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Whatever Happened to Conservative Party Modernisation?

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Abstract
By way of an introduction to this special issue, our aim here is to bring together and interpret some of the main themes and issues to come out of the selection of papers presented below in order to make sense of the overall fate of David Cameron's attempted modernisation of the Conservative Party. Based on the evidence highlighted by each of the contributors to this issue, we make a number of arguments. Firstly, that Cameron's early attempts to steer the party into the centre ground of British politics can be judged to have been reasonably effective. Secondly, that in 2007-8, in the context of the emergence of economic difficulties leading to the financial crisis, the party found itself at a crossroads, and it chose to exit that crossroads with a turn, across a number of policy areas, back towards a more traditional Thatcherite or neo-liberal agenda. Thirdly, we argue that the financial crisis and the political instability it generated is not enough on its own to explain this turn to the right. Rather, these events should be seen as having acted as a catalyst for the exposure of three main fault-lines in the party's modernisation strategy: i) its lack of ideological coherence; ii) its potential for serious performance deficits due to a lack of consistency in the political leadership displayed by David Cameron; and, iii); its vulnerability to party management issues.

Keywords: David Cameron; Conservative Party; modernisation; party change; conservatism

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Introduction

The papers in this issue were originally presented to the 'Whatever Happened to Conservative Modernisation?' workshop, hosted by the University of Leeds in September 2014, and organised jointly by the PSA Conservatives and Conservatism Specialist Group and British Politics[1]. The purpose of the workshop was to provide a general audit of the fate of David Cameron's modernisation strategy across a number of key policy areas, particularly with the forthcoming 2015 general election in mind. What was striking about that conference was that each of the presenters offered analogous narratives about how we should interpret the legacy of Conservative modernisation. In particular, there was a remarkable degree of consensus around the view that what had emerged initially as a relatively bright and promising modernisation strategy had either eventually been abandoned altogether or, widely blown off course, in the lead up to the 2010 general election and beyond.

The relative degree of continuity in the narratives provided by the authors allows us to pull together a number of broad conclusions on the trajectory which Cameron's modernisation has taken and, the factors which have impacted upon this. As such our aim here is to bring together and interpret some of the main themes to come out of the selection of papers presented below in order to make sense of the overall fate of David Cameron's attempted modernisation of the Conservative Party. Based on the evidence highlighted by each of the contributors to this issue, we make a number of arguments. Firstly, that Cameron's early attempts to steer the party into the centre ground can be judged to have been largely effective and reasonably successful. Secondly, that in 2007-8, in the context of the emergence of economic difficulties leading to the financial crisis, the party entered a crossroads, and it chose to exit that crossroads with a turn, across a number of policy areas, back towards a more traditional Thatcherite or neo-liberal agenda. Thirdly, we argue that the financial crisis and the political instability it generated is not enough on its own to explain this turn to the right. Rather, these events should be seen as having acted as a catalyst for the exposure of three main fault-lines in the party's modernisation strategy: i) its

[1] Peter Kerr and Steve Kettell would like to thank Richard Hayton for his lead role in organising the workshop and co-ordinating and bringing together this collection of papers. We would also like to thank the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds for hosting the event, and the Political Studies Association Conservatives and Conservatism Specialist Group for co-sponsoring the workshop in conjunction with this journal.

lack of ideological coherence; ii) its potential for serious performance deficits due to a lack of consistency in the political leadership displayed by David Cameron; and, iii); its vulnerability to party management issues.

Overall we present the case here that delivering on the earlier promises of modernisation was always going to be a serious challenge for the Conservative leader. Beyond the elusive problem of mapping out a distinctive, yet ideologically coherent vision of modernisation, the most pressing challenge for Cameron was always going to be in holding steadfast to that vision in the context of a changing political environment and the long-term party divisions which any Conservative leader has to confront. With regard to the latter, since he was elected as Prime Minister in 2010, we have seen David Cameron having to attempt to manage more than one type of coalition. Of greater challenge to achieving compromise with the Liberal Democrats has been the struggle he has had to manage the coalition of interests and positions within his own party. While Cameron can be credited with having negotiated some of these difficulties well, particularly in devising a statecraft strategy that has enabled the Conservatives to dominate the Coalition's governing agenda (Hayton, 2014), his leadership on the issue of modernisation has never been consistent enough to allow him to follow through on much of his earlier rhetoric.

