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Cameron's Conservative Party, social liberalism and social justice

Richard Hayton and Libby McEnhill

Abstract

Social liberalism has consistently been highlighted as arguably the defining feature of David Cameron's project to modernise the Conservative Party. However, this article challenges the perception that modernisation has fundamentally transformed the position of social liberalism in contemporary conservatism, questioning the extent to which the Conservatives under Cameron have deviated from their socially conservative Thatcherite ideological inheritance. Two key aspects of social liberalism are explored: an inclusive approach to 'equality issues', and a commitment to the idea of positive freedom or 'freedom to'. The extent to which positioning under Cameron's leadership has reflected these themes is then considered in relation to two flagship 'modernised' policy areas. The first is the issue of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples, and the second is the party's approach to poverty and social justice. We suggest that Cameron's success in transforming Conservative attitudes and policies in a socially liberal direction has been very limited, challenging the widespread characterisation of the Coalition as a fundamentally 'liberal' government.

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Keywords: Conservative Party; modernisation; David Cameron; social liberalism; social justice; conservatism; gay marriage; poverty; coalition

Introduction

Social liberalism has consistently been highlighted as a key aspect of David Cameron's project to modernise the Conservative Party, and Cameron has defined himself as a 'liberal conservative' on more than one occasion, notably with reference to the values he shares with the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg. However, social liberalism had already become a leitmotif of Cameron's leadership well before the formation of the Coalition government in May 2010. As one early assessment of his leadership in opposition noted, in his first year in the job the Conservative leader appeared to be 'insisting on the need to depart from Thatcherism and move back towards the centre ground of British politics by promoting a more socially inclusive and compassionate Conservatism' (Dorey, 2007, p. 137). This concerted attempt to reformulate the party's approach to a range of social and moral issues has perhaps been the defining feature of Cameron's modernisation project; certainly, it seemed to shape the initial policy review in 2006 that focused on areas including 'quality of life', public services and family policy. However, this article challenges the perception that modernisation has fundamentally transformed the position of social liberalism in the Conservative Party, questioning the extent to which the Conservatives under Cameron have deviated from their socially conservative Thatcherite ideological inheritance. It focuses particularly on the period of Coalition government since May 2010, but the analysis encompasses the whole of the Cameron leadership in order to present a rounded assessment of the modernisation process.

The article begins by exploring the contextual background to the emergence of Cameronite modernisation by briefly reviewing some of the debates about the future of conservatism that followed the Thatcher era and the landslide defeat suffered by the Major government in 1997. It then goes on to explore the extent to which Cameron has modernised his party's approach in a

socially liberal direction. This is explored in relation to two key themes of social liberalism; an inclusive approach to 'equality issues', and a commitment to the idea of positive freedom or 'freedom to'. The extent to which positioning under Cameron's leadership has reflected these themes is then considered in relation to two flagship 'modernised' policy areas. The first is marriage and the family, particularly with reference to the issue of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. While not a policy that was widely anticipated in 2010, gay marriage has proven to be a totemic issue for Cameron. The debate surrounding it provides potential ample illustration of both the ideological basis of his own perspectives on the issue, and the extent to which these are accepted by the wider parliamentary party. The second is the approach to poverty and social justice. This was a key element of the early modernisation programme in opposition, and has become even more pertinent since 2010 as the Coalition has implemented a range of welfare reforms that test the apparent commitment to a conception of social justice.

The article suggests that Cameron's success in modernising Conservative attitudes and policies in a socially liberal direction has been very limited. Although a few notable gestures have been made, these have been largely symbolic, and there has not been a fundamental transformation of the party's approach. In short the Conservatives under Cameron – and the Coalition government – can be regarded as essentially neo-Thatcherite. This is important as Cameronite modernisation has been widely presented and interpreted (both by proponents and critics) as an essentially liberal venture, as was the formation of the Coalition with the Liberal Democrats. As such, this argument implies that establishing the Coalition has not served to entrench liberalism in the Conservative Party as some of the advocates of the arrangement had hoped¹, and it also suggests that the influence of the Liberal Democrats in government in this area has been limited. This brings into question the durability of Cameron's modernisation project, and suggests that it is unlikely to endure over the longer term.

Beyond Economic Liberalism: Modernisation as Social Liberalism?

