Article:

The demise of the One Nation tradition

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This is a reply to: Dorey, Peter, and Mark Garnett. 2015. "'The weaker-willed, the craven-hearted': the decline of One Nation Conservatism." Global Discourse. 5 (1): 69–91. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.914823.

The ascendency of the politics of Thatcherism and the retreat of the post-war consensus surely represents one of the most significant ideological and political shifts of the past century, the social and economic reverberations of which continue to be felt today. Yet one aspect of this which has perhaps been somewhat overlooked is the waning of the progressive tradition in the Conservative Party. 'History', George Orwell (1944) once memorably remarked, 'is written by the winners'. As Peter Dorey and Mark Garnett (2015) have highlighted, Orwell's rule contains more than a grain of truth in relation to the story of the decline of One Nation conservatism, where Thatcherite historiography has permeated the conventional wisdom and characterisation of the 'Wets' (2015, 86). As such, their article is not only a valuable corrective to this tendency, but a very welcome and insightful contribution to the literature on the post-war Conservative Party.

What exactly constitutes One Nation conservatism is, as Dorey and Garnett rightly point out, somewhat disputed. As they note, the moniker is associated most closely with the politics of Benjamin Disraeli in the nineteenth century and the One Nation Group of Conservative MPs formed in the middle of the twentieth, but has been variously deployed by an array of others – even by Thatcher herself. Indeed, Stephen Evans (2009, 101) has argued that by interpreting One Nation conservatism 'in terms of patriotism rather than paternalism' Thatcher was able to rhetorically co-opt at least an element of the tradition for her own purposes. As Philip Norton (2008, 325) has noted, the Disraelian legacy contained both progressive and patriotic components, 'that is, enhancing the welfare of the people and projecting British greatness on the world stage'. In his monograph on the subject, David Seawright (2010, 71) takes particular issue with the 'the received wisdom' – which he denounces as 'wilful distortion' – namely the portrayal of 'One Nation in terms of an extended state approach to wealth creation in sharp contrast to the policies pursued by neoliberal Conservative Ministers in the Thatcher era'. Instead, the One Nation tradition (exemplified by the diversity of viewpoints in the original One Nation Group) should be understood as an ethos of creative ideological tension through which the Conservatives can renew themselves as an electoral force: 'the party's real secret weapon' (Seawright 2010, 176).

Delineating the true essence of the One Nation tradition is therefore no easy task. Understandably (although a little regrettably for the curious onlooker) Dorey and Garnett (2015, 70) seek to sidestep this debate, declining to 'advance any claims regarding the ideological identity of "One Nation" politicians'. Nevertheless, requiring a point of anchorage they do assert that 'a central proposition for One Nation politicians was a positive view of the state as a potential promoter of social harmony'

(2015, 70). As Mark Garnett (2003, 107) wrote more than a decade ago, much of this comes down to a 'question of definition'. Correlating One Nation with the more progressive strand of thinking in Conservative Party politics seems, to this reviewer at least, a reasonable stance to adopt, and reflects the interpretation found in much of the literature (Bochel 2010; Hickson 2010; Hayton 2012; Heppell 2014). However, given the concerns raised about the distorting 'ideological revisionism' (Dorey and Garnett 2015, 82) of the Thatcherite revolution, it is worth being mindful of the risk of defining the One Nation tradition too narrowly, for example, by underplaying the patriotic aspect – particularly in relation to its rhetorical appeal (Hayton 2012, 28–29). While writing from contrasting viewpoints, both Seawright, and Dorey and Garnett, fear that One Nation has been misrepresented – they just point the finger of blame in opposing directions. Somewhat ironically this shared concern about historical revisionism prompts them to reach for a similar metaphor: comparing 'the successful hegemonic exploitation' (Seawright 2010, 71) of One Nation to Bolshevism in the former case and claiming that 'the nearest parallels to the project are found in totalitarian states' in the latter (Dorey and Garnett 2015, 83). Paradoxically, limiting One Nation to a somewhat statist perspective may risk reinforcing the Thatcherite caricature of it which Dorey and Garnett wish to rebut.