Cameron's Early Momentum

In a previous issue of this journal, Tom Bentley (2007), the former director of the think-tank Demos, speculated about the future direction of British party politics in the wake of, as it was then, ten years of New Labour government. Shortly before Tony Blair announced that he would be standing down as Prime Minister, and a few months prior to the financial crash, Bentley noted that Britain sat at the crossroads between three very different but conceivable electoral scenarios: i) the renewal of the social democratic project under a rejuvenated Labour Party; ii) the onset of a period of electoral uncertainty and minority government leading to the emergence of an assertive right wing populism; or iii) the successful dominance of the political centre by a Conservative Party unified over key issues such as Europe. Looking back now, it is perhaps useful to reflect on this suggestion, that in 2007-8, the future shape of the electoral landscape did appear to be very much up for grabs and that it was in the hands of either a re-energised Labour

or a modernised Conservative Party to take hold of the political agenda and avoid the scenario which was to eventually come to fruition; that of a resurgent populism amid a period of electoral stagnation and disaffection.

Certainly no political commentator at that time could have foreseen the imminent emergence of the global financial crisis, and its concomitant capacity to disrupt political momentum. Yet the point that Britain stood at such a crossroads in 2007 does help to contextualise just how significant David Cameron's modernisation agenda was and the potential consequences for electoral competition in the UK if it was to fail. Cameron himself appeared to fully grasp the import of his own project and the clear need to provide electoral ballast to a party which had been listing awkwardly to the right for a number of years. As the papers in this special issue each show, the first two years of his leadership proved to be the highpoint of Cameron's modernisation strategy, characterised by a consistently pursued and genuine attempt to detoxify the Conservative brand and improve the party's image. Thus, by the spring of 2007, it did appear to many observers that Cameron was successfully re-orientating his party back towards the political centre. With support for the Tories on a gradual upward trajectory and on the back of a notable victory at the previous year's local elections, there were clear signs that we were witnessing the successful re-emergence of a centrist and more socially compassionate Conservative Party.

The sense that the party's early modernisation drive had hit the ground running is reflected in the analyses presented below. In our opening article, Richard Hayton and Libby McEnhill point out that what was at stake for Cameron was an attempt to resolve a long-standing identity crisis within the party. Deeply fractured as the Tories were, not only on the key issue of Europe, but more fundamentally along a number of social, sexual and moral issues, modernisation was intended to be a vehicle through which the party could restore, not simply its electoral credibility, but also its overall sense of self. A core element of this search for a more modern narrative of its identity was to be a redefinition of the types of groups that the party was attempting to reach out to. To this end, Cameron sought to strike a markedly different tone on a range of social issues, and to marginalise (and in many ways define himself against) the

stridently intolerant voices that could still be found in some quarters of his party. His decision in government to legislate for same-sex marriage was consistent with this approach, predictably causing outrage amongst elements of the Conservative right and burnishing his socially liberal credentials. In a similar vein, Cameron also attempted to shift perceptions of the party's identity amongst women voters. As Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs point out, the 'feminisation' of the Conservative Party became an often overlooked, but nonetheless central element of the modernisation strategy. To these authors, Cameron's early commitment to this agenda proved to be more than merely rhetorical and resulted in increasing not only the number of female Tory MPs (admittedly from a very low base) through changes to the candidate selection process, but also in raising the prominence of women's issues in the 2010 election manifesto.

Two key yardsticks for measuring Cameron's early momentum were always going to be his handling of the Tories' identification with the twin issues of immigration and Europe. On the former, Rebecca Partos and Tim Bale contend that as Leader of the Opposition Cameron was generally unhindered in steering Conservative Party discourse a respectable distance away from the previous populist rhetoric around immigration which had reached something of a crescendo in the 2005 election campaign. This was also supported, they contend, by his appointment of the moderate figure of Damian Green as Shadow Minister for Immigration, a respected advocate of 'one nation' conservatism. On the issue of Europe, the attempt to reconfigure the party's identity was slightly more complicated. As Philip Lynch argues, it would have been considerably difficult for Cameron to forge modernisation around a departure from a Eurosceptic position given that his party's scepticism towards the EU had by now become 'hard-wired' into its DNA. Nevertheless, Lynch points out that, while Cameron avoided any major alteration to the Tories policy on Europe, he did successfully link his discourse on the EU to wider modernisation themes such as an emphasis on the EU's obligations towards fighting global poverty through international aid.

For Neil Carter and Ben Clements, the key 'signature issue' for Cameron's modernisation was the environment, and these authors concur that his early commitment towards environmental concerns amounted to more than simply rhetorical or symbolic gesturing. His substantive support

for the issue not only helped to boost the party's electoral standing, it also enabled the formation of a cross-party consensus which resulted in radical policy change in the form of the Climate Change Act, 2008. The final major plank of Cameron's rebranding efforts was his attempt to redefine the party's identity in relation to public service and the state. As Martin Smith and Rhonda Jones argue, a core element of the modernisation process was the Conservatives' attempts to re-emphasise their commitment towards the public sector, particularly in the key areas of welfare such as health, education and pensions. For these authors, the idea of the Big Society, although incorporated into party discourse after 2007, functioned as a crucial element of their modernisation strategy. It provided a way of potentially reconciling public demands for stronger public services with the party's wider goals of decentralising control and reducing spending.