Conservative modernisation is not something that dropped out of the sky with the election of David Cameron as party leader in December 2005. Its origins can be found in the debates about the future direction of conservatism after Thatcher that began in the early 1990s, and 'modernisers' began to identify as such soon after the party lost power in the landslide defeat of 1997. The need for the Conservatives to engage more actively with a range of social issues and policies was something that had been picked up on by a number of Conservative politicians and intellectuals in the 1990s. This reflected a growing concern that the party had become associated with a rather narrow range of issues, particularly those related to the economy and the primacy of free markets. In electoral terms while the Conservatives retained their dominant position as the party most trusted to manage the economy, this did not necessarily pose a big problem. However, this reputation for economic competence was shattered by the events of Black Wednesday in September 1992. In addition to this immediate electoral problem, some Conservatives began to fear that with the 'defeat' of socialism, signalled by the declining power of the trade unions, the movement of the Labour Party towards the centre-ground in the domestic political arena, and the end of the Cold War internationally, that conservatism was beginning to lose its *raison d'être*. David Cameron summed up this view in a speech more than a decade later:

We knew how to win the battle of ideas with Old Labour. We did not know how to deal with our own victory in that battle of ideas. That victory left us with an identity crisis. Having defined ourselves for many years as the antisocialist Party, how were we to define ourselves once full-blooded socialism had disappeared from the political landscape? (Cameron, 2006a)

¹ For example, Boles (2013) MP.

The Conservatives consequently faced something of a conundrum. With free market ideas now widely accepted across the political spectrum, how should they distinguish themselves electorally? In addition, the Conservatives faced the problem that arguing strongly for the virtues of free markets had, rightly or wrongly, earned them a reputation for holding an indifferent attitude about a range of societal issues. Their association with free market individualism was captured by Mrs Thatcher's remark that 'there is no such thing as society'. While many Conservatives would have concurred with Letwin's (2002) claim that this remark was 'grotesquely misrepresented', for many voters it came to symbolise the party's attitude. In his influential volume *Modern Conservatism*, Willetts (1992, p. 51) had mounted a challenge to this, arguing that 'the principles of free markets aligned with a strong sense of community are fundamental conservative principles', and that markets and communities 'help to sustain each other' (p. 186). According to Willetts, the task for his party was to articulate a narrative of conservatism that retained a Thatcherite commitment to free markets but also explained how the Conservatives would foster a stronger society (Hayton, 2012, p. 32).

The need to flesh out this civic or compassionate conservatism was something that the party increasingly agreed upon. However, that did not mean that there was a consensus about what form it might take. On one side of the debate liberal modernisers suggested that a logical (and popular) extension of the economic liberalisation of the Thatcher era would be to take a similarly liberal approach to social matters, embracing the fact that British society was increasingly cosmopolitan in outlook and rejecting any moralistic posturing in relation to the lifestyle choices of individuals. On the other side, socially conservative traditionalists were also increasingly convinced of the need to say more about social issues. They were nonetheless wary of the liberal modernisers' solution, which one of their number, Gary Streeter MP, described as '[extending] laissez-faire doctrines throughout society'. For them, the Conservatives should concentrate on offering a stronger defence of traditional conservative values and institutions such as the family as a response to New Labour's perceived statism – something that some had grown wary of doing following the botched 'back to basics' campaign of the Major government (Page, 2007, pp. 97–98).

The clash between the socially liberal 'mods' and traditionalist 'rockers' (as *The Times* [1998] had put it) dominated the 2001 leadership election. The clear favourite for the leadership was Michael Portillo, who had fully embraced the notion of modernisation driven by social liberalism. Although he quickly garnered support from most of the shadow cabinet, he proved unable to convince much of the parliamentary party of the merits of this approach and was eliminated from the contest by a single vote. The new leader, Iain Duncan Smith, was an archetypal rocker, but surprised some of his critics by trying to develop the Conservatives' policy offering on a number of social issues. However, he rejected the idea of modernisation and his brief tenure was undermined by splits in the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP), not least over moral issues after he imposed a three-line whip in opposition to plans to allow unmarried and same-sex couples to adopt children (Hayton, 2012, p. 111).

