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The Theory and Practice of Party Modernisation: The Conservative Party under David Cameron 2005-2015

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Modernisation is a slippery word. Whilst commonly used in political rhetoric it is often unclear exactly what is meant by this term, or how successful modernisation can be discerned. This article examines the theory and practice of Conservative modernisation to cast light on these issues. Exploring recent developments in the Conservative Party in the UK between 2005 and 2015 it is argued that modernisation can occur at different levels. Using the notion of micro, meso and macro level modernisation, it is argued that Conservative modernisation was pursued at the micro and meso level but was derailed by events that altered party strategy. As such this article judges that David Cameron did not successfully modernise his party and, utilising this case, examines the challenges of delivering modernising change.

MODERNISATION; POLITICAL PARTY; CHANGE; CONSERVATIVE PARTY; DAVID CAMERON

In 2005, David Cameron, the new leader of the Conservative Party, promised to promote 'a modern compassionate Conservatism that is right for our times and right for our country' (Cameron 2005). Fated as a modernising candidate during the leadership elections Cameron asserted that the Conservatives had 'lost touch with the country', and that sweeping changes were needed to reconnect the party with modern conditions and attitudes, not just some 'slick re-branding exercise' (Jones, 2010, pp.292-293). The language of modernisation was extensively used in articulating this goal, yet whilst not novel (Finlayson 1998; 2003; Kerr et al 2012; Smith, 1994), it was often unclear exactly what was meant by this term. This made it difficult to state with certainty what Conservative modernisation would look like, what kind of change it would entail, and how success could be determined. Ten years on from Cameron's election as party leader questions around the modernisation agenda still abound, but now the project is widely seen to have been abandoned, failed, or in need of a 'reboot' (Shorthouse and Stagg 2013, p.5). In the words of Robin Harris, a former Director of the Conservative Research Department, Conservative modernisation 'is definitely dead. It is no longer a project: it is a curiosity' (2013). Elsewhere conservative commentators have argued that 'modernisation is at best half done' or that 'it is not so much an incomplete project as one that's barely begun' (Strong and Compassionate; Montgomerie, 2014). In this article the theory and practice of Conservative modernisation is explored, arguing that by understanding the nature of change proposed by Cameron it is possible to comprehend why this project ultimately failed in practice.

In surveying the existing literature on party change and modernisation there is remarkably little clarity or consensus as to precisely what is meant by this term, what successful modernisation looks like, and how modernisation can be achieved. This is largely due to conceptual ambiguity as modernisation is a term used to describe many different types of change both within and beyond the party context. In probing the nature and success of Conservative Party

modernisation it is necessary to dispel this uncertainty by determining how modernisation differs from other forms of party change, and how successful modernisation can be judged. This article grapples with these questions, positing a framework for conceptualisation and study in this area. In so doing it is argued that modernisation can be distinguished from other forms of change by the link made between change and modern conditions. In this way a modernising party diagnoses a disjuncture between their practices and/or ideas and contemporary society, and uses this diagnosis to re-visit and revise their ideology, policies and/or structures. Viewed from this perspective party change alone is not enough, a clear link must be made between modern conditions and change. In applying this conception to the Conservative Party it is argued that Cameron did outline a modernising agenda in 2005, but that this was limited in scope and was implemented with a limited degree of success. Analysing Cameron's modernising programme it is argued that the proposed change did not entail a fundamental shift in ideology but focused on policies and structural issues that were – in large part – abandoned as the political context altered. In exploring the Conservative case this article endeavours to offer empirical insight into Cameron's leadership, but it also considers wider theoretical questions about the nature of modernisation and the challenges that can afflict modernisation strategies.

In structuring this argument the article first examines the meaning of modernisation in greater detail and presents the analytical framework used to study this case. Second, drawing on the above, the article explores the nature of change in the Conservative Party, comparing modernisation in theory and practice to assess the progress made. Finally, the article reflects on the insights to be drawn from this case, considering the nature of modernisation and the challenges of affecting this form of change.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A PARTY TO MODERNISE?

Modernisation is at once a highly familiar and yet ambiguous process that has come to characterise the dynamics of contemporary party politics over recent decades. Across the political spectrum parties and their leaders are seen to engage in a perpetual struggle to reflect modern attitudes, preferences and conditions, advancing modernisation agendas designed to demonstrate their vitality and appeal to modern day voters. Yet, despite the regularity with which the term modernisation appears in political rhetoric, it is not entirely clear what this word means and how successful modernisation can be achieved in practice. When, for example, does modernisation occur, what form of change does it entail, and what causes modernisation projects to go astray? These questions are often difficult to answer.