What comes out of these analyses is a strong sense of positive affirmation for Cameron's performance in the early phase of his leadership, when the main tenets of his modernisation agenda were clearly established. To varying degrees, each of the analysts below paint a picture of Cameron having acquired significant early momentum in delivering meaningful and relatively coherent reform. Yet, as we see from each of the papers, there is an equally powerful sense throughout this issue that from late-2007 onwards, Cameron's modernising direction came to be largely blown off course, severely modified, or even altogether reversed.

Whatever did Modernisation Mean?

In our final contribution, summarising the theory and practice of Cameron's modernisation strategy, Katharine Dommett cautions us to the fact that any attempt to measure the overall fate, or even the relative degree of success and failure, of modernisation is no simple task. To get any meaningful sense of its lasting impact we firstly need to have a clear idea of what modernisation meant to David Cameron and more importantly what, precisely, its end goals might have been. At its crudest level, we might argue that if modernisation was designed simply to make the party more electable in the short term, then it can be judged to have been at least a partial success. However, to most of the authors in this issue and beyond, modernisation has been about more than just an electoral makeover; it has, as Hayton and McEnhill point out, been about re-

examining and attempting to shift the overall identity of the party. Yet, from the outset, it has always been difficult to discern any definitive consensus about the precise form that this renewed identity has, or should have, taken. Writing in this journal in 2007, Peter Dorey contended that:

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

Stuart McAnulla similarly argued that Cameron 'sought to distance himself from the perceived excessive individualism of Thatcherism, through stressing repeatedly that "there is such a thing as society'… [and] he also drew upon the "one nation" theme within conservatism that Thatcher had arguably eschewed' (McAnulla, (2012, p. 168). However, other analysts have been more sceptical of the extent to which Cameron's modernisation project ever envisaged a fundamental reappraisal of the ideological trajectory of the party. For example Hayton has questioned the extent to which Cameron successfully reconstructed conservatism, arguing that he 'steered his party within rather than against Thatcherism's wake' rather than attempting to re-orientate it ideologically (2012, p. 146). While modernisation involved some rhetorical distancing from the Thatcher era, the prioritisation of some different issues, and a concerted effort to rebrand the party and improve its image, it did not entail a far-reaching challenge to core Thatcherite principles. On this reading modernisation was, in short, fundamentally limited in ambition from its inception. Relatedly, others have viewed it, at worst, as a smokescreen for the continuation of a neo-liberal agenda (Kerr et al, 2011) or, at best, an 'empty signifier', adaptable enough to be able to rationalise any types of change that modern parties may find expedient (Byrne et al, 2012).

In response to this uncertain picture, Dommett reminds us that modernisation has always remained undefined by the party itself, thereby making it difficult to impose any coherent narrative, or even to straightforwardly evaluate its overall level of success. Nevertheless, the

author helpfully provides her own attempt to establish a working definition by pointing out that a distinguishing feature of modernisation, and one which makes it different from, say for example, Obama's more amorphous notion of 'change', is the link that it makes between party change and the wider contemporary context. To Dommett then: 'a modernising party can therefore be recognised as one that identifies a modern impetus to which it is necessary to adapt, and that then rolls out a programme of change designed to address the disjuncture between the party and those conditions **(page number?).** In this way, the author views modernisation as something much more meaningful than simple short-term electoral politicking. It amounted to a wider effort to bring the party into line with changing attitudes and societal practices. If we return to the argument that modernisation attempted to resolve the party's identity crisis, we get a clearer sense of the ways in which important links have been made between the party's own core identity and a range of wider identity issues within society, such as the increasing demands to recognise gay marriage or to deal more directly and sympathetically with issues relating to gender and class.