The modernisation debate was also at the forefront of the 2005 leadership election, with David Cameron identified as the most socially liberal modernising candidate, up against the Thatcherite traditionalist Liam Fox, and the more libertarian Thatcherite David Davis. While all three candidates spoke of the need for the Conservatives to modernise, it 'meant very different things' to each of them (Denham and O'Hara, 2007, p. 186). While Davis flagged the importance of localism and decentralisation, for Fox 'it meant a social policy to be promoted by supporting the (nuclear) family'. Cameron meanwhile 'argued that the Party had revelled too much in the triumphs of the Thatcher years, and thereby failed to move on to consider the challenges of the future: insecurity in the face of globalization, degradation of the environment and rising expectations of public services' (*ibid.*).

Cameron's convincing victory in the leadership election, drawing support from across the ideological spectrum in the PCP (Heppell and Hill, 2009) and securing two-thirds of the vote in the final ballot of the wider membership, appeared to settle the debate about modernisation in favour of an inclusive social liberalism. One of the key starting points for the Cameronite modernisers was the belief that the Conservatives not only appeared out of touch with contemporary society, but also that a significant portion of the electorate perceived them to be uncaring and concerned with little more than individual self-interest. This had been summed up by Theresa May's warning to the 2002 party conference that the Conservatives were seen as the 'nasty party'. As such, the party under Cameron set about decontaminating the Conservative brand by 'changing their image, altering their rhetoric, and adopting a more socially inclusive approach (Heppell, 2014, p. 155). This encompassed a range of issues such as the green agenda and feminisation, as discussed by Carter and Clements (2015) and Campbell and Childs (2015), respectively, in this issue. In relation to social liberalism we can identify two key themes.

The first relates to a cultural shift in relation to what we might broadly term equality issues. In part this reflected a long-term trend towards a more liberal society that had its roots in the 1960s. It also reflected the progressive impact of New Labour, as Rawnsey (2010, p. 451) observed:

One positive dimension of the Blair era was its social liberalism. There was progress on female equality, gay rights and race ... There were black faces around the Cabinet table for the first time, more female ones than ever before and gay ministers no longer had to pretend they weren't.

Consequently, as one leading moderniser, Francis Maude (2013, p. 144) observed: 'The centre of gravity of social attitudes has moved significantly towards much greater tolerance and respect. The Conservative Party doesn't have to run ahead of society – but it can't lag too far behind either'. Failing to keep up with contemporary society risked significant negative consequences in electoral terms. Here, this aspect of modernisation is analysed primarily in relation to Conservative attitudes towards gay rights and the family, notably the debate over equal marriage rights for same-sex couples.

The second theme we can identify draws on 'the social liberal notion of positive freedom': that is, the idea of 'freedom to' and 'self-fulfilment' (Marquand, 1999, p. 17). This implies a more communitarian set of values than the individualistic negative freedom of classical liberalism, which saw a revival of its standing in the form of neo-liberalism, or 'economic libertarianism' in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom (Gamble, 2013). This positive or 'effective' conception of freedom emphasises that it is only achieved when individuals are 'not only free from outside interference or allowed to do what [they] want' but also when they have 'the appropriate resources, information and capacities' such that they are able to do it (West, 1998, p. 239). This theme relates back to the first, in that it has been concerned with how inequality restricts individual or group prospects for achieving self-fulfilment. The positive or social liberalism discussed by Marquand developed in the late-nineteenth century in response to classical liberalism, and greatly influenced political debate in the twentieth century (see also Mahon, 2008). As such, in the post-1945 era we arguably witnessed not a clash 'between conservatism and socialism, but a debate between heterogeneous factions of liberalism' (Vincent, 1998, p. 57). Buckler and Dolowitz (2000, p. 301) have argued that New Labour 'adopted a "social liberal" position, emphasizing procedural fairness over distributive patterns, which can be viewed as a departure both from traditional "social democracy" and from the "neo-liberalism" of the recent right'. This second theme is therefore explored in relation to the Conservatives' attitude towards poverty, and how the party under Cameron attempted to respond to New Labour's position in this respect.

