) each claimed legitimacy from ‘the people’ but all lacked a majority in Parliament. Having refused to countenance another bout of popular sovereignty in the form of a second referendum, May needed to reassert the principle of parliamentary sovereignty and the necessity to find consensus through parliament, as this was the only route left to secure the passage of her agreement. She instead pitched herself against Parliament, trying unsuccessfully to present herself and her deal as embodiment of the ‘will of the people’ expressed on 23 June 2016. Somewhat extraordinarily, May characterised those who voted against her deal as engaging in an ‘abuse of power’ that sacrificed ‘the national interest’ in favour of their own (May, 2023). Only when it was far too late did she turn in desperation towards trying to build cross-party support for an agreement (Seldon, 2019).

Like her predecessor, May viewed the European question through the prism of the internal politics of the Conservative Party. Cameron had sought to mollify restive Eurosceptics variously through a ‘referendum lock’ on future EU treaties; the (unfulfilled) promise of a sovereignty bill; the referendum on EU membership; and by claiming that he might in fact back leaving the EU if the outcome of his renegotiation of terms was unsatisfactory. This strategy only served to embolden the ERG, and set the scene for May’s ‘Brexit means Brexit’ pitch for the leadership; appointment of leading Eurosceptics to

major Cabinet posts; and her legitimisation of calls for withdrawal at almost any cost, as ‘no deal is better than a bad deal’ (May, quoted in Marlow-Stevens and Hayton, 2021, p. 883). The lesson of Cameron’s tenure was that the hard Eurosceptics could not be pacified, but May had no alternative strategy, naïvely assuming that the desire of Brexiteers to leave the EU would cause them to vote for a deal that did not fulfil all of their demands (May, 2023). Her inability to declare the matter one of confidence in her government and threaten another general election (due to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act) weakened her hand further in this respect.

Fundamentally, the Conservative Party itself was a key underlying cause of the instability and crisis that beset the May administration. Cameron had sought to externalise the European issue and uphold Centre autonomy through the promise of a referendum, but this option was not viable for May given the divisions in the PCP. Her only hope of augmenting her governing autonomy was through a decisive general election win and substantial majority. Once this card had been played abortively her agency was drastically curtailed, but her government continued to try and operate in the manner of the BPT – attempting to limit parliament’s role in the process and keeping a highly centralised grip on the withdrawal negotiations, even at times excluding her Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union from key decisions (see Davis, 2021). The ‘Irish backstop’ became the most contentious area of disagreement and the target of Eurosceptic critics of May’s deal, who argued it could tie the UK indefinitely to EU rules and the customs union. Unable to convince her party of the necessity of the Northern Ireland protocol, she was forced from office. For Byrne *et al.* (2021, p. 699) May was ‘a victim of circumstances as much as a victim of her own agency’, but her statecraft utterly failed to provide the strong and stable leadership she had promised.

In defiance of convention: Johnson’s statecraft and the constitution

If Theresa May could be considered a ‘reluctant populist’ (Stefanowitsch, 2019), Boris Johnson was a rather more enthusiastic one, whose leadership style was much more suited to a populist approach. This brought with it risks for the Conservative Party, but by mid-2019 it faced what Rishi Sunak and two of his colleagues (in an article for *The Times*) labelled an ‘existential threat’ from which ‘only Boris Johnson can save us’ (Sunak *et al.*, 2019). What terrified Sunak and his colleagues was not only the prospect of electoral defeat opening the door of 10 Downing Street to Jeremy Corbyn, but the resurgence of the populist radical right in the form of Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party, which had just swept to victory in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament. Johnson, they argued, was the only person who could break the deadlock over Brexit, thereby diffusing this electoral hazard. This argument resonated with other Conservative MPs, more than half of whom backed Johnson for the leadership. Of the candidates who opposed him, only Rory Stewart questioned Johnson’s suitability for high office, but found that colleagues who shared his misgivings in private were generally unwilling to voice them in public (Stewart, 2023).