Here, Cameron's efforts to nudge his party's identity into line with a broader diagnosis of the modern challenges his party was confronted with, draws comparisons with the earlier modernisation of the Labour Party into New Labour. Labour's modernisation project evolved along similar lines in that it attempted to synchronise internal party change with changes in the broader socio-economic environment, such as the need for the UK to adjust to either a real or constructed notion of globalisation, depending on which side of the globalisation debate one stood (Giddens, 1998; Hay, 1999). What began as an internal party project aimed at decontaminating the party's brand and altering its ideological rhetoric, eventually morphed into a much grander, outward facing project aimed at modernising Britain's wider economy, society and polity (Finlayson, 2003). Arguably, this attempt to forge a critical intersection between the party's own identity and wider societal reform acted to enhance the potency of Labour's modernisation narrative and sustain its overall coherence and lasting impact. It implied what Dommett and, elsewhere Dorey (2007), refer to as a macro level modernisation; that is an attempt to fundamentally alter the DNA of the party to bring it into line with modern conditions. Such a comparison here is useful, for it brings into focus a critical question raised by Dommett,

of whether Cameron's modernisation could ever have been as successful as its New Labour predecessor at bringing about this type of macro-level party change. Given the nature of the party's reformist ambitions post financial crisis, in particular their desire to radically reduce the size of the state through stringent austerity measures which were always likely to disproportionately impact on poorer families, it is questionable whether Cameron could e**v**er have successfully sustained the party's newly formed narrative of itself as a more socially liberal and compassionate party.

Did Modernisation Fail?

If modernisation is to be judged by this criterion, of having followed through on its early social liberal rhetoric, then the majority of papers presented in this issue deem it to be, at worst a failure, and at best, blown waywardly off course. What is perhaps most notable is just how quickly and seemingly easily the party started to lose its new ballast and begin to keel over once again to the right. For example, Hayton and McEnhill point out that the party's earlier nods towards a social justice agenda were soon to be sidetracked by more traditional neo-liberal arguments around the role of individual responsibility as a determinant of inequality. Likewise, despite Cameron's early success in displacing some of the former populist rhetoric on immigration, any hopes that this might result in a more tolerant image for the party were soon blunted post-2007, by a dramatic turn towards what Partos and Bale describe as a 'remarkably restrictive, hard line and, at times, both hyperbolic and hyperactive' policy stance towards the issue **(page number?).** This stance has been all the while strengthened by the party in government, with a number of stringent restrictions being placed on migrants from low skilled and poorer backgrounds, migrant families and international students. In the area of immigration in particular, it has been a continuing feature of the party in government to resort to its more traditional practice of creating and reproducing a number of 'folk devils' to animate the imaginary of traditional Tory supporters. For example, Partos and Bale remind us that Tory discourse on immigration policy has been flooded with images of the 'benefits tourist', and the 'bogus students' who attend 'bogus colleges', despite the general lack of evidence to support these popular myths **(page ???).**

Likewise, Smith and Jones concur that, despite his early pledges to preserve the role of the public sector, Cameron has largely allowed the right of his party to dominate public sector reform, resulting in a relatively radical shift away from his modernisation project. These authors argue that Cameron has allowed the politics of austerity to usher in a fundamental and relatively consistent restructuring of the public sector in favour of increased privatisation, outsourcing of public services and stringent welfare retrenchment; a far cry from earlier rhetoric. Similarly, Campbell and Childs point out that in government, the party's attachment to a politics of austerity has committed it to a range of welfare reforms which have been widely seen to have impacted disproportionately on women and poorer families, thereby working to considerably undermine Cameron's credentials on the promotion of women's issues. Even on Cameron's flagship modernisation policy area, the environment, Carter and Clements point out that the party's promise to be the 'greenest government ever' has come under severe strain in office. Despite these authors conceding that the government has succeeded in delivering most of the environmental commitments outlined in the Coalition agreement, since 2010 we have seen an increasingly vocal environmental scepticism from the Conservative right. Along with a number of governmental commitments towards issues, such as support for the construction of the HS2 rail network, badger culling and shale gas exploration, this has served to tarnish the party's environmental credentials.

These types of radical departure from the party's early modernisation momentum bring us back again to the idea of 2007-8 as having represented a type of crossroads for the main UK political parties. Since that time, and in the wake of developments such as the onset of financial crisis, the decline in support for Labour and the more recent rise in support for UKIP, there is a consensus throughout this issue that the party has emerged from this junction by steering itself along the road to the right. However, the wider question of whether this means that it has failed altogether to deliver some type of 'modernisation' is slightly more complex. How we tackle this question again depends on how we choose to define modernisation. For example Lynch reminds us that although the party has taken an increasingly hard-line stance towards Europe whilst in government, its Eurosceptic position, which it never retreated from in opposition, has itself been 'modernised' to incorporate discourses around issues of popular democracy and support for

globalisation. Moreover, despite Cameron having subsequently taken the UK closer to a position of Brexit, his longer term vision is for Britain's inclusion within a modernised EU built around a renegotiation of Britain's relationship with Europe. Thus, in responding to the challenges posed by UKIP and the Eurozone crisis Lynch argues that the party has been able to forge a different type of modernisation agenda, namely one driven by the right rather than the centre of the party.