Social Liberalism as Equal Rights: The Case of Gay Marriage

In opposition between 1997 and 2010, the ‘most significant division in the Conservative Party was along the social, sexual and moral policy divide’ (Hayton, 2012, p. 117). New Labour’s equality agenda raised the salience of a number of morality questions, and forced the Conservatives to confront some issues they would probably have preferred to ignore. Successive leaders adopted different tactics in relation to a range of issues. William Hague, who had initially indicated his desire to lead an ‘inclusive’ and ‘tolerant’ party (quoted in Hayton, 2012, p. 106), allowed his MPs a free vote on legislation to equalise the age of consent. However, just 16 of his MPs backed the measure and Conservative peers defeated the legislation in the Lords. In the face of the Labour government’s plans to repeal Section 28, Hague mobilised his party against the measure and it too was defeated by Conservatives in the upper house. His successor, Iain Duncan Smith, also adopted a traditionalist stance when faced with legislation in 2002 to grant adoption rights to unmarried and gay couples on an equal basis with married couples. Imposing a three-line whip in opposition to the measure led to a significant Conservative rebellion, and further splits in the party were exposed by the return (this time ultimately successfully) of efforts to repeal Section 28 in 2003. Michael Howard replaced Duncan Smith as leader later that year, and prioritised restoring an image of party unity. When the government brought forward the Civil Partnership Bill and the Gender Recognition Bill, Howard opted for free votes to downplay the public impact of Conservative divisions, but this did not offer a clear message to the electorate on where the party now stood (Hayton, 2012, pp. 111–113).

The great advantage that Cameron faced when he became leader of the opposition in 2005 was that these measures had all already been passed into law. This made it easier to convince the party’s traditionalist wing of the need to concede and move on, and meant that his own socially liberal rhetoric was not put to the test in a parliamentary division. However, the decision to pursue the equal marriage agenda – and risk re-igniting old conflicts – might appear particularly surprising in light of this. Overall, it seems that this decision was driven by a combination of three factors. These are Cameron’s own socially liberal outlook, his desire to articulate a modernised form of conservatism, and electoral calculation. In relation to the first and second of these, Cameron has stressed the importance of marriage more widely, and the Coalition has legislated to introduce a form of tax allowance for married couples from April 2015. Gay marriage might be seen as a way to retain the traditional Conservative emphasis on the social value of marriage and update it for the twenty-first century. However, it could also support the impression of a more tolerant, inclusive party that was in touch with the attitudes of the broader electorate.

Cameron’s modernisation strategy in this area was based on sending signals that the party had changed (or at least was changing) by striking a deliberately different tone on equality issues. This was symbolised by his insistence that the party must respond to May’s (2002) charge that ‘as our country has become more diverse, our party has remained the same’ by reforming its candidate selection procedures to improve the chances of female, gay and ethnic minority candidates being selected. Cameron declared his own support for civil partnerships on a par with marriage in his first party conference speech as leader (2006b). While this explicit recognition was not replicated in the subsequent 2 years, he returned to it in 2009, making clear that any future tax breaks for married couples would benefit gay people in civil partnerships equally. Subsequently, this was included in the 2010 manifesto (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 35). Thus, while retaining an emphasis on his own belief in the importance of marriage and family, Cameron was able to avoid the accusation that this implies intolerance towards families or couples that do not fit the ‘traditional’, male-female nuclear model (Hayton, 2010). Forging a coalition with the Liberal Democrats appeared to offer further reinforcement of Cameron’s reorientation of the Conservatives in a liberal direction, and the move was widely welcomed among the modernisers.

Although Cameron had previously strongly endorsed civil partnerships and had stressed that any tax allowance for married couples would apply to such unions equally, he had not championed the cause of gay marriage in opposition. His declaration to the 2011 Conservative Party conference that his government would consult on introducing equal marriage rights for same-sex couples was therefore something of a surprise announcement. As noted above the passage of the 2004 Civil Partnerships Bill had exposed significant divisions in the PCP over the issue (Hayton, 2012, p. 113), so it was reasonable to anticipate a similar reaction to the equal marriage legislation. The subject had also not featured in the 2010 Conservative manifesto, nor indeed was it mentioned in the Liberal Democrat manifesto or the Coalition Agreement. However, Cameron chose to make marriage a key component of his 2011 party conference speech, telling the assembled delegates:

[F]or me, leadership on families also means speaking out on marriage. Marriage is not just a piece of paper. It pulls couples together through the ebb and flow of life. It gives children stability. And it says powerful things about what we should value. So yes, we will recognise marriage in the tax system.

But we're also doing something else. I once stood before a Conservative conference and said it shouldn't matter whether commitment was between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and another man. You applauded me for that. Five years on, we're consulting on legalising gay marriage.