Johnson’s populist approach had little regard for the constitution, and his willingness to flout convention brutally exposed the weakness of the ‘good chaps’ theory of government (Blicking and Hennessy, 2019). As Marsh *et al.* (2024) argue, the limited checks and balances of the BPT afforded Johnson the opportunity to pursue his statecraft objectives with abandon, repeatedly flouting the constitution (Sanders, 2023). Most egregiously, he attempted to prorogue Parliament as a tactic to push through Brexit, a move struck down by the Supreme Court. He also lied to parliament, interfered with the Electoral Commission, ignored his ethics advisors and the Ministerial Code, and defied the

norms of appointments to the House of Lords (Sanders, 2023). Yet while his predecessor as Conservative leader made clear her distaste for his style of leadership and regarded him as ‘morally unfit to be Prime Minister’ (Bale, 2023, p. 107), the framework for Johnson’s strategy had effectively been set by Theresa May. Her refusal to rule out a ‘no deal’ exit from the EU - despite the rejection of that option being the one thing that Parliament *could* agree on – left it as the default outcome on 31 October. May had also decried the House of Commons for preventing Brexit by rejecting her withdrawal agreement, utilising rhetoric that ‘was a textbook case of populism’ (Russell and James, 2023, p. 214). Johnson’s furious attacks on a ‘zombie Parliament’, followed directly in this line, as did the claim in the 2019 Conservative manifesto that ‘we have been paralysed by a broken Parliament’ (quoted in Alexandre-Collier, 2022a, p. 249). In September, with Johnson’s prorogation of Parliament looming, 21 Conservative MPs rebelled to back a motion tabled by Oliver Letwin, which gave Parliament the time to legislate to further delay Brexit. The Prime Minister furiously labelled this the ‘Surrender Act’, withdrew the Conservative whip from the rebels, and claimed that parliament had ‘schemed to overturn the verdict of the British people’ (quoted in Russell and James, 2023, p. 267).

The diminished size of the PCP left the government with a majority of minus 43, which under normal operating conditions should have prompted a general election. Johnson, however, was unable to dissolve Parliament due to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act passed by the Coalition, which further facilitated his populist positioning as MPs refused to consent to his calls for a general election. He thus portrayed both Parliament and the Courts as seeking to obstruct the ‘will of the people’. Only after a revised Brexit deal had been reached with the EU did Labour agree to vote for a dissolution. Johnson presented himself in the election campaign as the champion of the people versus Parliament, who would ‘get Brexit done’ (Russell and James, 2023, p. 295-299). A key contributing factor to the subsequent Conservative victory success was Johnson’s personal appeal to the radical-right vote, which was reincorporated into his party’s support base (Evans *et al.*, 2023). Flinders (2020, p. 229) also observed in Johnson ‘a deeper statecraft strategy, key to which is an explicit focus on fuelling and funnelling frustration amongst those sections of the public most disaffected with ‘conventional’ politics’. This populist style brought electoral success, but also risked inviting governing instability (*ibid.*, p. 238). The populist transformation of the Conservative Party also extended beyond Johnson himself. Within a matter of months of becoming leader, Johnson had cemented the factional takeover of the Conservative Party by its hard Brexit wing (Hayton, 2022). The mandate secured at the 2019 general election meant that Johnson’s hard exit from the EU quickly passed through Parliament, but this did not dissipate the grip of the populist right over the party. The large governing majority should have facilitated the reassertion of centre autonomy, but much of the party remained in thrall to populism. The struggle to contain and manage these populist pressures would come to define the premiership of Rishi Sunak in particular.

Johnson’s tumultuous premiership was eventually brought to an end by mass resignations from his government in July 2022, triggered ostensibly by the revelation that the Prime Minister had been aware of formal complaints of inappropriate behaviour against his Deputy Chief Whip when he appointed him, something he had initially denied. This controversy was symptomatic of the wider perception that Johnson’s relationship with the truth was casual at best and that he and others around him had a disregard for the rules, symbolised most devastatingly by the ‘Partygate’ scandal, and the sorry fact that 10 Downing Street was associated with more breaches of COVID lockdown rules than any other address in the country (Crerar, 2022).