Likewise on the issue of immigration, Partos and Bale also throw open the question of whether 'modernisation' should necessarily be taken to signal a more liberal approach to immigration controls. Equally, it could be viewed synonymously with a harder-line tightening of restrictions in response to growing public concern over the issue. Whichever definition we adopt, these authors purport that the party's record on modernisation in government is complex and needs to be disaggregated, with it having liberalised controls on wealthier economic migrants on the one hand, while tightening restrictions on students and 'illegal' migrants on the other. This recognition, that the type of modernisation that has been delivered in government, is one that we could equate more closely with the right of the party, is also a central theme of Campbell and Childs' analysis of the party's record on gender politics. These authors point out that it can be a mistake to measure the Conservatives' record against the yardstick of a 'leftist' type of feminist agenda. If judged on this criteria, the party, including a number of its female Conservative MPs, committed generally towards preserving more traditional gender norms, will often largely 'fail' to measure up to this. Yet, on closer inspection, Campbell and Childs identify an increasingly assertive group of Conservative women MPs who do often speak vociferously for women regardless of whether or not they identify themselves with a feminist standpoint.

From these analyses then, we can see that whilst a centrist, or socially liberal modernisation drive may have been largely or completely abandoned, there is some evidence of a broader reformist agenda having been seized on by the right of the party. Yet, despite this more complex picture, all of our contributors below agree that the modernisation strategy, which defined its own goal as moving the party's identity towards the centre ground, should be judged largely a failure on its own terms. In the next section, we examine some of the potential explanations for this failure.

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Explaining the Fate of Modernisation

To Dommett, the party's departure from its early momentum has been largely due to the modernisation project having been blown off course by 'events'. Undoubtedly, the most important of these events was the emergence of the financial crisis and the broader climate of political instability it gave rise to. The recession was the deepest of the post-war period, leading to a large deficit in the public finances (government borrowing peaked at 11 per cent of GDP in 2009-10). As growth stalled unemployment also rose. In a similar vein to the way in which the economic difficulties of the 1970s had opened up the political space for the emergence of the Thatcherite project, the question was always going to be whether the more recent crisis would result in a similar type of neo-liberal turn for the party. It presented, in many ways, the ultimate test for Cameron's commitment to modernisation. As each of the contributors here show to varying degrees, just as Cameron's efforts prior to 2007 had successfully worked to adjust the colour, contrast and brightness of the party's image, the financial crisis created the conditions for the party machine to reset itself to its pre-2005 Thatcherite 'factory settings'. Whilst the evidence appears to undoubtedly show this to have been the case, our argument here is that the political context created by the financial crisis was not enough, in itself, to explain the drift away from modernisation. Rather, the crisis should be seen as having acted as a catalyst for the exposure of three main fault-lines in the party's modernisation strategy: i) its lack of ideological coherence; ii) its potential for serious performance deficits due to a lack of consistency in the political leadership displayed by David Cameron; and, iii); its vulnerability to party management issues.

Ideological Incoherence

Hayton and McEnhill point out that a key problem for Cameron's modernisation has been the fundamentally unresolved tensions that exist between the modernisers' emphasis on social justice issues and the party's more traditional attachment to Hayekian inspired neo-liberal ideas. For these authors, after 2007-8, and particularly in government, such tensions have become more readily apparent and have tended to be resolved much more in favour of neo-liberal solutions to tackling income inequality. In practice, IDS' social justice strategy has primarily been aimed at providing behavioural and individual-focussed policy solutions rather than social liberal and

redistributive measures. This point helps to expose a key fault-line in Cameron's project, namely the potentially uneasy relationship which can exist between liberal and conservative ideas, particularly at the intersection between social liberalism, neo-liberalism and Thatcherite conservatism. It is arguable that Cameron's early modernisation efforts very neatly sidestepped these potential contradictions through some adept 'ideological cross dressing' (Kerr, 2007, p. 64). This was evident in the ambiguity of statements such as 'there is such a thing as society, we just don't think it's the same thing as the state', and Cameron's declaration that he is 'certainly a big Thatcher fan, but I don't know if that makes me a Thatcherite' (ibid, p. 49). From the outset, Cameron arguably proved to be ideologically entrepreneurial in pinning themes of social justice and liberal conservatism onto a pre-existing commitment to neo-liberalism, but in the wake of the financial crisis and, as the party entered government, the demands for a more coherent approach were always going to be pressing.