And to anyone who has reservations, I say: Yes, it's about equality, but it's also about something else: commitment. Conservatives believe in the ties that bind us; that society is stronger when we make vows to each other and support each other. So I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative. (Cameron, 2011a)

Cameron consequently sought to make a conservative case for same-sex marriage, in effect arguing that modernising the institution of marriage would strengthen it (a traditional conservative objective) with benefits for society as a whole. The influential Conservative blogger Tim Montgomerie (2012) made a similar argument in support of Cameron:

It is because I value marriage so much that I have come to believe it should be extended to gay people and not kept exclusive. Because it is so beneficial an institution it should be enlarged rather than fossilised. Whereas some people see the gay marriage issue as primarily about equal rights, I see it as about social solidarity and stability. Marriage is, for want of a better word, conservatising.

This argument was not one that a significant proportion of the PCP or the wider membership found persuasive. At the key second reading stage of the Same-Sex Marriage Bill, 137 Conservative MPs voted against, with 127 in favour (the legislation was able to pass with a large majority thanks to Labour and Liberal Democrat support) (Cowley and Stuart, 2013, p. 9). Conservative opponents of the bill tended to focus their arguments around the claim that it represented a radical change to the institution of marriage, and therefore presented a threat to it (Gilbert, 2014). This differentiated the issue from civil partnerships, which some Conservatives had backed in the hope that they would close the issue and remove calls for equal marriage (Gilbert, 2014, p. 20). Conservative MPs also faced calls from religious leaders, constituency party members, supporters and the right wing press to oppose the bill. Opinion polls suggested that only 27.8 per cent of Conservative supporters were in favour of same-sex marriage, compared with 42.8 per cent of the electorate as a whole (Clements, 2014, p. 236). Party members were similarly sceptical, with 24.3 per cent in favour and 57.8 per cent against (Bale and Webb, 2014, p. 5). The controversy in the party over the issue created a political

headache for Cameron, which UKIP attempted to exploit by voicing opposition to same-sex marriage (Clements, 2014, p. 242).

Given the opposition to same-sex marriage from UKIP, religious organisations such as the Church of England and the Catholic Church, and from the traditionalist wing of the Conservative Party, it would be easy to identify Cameron's decision to push for this measure as a key indicator of his social liberalism. Certainly, part of the appeal of the cause to Cameron must have been the opportunity to burnish his socially liberal credentials with liberal-minded voters. Analysis by Gilbert (2014, p. 21) also concluded that 'conservative ideology was more readily articulated in *opposition* to the Bill, rather than in favour of it'. A number of the Conservative MPs who spoke in favour of the Bill in the parliamentary debates also framed their case in classical liberal terms, effectively deploying Mill's harm principle (Gilbert, 2014, p. 5). However, echoing arguments made in the United States, some Conservatives including Cameron advocated same-sex marriage 'as a way to reinforce traditional sexual norms' and the institutional constraint provided by marriage (Yi, 2013, p. 499). This was, it seems, in anticipation of the problem that much of Cameron's party might not share his own, ostensibly socially liberal outlook on the issue. Framing same-sex marriage in this way was an attempt to transcend intra-party divisions on social, sexual and moral issues (and, indeed, those among the public), constructing a new position that blended liberal and conservative perspectives. This, then, might persuade both sides to lend their support. Cameron's framing of the issue was therefore not informed wholly by a commitment to liberal equality, but also by a continued, distinctly conservative emphasis on the stabilising social value of marriage.

The third factor, electoral calculation, is of course linked to the other two; Heppell (2014, p. 183) has argued that with 'public support for same-sex marriage increasing' Cameron 'understood the need to position the Conservatives on the right side of social attitudes'. Consequently, 'as a pragmatic act to confirm the detoxification of the nasty party imagery, supporting gay marriage was a rational act for Cameron as a vote-maximising political leader' (Heppell, 2014, p. 184). However, whether this proved to be a wise decision in retrospect is questionable. Unfortunately for Cameron, the weight of broader public opinion on the subject was at odds with the scepticism felt by both Conservative supporters and MPs, the majority of whom failed to support the move. Given the party management difficulties the issue caused, it could be argued that this was a miscalculation that served mainly to expose intraparty divisions and push some supporters towards UKIP. Research into the attitudes of Conservative Party members suggests that those who are cultural conservatives are most likely to defect to UKIP (Webb and Bale, 2014).