The shambolic nature of Johnson's administration reflected his chaotic personality and leadership style. This disorderly approach to some degree masked the extent to which his premiership also represented an ambitious statecraft strategy aimed at reasserting centre autonomy and re-establishing Conservative Party hegemony (Hayton, 2021). Electorally, this involved exploiting the issue of leaving the EU as a national issue around which to mobilise the politics of support through a populist appeal to sovereignty (*ibid.*). This was combined with a highly centralising approach to government, driven from Downing Street by the Prime Minister's Chief Adviser, Dominic Cummings. An early example of this came with the resignation of Sajid Javid as Chancellor of the Exchequer after Cummings fired one of Javid's Special Advisers against his wishes.

Empowered by victory in the general election, Johnson appointed a Cabinet of subordinates and attempted 'massive centralisation' of government through the Cabinet Office and Downing Street, to the extent that one long-time observer of the civil service labelled it an 'imperial premiership' (Rutter, 2020). This highly centralised decision-making process was apparent in the government's handling of COVID-19, for example in the circumvention of normal procurement processes in the award of government contracts, which led to allegations of corruption (Iacobucci, 2021). This 'internal centralisation' was accompanied by 'external centralisation', for example in the coercive management of local and devolved authorities in England during the pandemic (Ward and Ward, 2023). To this we could also add the confrontational stance towards sub-national governments (for example over the question of a second referendum on Scottish independence) and more assertive – or 'muscular' unionism rooted in the BPT (Sandford, 2023; Anderson and Brown Swan, 2024). With a legitimisation strategy rooted in Brexit populism, the parallels with Thatcherite authoritarian populism are clear (Ward and Ward, 2023). The ultimate failure of Johnson's statecraft lay not only in the shortcomings of himself and key members of his inner court, but in the inherent contradiction between this executive centralisation and the incoherence of the UK state, which greatly limited its capacity to deliver (Richards *et al.*, 2023).

Unpopular populists: Truss and Sunak

In the leadership election to replace Johnson, Liz Truss emerged victorious by campaigning on a populist platform that promised tax cuts, a tough line on immigration (backing expanding the plan to remove asylum seekers to Rwanda), and to play hardball with the EU over the Northern Ireland border question. This secured her the support of 113 MPs in the final round of voting by the PCP, enough to push her into second place behind Rishi Sunak (137 votes) but ahead of Penny Mordaunt (105 votes). In contrast to Truss, Sunak's campaign was a more traditional pitch that emphasised fiscal responsibility, particularly the need to control inflation and reduce government borrowing. In the decisive ballot of all party members, Truss (with 57 percent) comfortably defeated Sunak on 43 percent (Bale, 2023, p. 267). Truss's support base in the PCP was a scaled down version of her predecessors, with fellow Johnson-loyalists and members of the ERG featuring prominently in her campaign and Cabinet.

The Truss premiership was to last just 49 days, undone by a catastrophic 'mini-budget' that provoked a turbulent market reaction that forced an emergency intervention by the Bank of England to stabilize the bond markets. The measures advanced by the Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng (who was promptly christened 'Kamikwasi' by the sketch writer John Crace) amounted to some £45 billion of tax cuts, to be funded through additional government borrowing. This audacious 'plan for growth' went

significantly beyond the £30 billion of tax cuts that Truss had advocated in her leadership election campaign and came on top of the plan announced a few days earlier to cap energy prices, which was costed at £150 billion. In a furtherance of the 'internal centralisation' of the Johnson era, it was devised largely in secret by Truss, Kwarteng, and a small group of advisers in Downing Street, with even the Treasury pushed to the side-lines (Parker *et al.*, 2022). The new Prime Minister and Chancellor had signalled their disdain for civil service independence by sacking the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, Tom Scholar, only days after entering office. Truss also refused to allow the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to provide an independent forecast of the budget's impact, and effectively set her government's fiscal policy at odds with the Bank of England. This attempt to exert centre autonomy over a defining area of 'high politics' was, in the words of one observer, 'a landmark gesture of national independence' and an attempt 'to sidestep the conventional rules of mainstream economics' (Marsh, 2023). Needless to say, in the words of her idol Margaret Thatcher, Truss rapidly discovered that you 'can't buck the market' and that she would have to reverse direction (Truss, 2023). Her credibility in pieces, she was forced from office and replaced by the embodiment of the 'Treasury orthodoxy' that she had lampooned during her leadership campaign.