According to Campbell and Childs, such ideological incoherence has been evident in government policy directed towards women, which has included a number of initiatives underpinned by a mix of liberal feminist, socially conservative and neo-liberal elements. This has resulted in an often contradictory policy direction, with the government supportive of a liberal feminist agenda on issues such as pay and flexible working, whilst at the same time championing tax breaks for married couples and implementing a raft of austerity measures which have disproportionately impacted negatively on women. Likewise, the contradictions of the Conservatives' strategy are heavily exposed in the area of public sector reform. For Smith and Jones, the party's preference in government for minimising the role of the state through privatising and outsourcing public services has clashed considerably with their earlier efforts to secure an image of a party committed to public service. Likewise, these authors also point out that the ideas behind the Big Society were no less contradictory and were based on the aim of strengthening the role of the voluntary sector whilst at the same time reducing its funding. In practice, they argue, the Conservatives have generally pursued a relatively consistent view of the relationship between the state and the market, but not a view that is particularly compatible with their early modernisation rhetoric.

Beyond these tensions which exist between the social liberal, neo-liberal and traditional conservative elements of the party's ideology, it is also relevant to raise the question of how workable the concept of modernisation could ever be for a party which has a broader attachment to ideas of traditionalism and the preservation of established norms and values. A major challenge for Cameron was that of having to seamlessly bring together a forward looking modernisation narrative with long-standing conservative ideas based around tradition. Nowhere was this challenge more evident than in the area of gay marriage. Cameron and other Conservatives who supported the policy argued that equal marriage for same-sex couples would modernise and thereby strengthen the institution, helping to preserve its status in society (a traditional Conservative objective). However, traditionalist conservative ideas were more frequently and powerfully deployed by those MPs opposed to the bill. Similarly, Carter and Clements point out that, on the environment, Cameron set out to couple his commitment to a 'cleaner, greener world' to a traditional Burkean conception of stewardship and conservation. Yet again, this effort to successfully link modernisation to traditionalism proved to be relatively unsuccessful with a growing confident number of MPs vocalising neo-liberal arguments against pro-environmental measures on the basis that these often incur increased state regulation and the imposition of 'green taxes' or levies. Overall, these authors argue that, in government, the party has undermined its modernising agenda on environmental issues by consistently showing a more traditional support for producer interests over environmentalists. Therefore it is possible to argue that in some areas, where that creative tension between modernism and tradition emerged, modernisation merely worked to restore a more confident reassertion of the party's attachment to the latter.

All of this leads us to concur with the argument proposed by Dommett that modernisation was never underpinned by any type of coherently worked out ideological strategy for the party. Such a strategy was necessary, the author argues, if the party was to avoid being easily thrown off course by short-term trends such as the growing challenge posed by UKIP. According to Lynch, this recent trend, toward a rise in support for UKIP, only serves to further highlight the contradictions of Cameron's modernisation project. It throws open the awkward fact that, whilst

attempting to extend the party's appeal to non-traditional Conservative supporters, it has generally struggled to retain the trust and support of some of its more traditional base.

Leadership and Performance Deficit

The issues raised above all point to the serious question of whether the party would realistically be able to deliver on most of the promises it had made in opposition. As Dommett points out, the fulfilment of party modernisation is no mean feat; it is a difficult process which requires considerable leadership skill to push through. The evidence garnered throughout this issue raises the important question of whether David Cameron possesses the appropriate level of leadership acumen, or perhaps more accurately the overall commitment, to have successfully followed modernisation through from opposition to power. In discussing some of the problems Cameron has experienced whilst in government, Lynch draws on the useful distinction made by Andrew Gamble (1994, p. 8) between the 'politics of support' and the 'politics of power'. The author reminds us of the potential problems that can arise for a party out of the twin priorities of having to appeal for support from voters on the one hand whilst at the same time struggling with the practicalities of government on the other. For each of our contributors, Cameron has had an often difficult time reconciling these twin demands and this has led, across a range of policy areas, to a number of performance deficits and the unravelling of further contradictions in his modernising strategy. For example, in looking ahead to a potential second term for the Conservatives, Lynch points out that Cameron's recent efforts to appeal to core supporters through promises to restrict EU immigration have generally failed to draw support away from UKIP and may ultimately prove unrealisable, given the strength of the EU's commitment to the free movement of its citizens. According to Lynch, the key problem for Cameron on Europe is that his failure to address the issue in opposition has forced him to continuously play 'catch-up' whilst in government, a strategy which has seen him leak support to UKIP.