Poverty and Social Justice

A significant part of the Conservatives' decontamination strategy under Cameron's leadership was constructing an approach to problems of poverty and deprivation that could counter New Labour's. Through its focus on 'social exclusion' and extensive welfare reforms, New Labour had conclusively pushed poverty onto the political agenda in 1997. This made it very difficult for the Conservatives not to address this policy area, even though it was a difficult issue for them. The Conservatives under Cameron responded with an apparent acceptance of the concept of social justice, developed through Iain Duncan Smith's work leading the party's Social Justice Policy Review in opposition, and in government following his appointment as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Social justice is usually seen as indicative of a support for equality and is not a concept that is easily associated with Thatcherite conservatism. Therefore, it is tempting to view the adoption of this idea by Cameron's Conservatives as evidence of a shift away from this ideological heritage, towards social liberalism. However, concepts do not have fixed and immutable meanings (Freeden, 1996). Social justice can be imbued with a more traditionally conservative meaning, and there are indications that

Cameron's Conservatives' use of this concept is not demonstrative of a shift towards social liberalism.

The development of a Conservative approach to poverty was a significant strand of modernisation under Cameron's leadership. In an apparent departure from Thatcherism's rejection of the concept of 'relative poverty' in favour of an absolute definition (Hickson, 2009; Dorey, 2010), Duncan Smith stated that the Conservative Party needed to recognise that 'all forms of poverty – absolute and relative – must be dealt with'. Similarly, Letwin had previously claimed that: 'inequality matters. Of course, it should be an aim to narrow the gap between rich and poor' (quoted in Sylvester, 2005). The policy suggestions put forward by the Social Justice Policy Group (SJP), commissioned by Cameron in 2006, drew extensively on New Labour's language on the social exclusion that poverty could cause. This suggested an inherently relative conception, and an appreciation of the need to bring the poor back in to mainstream society. In turn, this suggested a shift away from the individualism associated with Thatcherism, towards a greater emphasis on communitarian values than might have previously been expected from the Conservatives. Cameron appeared to agree with this emphasis, stating in his 2006 Scarman lecture that: 'we need to think of poverty in relative terms', and 'the Conservative Party recognises, will measure and will act on relative poverty' (Cameron, 2006c). Alongside this, the possibility of a Conservative theory of 'social justice' made its way into the mainstream of the party's social policy. Launching the SJP, Cameron announced that he was 'deeply committed to social action for social justice' (quoted in BBC, 2005), and later proclaimed Duncan Smith to be 'the most determined champion for social justice this Party has ever had' (2013). In government, the Department for Work and Pensions has continued to draw on this theme by developing and implementing a 'Social Justice Strategy' (HM Government, 2012). The influence can also be seen in other departments, such as the Department for Communities and Local Government's 'Troubled Families' initiative (DCLG, 2013).

Social justice is not an idea that is usually associated with conservatism. Drawing on Hayek, the New Right argued that social justice and freedom were incompatible. This was based on the claim that freedom is properly understood negatively, as the absence of coercion. Putting in place the policies and procedures needed to promote the ideal of 'social justice' would constitute an unjustifiable intrusion on individual freedom. This analysis of the potentially highly damaging consequences of 'social justice' precluded its acceptance by New Right conservatives. However this interpretation is rejected by social liberals, whose conception of freedom cannot be fulfilled without some reference to inequalities, and the way that these are managed or ameliorated in order to provide the conditions where real 'equality of opportunity' can flourish (Barry, 2005, pp. 37–45). There is a duty on government to improve (or facilitate the improvement of) the skills of individuals and communities as a matter of good for the societies concerned (Plant, 2009, p. 218), although the perceived correct nature of this duty will differ between, for example, liberals and social democrats. Nonetheless, this implies a more communitarian set of values than a negative conception of freedom allows for. As such, for social liberals, processes and policies that support the promotion of social justice have a legitimate and necessary place without strategies to address poverty and disadvantage, as these are inequalities that mitigate against a socially just society. The incompatibility of this conception of social justice with Thatcherite conservatism has nourished the belief that Cameronite conservatism marks a departure from the party's recent ideological past.