The fleeting tenure of Truss was rooted in populism, but given her own limited mandate she lacked a convincing legitimisation strategy, particularly for a radical economic plan that involved challenging core institutions of the central state such as the Bank of England and the Treasury and rejecting the fiscal conservatism that many within her parliamentary party remained attached to. Sunak, having warned of precisely the market reaction to Trussonomics as had ensued, had burnished his credentials and at the second time of asking won the endorsement of 193 colleagues, more than half the parliamentary party (Bale, 2023, p. 285). His arrival in 10 Downing Street appeared to herald the return of a more conventional Conservative Party leadership and strategy. His response to the crisis provoked by his predecessor was to return to the austerity statecraft of Cameron and Osborne, stressing the importance of fiscal responsibility. Three of the five top priorities he identified for his first year in office consequently focused on the economy: halving inflation, reducing national debt, and stimulating growth. In Bulpitt's terms, Sunak's strategy was to repair the Conservatives' shattered reputation for governing competence as the foundation stone of their electoral appeal. A more pragmatic approach to relations with the European Union led to the Windsor framework to ease trade arrangements in relation to the Northern Ireland border, and to the UK re-joining the Horizon Europe science research funding programme. Four months into his tenure, an effusive leader column in *The Times* (28.2.2023) proclaimed that: 'his technocratic approach is exactly what a country exhausted by populism needs'.

In practice, however, Sunak struggled to maintain centre autonomy in the face of populist pressures, which his statecraft also sought to exploit. After Truss's resignation, he secured the support of Suella Braverman in return for promising her a place in Cabinet as Home Secretary. Whether this endorsement was a pivotal factor in Sunak winning the leadership (as Braverman claimed) is another question, but it did signal that the Prime Minister hoped to contain the populist right by including some of their number in his government and taking a hard-line on asylum, doubling down on the Rwanda policy. Braverman's reappointment to the Home Office, coming as it did just days after her resignation for breaching the Ministerial Code, effectively extinguished any suggestion that Sunak's premiership would signal the return of 'good chap' governance which could be relied upon to uphold constitutional principles.

Sunak was unable to restrain his Home Secretary, who he eventually sacked in his November 2023 reshuffle. He remained wedded, however, to his pledge to 'stop the boats' and the plan to send asylum

seekers to Rwanda, which the following day the Supreme Court ruled unlawful. Further damage was done to the government's credibility when the immigration minister and former Sunak ally, Robert Jenrick, resigned over the government's attempt to address through legislation the court's concerns in December 2023. The government's response to the Supreme Court ruling, seeking to reverse by law its finding that Rwanda was not safe for asylum purposes, and attempting block future legal challenges on that issue (Institute for Government, 2023), marked a further attempt to reassert executive authority through parliamentary sovereignty. Sunak justified this stance with populist rhetoric straight out of the Johnson playbook. Having contained a rebellion on the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill in the House of Commons, where it was eventually passed unamended, Sunak held a 'stop the boats' Downing Street press conference on 18 January 2024, in which he noted: 'There is now only one question: will the opposition in the appointed House of Lords try and frustrate the will of the people as expressed by the elected house? Or will they get on board and do the right thing?' (quoted in Walker, 2024). In seeking to invoke the 'will of the people' to advance his legally questionable and practically dubious Rwanda policy Sunak was ploughing the same populist furrow as his predecessors, while also resisting calls for even more strident measures from Jenrick and others on the right of his party. The case serves to illustrate the extent to which the post-Brexit Conservative Party is wedded to the notion of centre autonomy legitimised through a populist appeal to parliamentary sovereignty.