Similar problems of leadership are evident on the issue of immigration. Partos and Bale point to a clear disconnect between the party's recent efforts to respond in a knee-jerk fashion to populist demands to restrict the influx of international students and its longer-term broader desire to 'attract the brightest and best' economic migrants. Importantly, these authors point out that this

attempt to shore up support for the party has also proved largely ineffective as the party's attempts to fuel public anxiety over the issue has merely acted to make it look altogether incompetent at controlling migrant numbers. Similarly, Campbell and Childs argue that, another example of the gap between the politics of support and the politics of power has been Cameron's announcement in 2009 that by the end of his first term in office, a third of his cabinet would be women; a claim which these authors and, previously Heppell (2012), have contested as having been unrealistic given the limited number of Conservative MPs currently available for cabinet positions. For Campbell and Childs, this serves to highlight their view that, with hindsight, much of Cameron's early commitment to feminising the party rarely amounted to little more than electoral posturing and that his overall lack of firm leadership on the issue is a key reason for its performance deficit in this policy area.

Likewise, Carter and Clements are led to question the overall strength of Cameron's commitment to a pro-green agenda. According to these authors, a key reason for Cameron's departure from his early promises to 'go green' was his overall lack of consistent leadership as it became clear that the environment as an issue couldn't work to provide the party with any clear electoral advantage. As a result, whilst in power, Cameron has allowed the priorities of deficit reduction and economic growth, as well as backbench environmental scepticism, to push him all too easily off his original trajectory. For Smith and Jones, a similar narrative emerges to explain the fate of the Conservatives' earlier promises to preserve key parts of the public sector. For these authors Cameron's rhetorical commitment towards the public sector, and in particular key areas of universal welfare provision, was always electorally rather than ideologically driven. Thus, given the lack of leadership weight behind these commitments we didn't have to wait long for the party to find themselves caught between their modernising rhetoric and their broader governing priority of attempting to eliminate the deficit through cuts to public spending. In their largely unsuccessful attempts to deliver this latter strategy, the authors concede that the party have introduced a number of radical reforms to the state - in many ways what amounts to a modernisation of the state - but in ways which are often contradictory and largely fail to meet the government's wider goals, or indeed, the objectives laid out in earlier modernisation rhetoric.

None of this, however, is to suggest that Cameron has altogether lacked leadership skill or even that he has failed more generally to deliver a relatively successful form of statecraft. As the analyses below each testify, the PM has been particularly adept at ensuring that the coalition has been dominated by a Conservative policy agenda. This point is made by Hayton (2014), who has argued that Cameron's own political acumen and personal charm have played an important role in establishing both political argument hegemony and an overall image of governing competence for the party. His dogged prioritisation of a politics of austerity and public sector cuts has enabled his party to map out a relatively coherent governing agenda whilst mobilising public support for welfare reform. Yet, much of this success has been at the expense of his broader modernising credentials. When it has come to delivering on those parts of the agenda which were central to his modernisation strategy, Cameron's leadership and general level of commitment has been too often wanting.

Party Management Issues

Party management whilst in government has been a long-standing problem for the Conservatives and no less so for the Thatcher and Major governments than it has been for David Cameron. However, what distinguishes Cameron's government has been the fact that he has been forced, due to the circumstances thrown up by the 2010 election, to steer an awkward path between two different parties, both the Conservatives and their Liberal Democrat coalition partners. What is most striking from the audit of the past five years, is that Cameron has, to some extent at least, had more success in managing his relationship with the latter than he has, at times, with the former. In that sense, the Conservative Party itself – divided as it is between its various ideological and policy factions – has appeared to present an even trickier coalition to manage at times than the wider partnership with the Liberal Democrats; with the effect that the Prime Minister has, to some extent, had to juggle two coalitions rather than one. The problems he has encountered in managing the broad coalition of interests within his own party leads Dommett to argue that Cameron was never able to successfully secure intra-party consensus around his modernisation strategy. Thus, although he was relatively successful in largely avoiding any major dissent from 2005 – 2007, this broader lack of consensus meant that he was always going to be vulnerable to party management issues in the face of changing circumstances.

It is whilst in government – partly as a consequence of having failed to secure an outright majority – that the Prime Minister has faced some of the most stringent opposition from within (see for eg, Cowley & Stuart, 2012). But what is worth reflecting on here is the fact that the formation of the coalition, which some Conservative MPs at the time seized upon as evidence of the failure of his project, conversely represented an opportunity for Cameron to consolidate his modernisation project by building a more progressive alliance with the Liberal Democrats around areas such as the environment, the strengthening of public services and a range of social and moral issues. In that respect, the Coalition agreement could have been used by Cameron to help de-politicise the party's obligations to follow through on a number of modernisation themes. To an extent Cameron has achieved this in a limited number of areas, but it has also been more common practice for senior figures in both parties to publicly emphasise their broader disgruntlement, rather than camaraderie, with their coalition partners, thereby fostering a sense of uneasy cohabitation rather than a happy marriage between the two parties (Hayton, 2014). At the same time, when we come to assess the impact which intra and inter party dynamics have had in steering the governing agenda away from the modernisation strategy, it could be crude to suggest that the impetus has come solely from within the right of the Conservative party. Some acknowledgement must also be given to the role the Liberal Democrats have played in wilfully keeping the government on track with its stringent austerity agenda. The Conservatives found themselves in coalition with a party which was itself undergoing a similar process of modernisation, with 'Orange book' economic liberals in the ascendancy in the run-up to the 2010 election. As such, with the Liberal Democrats keen to demonstrate their own modernised credentials and readiness to govern, so it may have seemed convenient for them to show affinity with some of the 'tough' choices that come from a politics of austerity and cuts.