Turning to the central thesis of Dorey and Garnett's piece, they offer three key reasons for the decline of One Nation conservatism: changes in the party, events, and demographic change. They persuasively explore how these interrelated factors fatally undermined the progressive wing of the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP). This spectacular decline – from 'near-hegemony' (2015, 72) to almost total exclusion from the party's mainstream – raises a number of interesting questions. Firstly, was the dominance of the One Nation tradition during the 1945–1964 period something of a historical aberration, facilitated by a unique set of circumstances in the party and more widely that are unlikely to ever be repeated? Secondly, was this form of conservatism descending into a (possibly terminal) spiral of decay even before the advent of Thatcherism? And thirdly, is there any realistic possibility of the resurgence within the party of an ideological viewpoint not so wedded to the virtues of neoliberal marketisation?

As Dorey and Garnett illuminate, in the aftermath of the Second World War a particular set of conditions both within the PCP and more widely coalesced to facilitate the emergence of a cross-party consensus over Keynesian economic management, the desirability of full employment, and the welfare state, with which One Nation conservatism is closely associated (Bochel 2010, 123). As Dorey and Garnett acknowledge, for a proportion of the party commitment to these policies was merely tactical, and to be tolerated only as long as they delivered electoral success. More vigorously right-wing opinion remained alive and well in the party, evidenced, for example, by the flow of rather un-progressive motions at conference on issues such as corporal punishment, immigration, and the trade unions (Bale 2012, 92). Figures such as Harold Macmillan and Iain Macleod who rose to prominence in this period did not achieve a transformation of the party's ideological outlook in the manner of the Thatcher era. Consequently, the supremacy of One Nation conservatism was always vulnerable to challenge when cracks began to appear in the economic model underpinning the post-war consensus.

In his assessment of the party since 1945, Timothy Heppell (2014, 18) associates One Nation conservatism with the 'politics of prosperity' of the 1951–1960 era. For Heppell (2014, 28), 'the exhaustion of the one-nation tradition' was evident during the third term of the 1951–1964

Conservative government, which was 'consumed by perceptions of economic decline' (2014, 36). On this reading, One Nation statecraft had been premised on delivering rising prosperity and economic growth capable of sustaining the welfare state, but the Conservatives' reputation for governing competence began to unravel when in 'the early 1960s the underlying fragility of the economy was exposed' (Heppell 2014, 28). As such, the apogee of One Nation politics in the 1950s does standout as something of a historical anomaly and, if not completely extinguished, was certainly in retreat by the late 1960s as the party attempted to modernise. The demise of One Nation conservatism cannot therefore be attributed to the rise of Thatcherism, although the post-1975 era was certainly crucial in confirming its death. Rather, we can see the degeneration of the One Nation statecraft strategy as a precursor to the rise of the New Right.

Whether there is any meaningful prospect of a revival of One Nation politics within the Conservative Party is a debate that periodically reoccurs, the last serious airing taking place following David Cameron's election as party leader in December 2005. For example, in his early assessment, Peter Dorey (2007, 162) detected One Nation sentiments in Cameron's initial pronouncements as Leader of the Opposition, concluding that:

> David 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.

This was a widely held interpretation of the modernisation agenda pursued by Cameron as he attempted to transform his party's image in opposition, particularly in advance of the 2008 financial crisis. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Hayton 2012), Cameronite conservatism steered within rather than against Thatcherism's wake and is most accurately conceived as neo-Thatcherite rather than anti-Thatcherite or post-Thatcherite. Cameron's modernisation strategy in opposition was a sustained attempt to detoxify the Conservative brand and to broaden the party's electoral appeal, but was never designed to radically reorientate the party's positioning on fundamental questions about the role of the state. This is not to say that there is a dearth of intellectual activity pondering the future direction of the party in Conservative circles, but that much of the most active strands remain very much within the parameters of New Right thinking (Hayton 2014). It is consequently very difficult to foresee a renewal of the One Nation tradition flourishing in the contemporary Conservative Party. While future generations of Conservative politicians will no doubt exploit the beguiling rhetoric of One Nation, as an ideological tradition it has been relegated to the very margins of the party's politics.

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