Conclusion

The period of Conservative government from 2010 to 2024 was characterised by instability and crisis. In some respects, it changed Britain markedly. Brexit was a costly rupture that tilted the UK away from Europe towards Anglo-America but has not resolved the European question in British politics, merely altered it. It also contributed to the further fraying of relations between the nations that compose the UK's union state. Yet in other ways the British state remains instantly recognisable, a centralised authority premised on the Westminster Model and the BPT. As has so often been the case throughout history, the politics and statecraft of the Conservative Party have been at the heart of the story of British politics over the past decade and a half. The often-tumultuous nature of party politics, and the cacophony of media commentary that accompanies it, can make discerning the shape and drivers of statecraft strategies difficult. Nonetheless, as this article has shown, there are some common threads and longer-term currents underlying the Conservatives' approach to governing, an appreciation of which is vital for any wider explanation of the trajectory of British politics.

What is most striking is the extent to which the Conservatives proved willing to prioritise partisan statecraft strategy over defence of adherence to constitutional norms. The desire to establish and preserve centre autonomy – and Conservative control over the apparatus of the central state – was, as Bulpitt's thesis envisaged, a consistent driver of party strategy. Successive Conservative leaders were prepared to risk constitutional upheaval through the use of referendums and deploy a populist legitimisation strategy that undermines parliamentary democracy. The limited checks and balances of the Westminster Model were exploited for partisan advantage, and the feebleness of the 'good chaps' theory of government exposed.

Sovereignty was trumpeted as the defining principle of the constitution, and Brexit celebrated as an opportunity to reclaim and reassert it. In that sense, the Conservatives used Brexit to buttress the BPT and the concentration of power at the heart of the political system. This reflected the ideological

ascendency of the English Tory tradition, which prioritises the principle of indivisible national (Crown-in-Parliament) sovereignty above all else – even over the union of the United Kingdom, to which the Conservative attachment is now rather more conditional (Gamble, 2016). The lack of strategic capacity of the UK state has meant that despite this concentration of executive authority, successive governments struggled to address a raft of seemingly intractable challenges, and sought to disapply or circumvent standard operating procedures (such as in the PPE procurement scandal) or constitutional barriers (such as on the Rwanda policy). Beneath the façade of the Westminster Model and the BPT lies an increasingly fragmented and ‘incoherent state’ (Richards *et al.*, 2023, p. 45) which the centralised Conservative statecraft analysed in this paper proved ill-suited to administer, and which makes the implementation of the types of policies the party wants to pursue more arduous.¹ Amidst a dismal rollcall of tribulations, the disastrous Truss vignette stands out not as an exception but as the logical culmination of the belief that if only the levers of power could be pulled firmly and rapidly enough in a rightward direction no problem is insurmountable. The naïve belief that the deep-seated productivity issues in the UK economy could be simply swept away with cuts to taxation illustrated not only the ideological blinkers of her administration but the failure of the centralised state over many years to devise a holistic strategy to address a complex and multi-faceted problem.

After 14 turbulent years in office, in July 2024 the Conservative Party went down to its worst defeat in parliamentary history. In opposition, the lure of populism will likely prove hard for the party to resist. The ease with which successive Conservative Prime Ministers drew on the notion of popular sovereignty and a populist legitimisation strategy – even as it destabilised the traditional Conservative view of the state underpinned by the BPT – suggests that relieved of the responsibility of governing the party will slide further into populism. The most immediate pull in that direction will come for the Reform Party led by Nigel Farage, which Sunak’s successor as Conservative leader will need to counter, co-opt, or co-operate with. Handling this challenge and finding a new mode of statecraft to re-establish the party’s reputation for governing competence will be a formidable task. The current Conservative Party, in thrall to populism and clinging to the BPT, looks ill-equipped to formulate and articulate a convincing response to the governance challenges that the UK will face in the coming decade, which demand reform of the creaking state and constitution.

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¹ I’m grateful to Reviewer 1 for helping me clarify this point.

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