Nevertheless, despite the Liberal Democrats seeming willingness to collaborate with their Conservative partners in delivering a fairly consistent neo-liberal agenda and a radical restructuring of the state, Cameron has still faced continual and heavy pressure from his own backbenchers for an ever sharper turn to the right, particularly in the wake of an increasing electoral squeeze from UKIP. This has led to an unprecedented number of rebellions by

Conservative backbenchers (Cowley & Stuart, 2012). Carter and Clements argue, for example, that although the government successfully implemented most of the main environmental initiatives outlined in the Coalition agreement, subsequent splits over 'green levies' and issues such as support for HS2 have very much worked to undermine the party's coherence on its green agenda. As a result it is the Liberal Democrats rather than the Tories, who have taken the credit for much of the environmental agenda. Likewise, Hayton and McEnhill argue that high profile opposition to gay marriage has caused similar embarrassment for the modernisers, whilst to Campbell and Childs the party's fractured approach to gender issues has frustrated the attempts of some Conservative women MPs to take a more liberal feminist approach to promoting both the descriptive and substantive representation of women in the party. Even on the issue of immigration, which Partos and Bale concede is an area in which Cameron has had more success in managing party divisions, there still exist key fractures between those who see mass immigration as having a disruptive impact on national identity and those wedded to a neo-liberal attachment towards the de-regulation of restrictions on labour.

However, it is the issue of Europe which has proved most disruptive to party unity and provided one of the most potent threats to Cameron's broader modernising agenda. As Lynch argues, in opposition Cameron had a reasonable level of success in building on IDS' and Howard's earlier attempts to downplay the salience of the issue and create a relative degree of party unity. This was crucial in helping Cameron to deflect party discourse onto broader modernising themes. However, the emergence of the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone, along with the rising support for UKIP have combined to facilitate the re-emergence of deep divisions, backbench rebellions and, even defections, which have acted to drive the party away from its modernising agenda. Thus, although Lynch argues that there is a relative unity within the party over a Eurosceptic position, the dividing lines between the various shades of Euroscepticism have been deep enough and damaging enough to seriously undermine Cameron's credibility, and with that, we might argue, the broader credibility of his modernising project.

Conclusion: A Missed Opportunity?

In the early part of his leadership, to many observers it appeared that David Cameron was determined to forge a new identity for his party and develop a modernised form of conservatism, which would provide a narrative not only to help the party regain power but also to guide it through the challenges of office that would inevitably arise. In practice however, as explored in the articles in this special issue, Conservative modernisation has proved insubstantial in both ideational and policy terms. Lacking a sufficiently robust and coherent core, it has been unable to provide the weight of ballast required to anchor the party towards the centre-ground, either in the face of pressure from the right of the party, or in the context of choppy economic waters. If anything, the notion of modernised conservatism, along with the existence of the Coalition, has provided a target for those on the party's right-wing (and indeed those beyond it, such as UKIP to persistently attack the Cameron-Clegg government for a lack of neo-liberal radicalism. Given that on many measures the Coalition has been one of the most right-wing governments the UK has seen since 1945, this is a pretty damning indictment of its lack of purchase.

All of this does, however, also beg the broader question of how we should assess David Cameron's leadership of the party to date. As we've suggested above, in many ways the Conservative leader has demonstrated considerable political skill, in co-opting the Liberal Democrats into government, managing inter-party relations, enabling his party to dominate the Coalition's programme, and in gaining the electoral credit for economic recovery. But much of this leadership acumen and successful statecraft has been confined to more traditional policy areas, such as economic management, public sector and welfare reform, immigration and Europe. On the issues that relate more directly to his modernisation strategy, Cameron's leadership has been largely much more inconsistent and generally wanting. In the context of pressures from the right and a changing political and economic context, Cameron's lack of firmer, and more consistent, leadership on the issue of modernisation, has allowed his early agenda to drift wildly, or in most cases, to be abandoned altogether. All of this is to suggest that, Cameron's inability, or indeed lack of political will, to keep his modernisation strategy on track, is revealing not of an absence of political skill, but of the broader deficiencies of his modernisation project in terms of its ideological substance and coherence.

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