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The not so new New Right? A reply to 'After Cameron: The New New Right and the Unchaining of Britannia' by Matthew Lakin

Richard Hayton

Famously, for most of the twentieth century the Conservative Party was highly adept not only at winning elections, but at recovering relatively quickly following an election defeat (Ball and Seldon, 2005). Even crushing losses such as the 1906 Liberal landslide which swept more than 60 per cent of sitting Conservatives MPs out of the Commons, and the 1945 Labour victory which saw Attlee's party gain 239 seats and lay down the contours of the post-war settlement, saw the party come back strongly and substantially reverse the losses at the following general election. This pattern was decisively broken, however, by the New Labour landslide of 1997, following which the Conservatives were seemingly incapable of mounting a serious challenge to Labour's dominance. A central difficulty in opposition was the question of how to deal with the ideological legacy of Thatcherism on conservatism, which the party grappled with ineffectually (Hayton, 2012). Under David Cameron's leadership (from December 2005 onwards) modernisation appeared to offer a partial solution, and – albeit by means of a coalition – he succeeded in leading the Conservatives back to power following the general election of May 2010.

As Matthew Lakin's article explores however, the modernisers have been far from victorious in the intraparty debate over the future direction of British conservatism. As he usefully highlights, unhappiness with the Cameronite modernisation project has not been confined to the traditional Thatcherite right of the party, which is often associated with the older generation of parliamentarians. Amongst the new intake of Tory MPs he identifies a strongly anti-statist emergent grouping, 'the New New Right' (hereafter NNR), who feel palpable disappointment with Cameron's failure to win an overall majority in 2010. While the NNR's concern that the Prime Minister is effectively 'hostage' to the Liberal Democrats in government is not borne out by more dispassionate analyses (see for example Hayton, 2014), their contention that the Conservatives have failed to secure victory in the battle of ideas and are neglecting to counter the dominant 'left wing consensus' (Kwarteng et al., 2011, 3) is one that has resonance on the right of the Conservative Party generally. For instance, disquiet was evident in a 2013 poll of party members, which found that a substantial majority opposed policies closely associated with Cameron personally and the modernisation agenda more widely, such as protecting the overseas aid

budget and legislating for gay marriage. With the benefit of hindsight, just a third thought that entering into coalition with the Liberal Democrats had been a good idea.¹

Lakin concentrates his analysis on a group of five Conservative MPs who have co-authored two books (Kwarteng et al. 2011 and 2012) outlining their future vision for their party: Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab, Chris Skidmore, and Elizabeth Truss. While this cluster is clearly taken to be the core of the NNR, implicit in the article is the suggestion that a substantial body of fellow ideological travellers exists in the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP), adding to its importance. Unfortunately the relevant individuals are not identified, although the Free Enterprise Group (FEG) – which lists 37 Conservative MPs as supporters – is described as the NNR’s outlet for advancing and spreading its ideas. As Lakin acknowledges, the FEG is just one of a number of assemblages that have sprung up within the PCP in recent years, adding to an already extensive list of ginger groups including the likes of the Tory Reform Group, No Turning Back, and Cornerstone. Seeking to demarcate the NNR therefore risks falling between two stools, on the one hand identifying an essentially sociological phenomenon, namely the gathering of like-minded individuals in the PCP, and on the other an intellectual one, as the bulk of the paper is dedicated to outlining the ideological agenda of the movement. In relation to the former, the NNR label is of limited use as only five core individuals are identified, while the inference that FEG members subscribe to the prescribed NNR philosophy is unproven. Some such as Robert Buckland MP, a self-professed pro-European Conservative and Vice-President of the Tory Reform Group (which advocates One Nation conservatism) are clearly several ideological steps removed from the authors of *Britannia Unchained*. In relation to the latter, the key question has to be whether the NNR’s ideology really is distinctive.

Elsewhere I have argued that the contemporary Conservative Party is essentially neo-Thatcherite, with Euroscepticism and a neo-liberal political economy firmly in the ascendancy, and a fault-line running through the party on questions of social liberalism (Hayton, 2012). Ideological debate within the party has therefore tended to be restricted by relatively narrow parameters, for example over the degree of Euroscepticism rather than the fundamental principle. Lakin’s characterisation of the NNR as ‘economically neoliberal, hostile to the social state, and hostile to identity politics’ conforms to this broader picture. The great value of his work is in tracing the direction in which some of the new generation of Conservatives are seeking to push their party’s politics. However, given the clear lineage from and debt owed to the Thatcherite tradition, the extent to which the NNR really represents a novel departure in Conservative political thinking is questionable. Lakin acknowledges that the NNR can be essentially regarded as keepers of the Thatcherite flame, attempting to renew the Iron Lady’s philosophy for the challenges of the twenty-first century rather than the late-twentieth. His attempt to distinguish NNR neoliberalism from Thatcherite neoliberalism centres on a claim for the former’s Pujadism, but a disregard for elitist convention, and rhetorical backing of small businesses and individuals against overweening ‘big’ government, was central to Thatcher’s authoritarian populism. If Napoleon’s ‘nation of shopkeepers’ barb was taken as an insult by many, for the Grocer’s Daughter it

¹ For full datasets see <http://research.yougov.co.uk/documents/7756/> and <http://yougov.co.uk/publicopinion/archive/7664/>

was an image of Britain to be celebrated. As Lakin highlights, the NNR believe Thatcher's 'work remains incomplete' (Kwarteng et al. 2011, 12), but so did she. For the true Thatcherite believer, the need to be unceasingly vigilant to the malign influence of left-wing thinking never disappears. The NNR's fear that the party, or elements within it, have been corrupted by the left is also a direct echo of Thatcher's attacks on consensus in the 1980s.

As such, the NNR certainly represents the latest reformulation of robustly Thatcherite thinking in the Conservative Party, and the real value of Lakin's work is in highlighting the ongoing influence of the ideological legacy of Thatcherism in the PCP and beyond. However, whether the demarcation of the NNR as a distinct entity is particularly useful is open to question. Its core ideas, it seems to me, are far from new, and they are shared (albeit to different degrees and with different nuances) across much of the contemporary Conservative Party beyond the NNR.

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Richard Hayton
School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS)
University of Leeds
r.hayton@leeds.ac.uk