It was under the leadership of Cameron as a self-proclaimed 'liberal conservative' that this accommodation with the idea of social justice assumed a central place in the Conservative Party's approach to poverty and disadvantage. However, neither the renewed concern with poverty nor interest in the idea of social justice are exclusively associated with the socially liberal wing of the party. A number of MPs who have been closely involved in developing the ideas – such as Duncan Smith, Letwin, Greg Clark and Streeter – are on the party's socially conservative wing. Indeed for

Streeter (2002, p. 9), social justice and social liberalism are opposing ideas and Conservatives should stand ‘not for social liberalism, but for social justice’. This suggests that the approach to poverty under Cameron’s leadership, which is centred on an appeal to social justice, cannot necessarily be explained with reference to social liberalism. An examination of how social justice is understood by the party is illuminating in this respect, suggesting that what we are looking at is not a wholesale shift towards social liberalism. Rather, it owes a lot of its heritage to socially conservative perspectives on poverty that bear hallmarks of a Thatcherite approach to welfare provision.

Conventional understandings of social justice are fundamentally concerned with distribution; it is about ‘how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society’ (Miller, 1999, p. 1), or ‘about the treatment of inequalities of all kinds’ (Barry, 2005, p. 10). In the British context, the ‘good’ that proponents of social justice have primarily been concerned with the distribution of is money; specifically, the contention that ‘the distribution of income and wealth created by capitalism was unacceptably unequal and required remedying by taxation’ (Barry, 2005, p. 6; Lister, 2007). As such, a belief in the value of social justice conventionally necessitates a belief in the existence of relative poverty and the disadvantages brought by this. This is compatible with the first social liberal theme outlined in this article, regarding the concern with equality issues. This gives the concept of social justice an inherently society-focused nature: barriers to equality of opportunity cannot be relieved simply by addressing the problems of the poorest individuals because the source of these problems is inequality, which is a broader social problem than individual disadvantage. Barriers to equality of opportunity are primarily located at the level of society, rather than the individual, so addressing these will impact on the whole of society. Ultimately this is one of the reasons why the concept was rejected by the New Right, owing to its implications for individual ‘freedom from’.

In some ways, Cameron’s Conservatives’ approach to poverty seems to fit with this understanding; for example, in the apparent acceptance of the concept of relative poverty, or the recognition that it is problematic that ‘we have a group of skilled professionals and wealth creators at the top of society who have little or no connection to those at the bottom’, yet ‘in so many cases what divides the two is little more than a different start in life’ (Duncan Smith, 2012a). The Conservatives recognise that for some people ‘the bottom rungs of the ladder to prosperity are broken’ (Cameron, 2005, p. 9) and regard it as the state’s duty to provide support in order to fix this. This is conflated with a conception of fairness as promoting social inclusion; for example, Duncan Smith (2012a) stated at the launch of the DWP Social Justice Strategy that there is a ‘fundamental unfairness in confining people to the margins, leaving them to languish there unseen for years’. Policy efforts, therefore, are focused on bringing those on the margins ‘back in’. Measures such as introducing greater conditionality for unemployment benefit claimants, the controversial work placement schemes and re-assessment of disability benefit claimants have all been justified in terms of allowing – or pushing people towards – the opportunity to improve their lives through promoting inclusion and self-fulfilment.

As such, the Social Justice Strategy opens with a statement: ‘social justice is about making society function better – providing the support and tools to help turn lives around’ (HM Government, 2012, p. 4). This in itself is instructive in telling us what the Department means when it discusses social justice. What it refers to is something quite different from the conventional understanding outlined above. The Strategy goes on to talk about the sort of support that will be provided, and who it will be provided for; primarily, the focus is on maintaining strong families as a means of ensuring better social outcomes for children (in this way, the poverty strategy ties in with the emphasis on the family). In identifying the problems that lead to family breakdown – which the report correlates with poverty – the focus is on individuals who face multiple barriers to equality of opportunity; those with very low levels of education, people who are dependent on drugs or alcohol, or the long-term unemployed. Significantly, however, the Strategy rejects the centrality of income inequality in

explaining these disadvantages, following the CSJ's idea that low income is a 'symptom' rather than a 'cause' of poverty and disadvantage. For example, in relation to low educational attainment, it is stated that trends on exclusions from school and young people engaging in crime are 'not simply a consequence of low income; they are symptomatic of some of the more deep-rooted problems faced by many people' (HM Government, 2012, p. 27). In as far as the Coalition has sought to address poverty, it is on these issues that efforts at promoting 'inclusion' have been concentrated.