In part this ambiguity is driven by the diversity of ways in which modernisation is defined and discussed. Often treated as a common sense process, many academics and commentators fail to define what they mean by this term, resulting in subtly different accounts that make it hard to assess. Authors such as Tim Bale (2011) and Andrew Denham and Kieran O'Hara (2007) offer excellent overviews of modernisation in the party context - detailing different phases of Conservative modernisation and characterising key modernising figures - but they often fail to define what is meant by this term, leading to imprecise understanding. This academic uncertainty is compounded by political commentary that sees modernisation as a pragmatic tool. Peter Oborne, for example, depicts modernisation simply as 'a set of techniques for securing and then keeping power' (Oborne, 2011). Modernisation is therefore attributed a range of often subtly different meanings. For Peter Kerr, Christopher Byrne and Emma Foster it has become an 'empty signifier', a term used by parties to 'legitimise a myriad of changes' in

political parties and the state (2012). The sheer number of references to modern life, modern attitudes and the modern environment, as well as the emphasis placed on change by politicians, supports the idea that modernisation has been sapped of any coherent meaning. And yet, in this article it is argued that modernisation is a distinct form of change due to its emphasis on modern conditions.

In conceptualising modernisation this article draws on the work of Mike Kenny and Martin Smith that describes modernisation in the political realm as an attempt 'to bring the political world in line with changes conceived to have occurred in other domains, principally society, economics and culture' (2001, pp.238-9). This description is echoed elsewhere in the work of Alan Finlayson which describes modernisation as a reaction to the 'new, changed, or changing conditions' of the modern environment, 'it denotes a state of always trying to catch-up with ourselves' (2003, p.69). These interventions recognise that it is the process by which actors (in this case within parties) come to perceive their existing ideas and behaviour as out of kilter with modern conditions, and accordingly resolve to respond to that impetus that constitutes modernisation. This indicates that change is an accommodation to long-term shifts such as the evolution of public opinion or the global political context, but modernisation can also be induced by sudden crises that redefine contemporary modern conditions. What is common to these forms of change is the idea that existing ideas and practices require adaptation to reflect conditions that are likely to endure. As such change reflects an accommodation to long-term rather than short-term shifts.

In the party environment this process of re-appraisal should be seen within the context of parties' wider objectives and interests. In seeking to reflect modern attitudes and ideas parties are endeavouring to maximise their support, aggregating the largest number of votes to secure electoral office or thrust a chosen issue onto the political agenda. As such when a party commits to modernisation they are making a strategic calculation that (most commonly) sees a disjuncture between modern conditions and party practices as responsible for poor electoral performance. As such Tony Blair's modernisation project diagnosed a disconnect between Labour Party policy, modern attitudes and societal and economic conditions as responsible for the party's inability to secure victory in 1992. Recognising modernisation to be a strategic accommodation to long-term changes in opinion is key as it exposes the way in which short-term change can disrupt the perceived need for modernisation. To explain this point it is useful to consider an example; a socially liberal party may develop a programme of modernising change in line with the belief that long-term changes have made social attitudes more socially conservative. However, an event may lead the party to believe that their previous diagnosis was wrong, and that there is room for a more socially liberal message. As such the party re-interprets the need for modernisation and abandons (or substantially revises) the previously articulated vision for change. This possibility means that political context is key as modernising change focused on long-term trends can be derailed by short-term concerns motivated by events. As such political stability is often vital for successful modernisation as in such conditions long and short-term considerations can be mediated.

The form of modernising change can differ and it is not possible, or desirable, to identify specific shifts as evidence of modernisation. Rather it is useful to be aware of the different levels at which change can occur. The existing literature on parties and modernisation is exceedingly useful in this regard. Tim Bale (2008), for example, identifies five indicators of party change that

pinpoint shifts in personnel, policy and organisation (Table 1).[1] Tim Heppell discusses the potential to change 'image and substance' (2013, p.262) and, elsewhere, Andrew Denham and Kieran O'Hara highlight three factors: emphasising organisational adjustments, policy shifts and leadership change (2007, p.167). Modernising change can occur at any or all of these levels, but the precise response will depend on leaders' perception of modern condition and diagnosis of the need for change. This makes it necessary to study how political actors articulate their vision for modernisation as it is their diagnosis that offers the benchmarks for success.

Table 1: *Bale's account of Party Change*

Type of Change	*Indicator of Change*
Personnel	Appointing fresh faces unconnected with past 'failure' and revitalising membership
Organizational rationalization and retooling	Equipping marginal seats with the human and financial resources needed to win and getting a grip on party bureaucracy, research and media operations
Policy selection, or at least emphasis	De-emphasizing issues a party traditionally 'owns' and ranging into enemy territory
Explicit distancing from past practice	Pointing out where the party went wrong in the past and how it will make sure it does not make the same mistakes again
The facing down of internal opposition	Containing (and if possible being seen to quash) internal opposition to the above

(Table compiled from Bale (2008, p.273)).