As such, the approach can be characterised as focusing on 'poor people', rather than on inequality or relative poverty as such. This is a significant distinction because it means that responsibility for poverty is located primarily at the level of the individual, albeit coupled with some appreciation of how 'the system' enables or encourages individuals to make decisions that then lead them down 'pathways to poverty'. Rather than framing poverty as an equality issue, as might be expected under a socially liberal outlook, this has the effect of providing a moral explanation. For example, Duncan Smith (2012b) suggested that it is not enough to lift families above a 'narrow' 60 per cent relative poverty threshold, as New Labour aimed to do: 'there must be some kind of change in their life, or they will slip back'. The implication of this is that poverty is caused by more than simply not having enough money, perhaps as a result of low wages or a lack of available jobs or working hours. It has a behavioural component, meaning that poverty cannot be addressed without first resolving the underlying flaws of those experiencing it. This contradicts evidence, which suggests that a large proportion of people defined as 'in poverty' are those who are 'doing the right thing' by Conservatives' standards (Cameron, 2011b) – that is working full-time and trying to support themselves (MacInnes et al, 2013, p. 26; Resolution Foundation, 2013, p. 6).

This moralistic understanding of poverty is highly reflective of a Conservative influence on Coalition policy, and specifically of the ongoing relevance of neo-liberal conservatism (Hayton and McEnhill, 2014). As such, despite some acceptance of the importance of self-fulfilment and freedom as 'freedom to', the extent to which this is applied in practice is quite limited. It is largely confined to those whose poverty can be understood with reference to some level of individual choice; alleviating income inequality is not the priority. In turn, this diminishes the Conservative Party's claim to be concerned with relative poverty. Despite some initial similarities, the Conservative concept of social justice is considerably different from a conventionally socially liberal perspective.

Conclusion: A Liberal Coalition?

The economically liberal character of the Coalition government is not in doubt; since coming to power, both parties have been unwavering in their commitment to radically reduce the deficit by cutting public spending, often accompanied by wide-ranging reforms of public services. On social issues, Cameron has often described himself as a 'liberal conservative', and it has been claimed that the perspective of Cameron's Conservatives 'can be accurately summarized as a social liberal outlook' (Beech, 2011, p. 268). The proposed overlap between the modernised Conservative Party, espousing both economic and social liberalism, and the ideology of the Liberal Democrat leadership implies that the Coalition government can be characterised as an essentially liberal project. This article questions this characterisation, suggesting that Cameron's modernisation of the Party in a social liberal direction is far less extensive or secure than it might have at first appeared.

In identifying the need for the Conservative Party to engage more seriously with social issues, Cameron was responding to two central challenges. First, there was the need to portray a more compassionate, socially inclusive image, brought about partly as a result of New Labour's determination to push social issues onto the agenda and partly owing to the Conservatives' concurrent neglect of these in favour of an overwhelming focus on the economy. Second, the party faced a dilemma in how it would distinguish itself from Labour, now that it appeared to have won

the 'battle of ideas' over the economy (exemplified in the existence of New Labour). While the need to address these issues was not in doubt, Conservatives were divided over the nature of the solution. The liberal modernisers advocated an extension of their economic liberalism into the social sphere, while traditionalists preferred to argue for a stronger defence of traditional conservative values, retaining a focus on promoting or restoring morality as a means of achieving better social outcomes. In some areas, the Conservatives do seem to have moved away somewhat from the moral authoritarianism that characterised the traditional Thatcherite approach to society, certainly in terms of the acceptance of equality for same-sex couples.

In others, the shift is far less clear. On the key issue of poverty, the Conservatives have begun to talk about social justice, which might seem to indicate a shift towards social liberalism. However, on closer consideration, the ideas behind this are essentially neo-Thatcherite and have consistently been so since the early years of Cameron's leadership. The main focus is on individual responsibility, manifested in an analysis of the causes of poverty that locates these at the level of individual 'choice'. The extent to which the Conservatives under Cameron have shifted towards an understanding of freedom as self-fulfilment or 'freedom to' has been quite limited, with efforts largely aimed at addressing the flaws and poor decisions of individuals rather than at reducing social and economic inequalities as a whole. Taken together, the implication from these two significant policy areas is that the socially liberal character of the Conservatives under Cameron's leadership is far from certain. As such, the modernisation project appears unlikely to endure.

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