Kerr et al, as seen above, argue that modernisation is often used as an empty signifier to justify any form of change as the term is 'sufficiently vague so as to be able to mean almost anything' (2012, p.23), but it is argued here that different forms of modernisation can occur. In making this assertion this article builds on the work of Peter Dorey which argues that modernisation is composed of 'discrete but logically sequential' processes of change (2007, p.142). In Dorey's account modernisation describes a process where 'declarations pertaining to overall ideological position and orientation filters down into a corresponding stance on broad areas of policy, before narrowing down into specific positions' (Ibid.) – a process depicted in Table 2 (below).

Table 2: *Dorey's account of Modernisation*

Level of Change	*Type of Change*
Macro ⇩	Change to the overall ideological position that the leader adopts and which provides the philosophical or normative framework of policy development
Meso ⇩	Change to general statements of principle or intent *vis-a-vis* key sectors or spheres of policy, such as crime, environment and the family
Micro	Change to concrete policy proposals for specific polices

This indicates a linear process where ideological change is key, but it is possible for a party to simply modernise its organisational structures or its branding as long as the change pursued is

[1] It should be noted that Bale is not explicitly discussing modernisation here, but his description of change can nevertheless be used to highlight levels at which a party engaged in modernisation can change.

motivated by modern conditions. Recognising this possibility raises questions over the depth of modernisation and the extent of change signalled by this term. Here Dorey's classification of micro, meso and macro change is useful as these demarcations indicate the level at which change is taking place. In this manner micro change indicates the most superficial level of change, concerning shifts in policy, personnel or branding. Meso level change refers, as Dorey indicates, to statements of principle, but also to shifts in priorities, and changes in party structures and procedures. Finally, at the macro level changes occur to the ideology of the party, affecting the party's vision of the world and the actions taken. When politicians talk of modernisation they tend to give the impression that they are undertaking macro level change as this can have positive electoral implications, but reform can often be less extensive. This makes it necessary to distinguishing the level at which politicians articulate a vision of modernisation. Party leaders can pursue change at more than one level, but to be successful they must enact the precise form of change proposed, otherwise they risk an expectations gap emerging whereby the public judge a party to have failed to deliver the promised form of change (Dommett and Flinders, 2013; 2014). This not only affects perceptions of success but also has implications for political trust as parties that regularly shift positions are deemed less trustworthy; affecting their electoral appeal.

Within this article it is also argued that the level of modernising change pursued by a party is significant because it signals the extent to which new ideas are embedded within the parties' practices and ethos. Whilst modernisation can be successful at each and every level, a modernisation project is most likely to be affected in practice when it is underpinned by macro level, ideological change accepted by the party.[2] This is because such change constitutes a fundamental shift in the practices of the party that is likely to endure, even as short-term incentives and environmental conditions change. In contrast, micro and meso level change focused on policy, organisational reform and re-branding are liable to being re-appraised and altered (or reversed) in response to short-term impetus. Hence the level at which change is pursued can affect the chance of modernisation being successfully enacted.

Based on this theorisation a two stage study of party modernisation is proposed that examines the way in which parties modernise, and the reasons for success or failure. First, it is argued that analysts must remain cognisant of the idea that modernisation is not simply evident when a party actor uses the term; more fundamental evidence of change is required. 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. These changes can occur at the micro, meso and/or macro level as indicated in Table 3 (below).

Table 3: *The Levels and Indicators of Modernising Change*

Level of Change	*Type of Change*	*Indicator of change*
Macro	Change in ideology	References to new values, beliefs, ideas and concepts consistently depicted as underpinning the party's vision and agenda

[2] Acceptance for ideological change can be both consensual, with party members and representatives supporting the case for change, or it can be secured through strong leadership that neutralises internal dissent.

Meso	Change in principles, priorities, organisational procedure or party structure	References to new policy agendas, new principles (which do not affect the party's entire ideological perspective), and procedural reforms
Micro	Change in policy, personnel or branding	References to specific new policy ideas, new marketing strategies, new personnel

In determining the vision of change offered by politicians analysts can utilise a systematic study of political documents (as done in the analysis which follows). This involves examining political speeches, interviews, policy documents, and manifestos to discern:

a) The rationale for change

b) The significance of modern conditions to explanations of change, and

c) The nature of change proposed

At this latter level the indicators outlined in Table 2 can be used to discern the kind of change proposed, using these variables as a benchmark that can, subsequently, be used to assess the degree of change implemented in practice. Consistency here is key, hence for a party to be seen to have modernised there must be an equivalence between theory and practice, with the diagnosed shifts in modern conditions remaining a consistent drive for party behaviour.

Equipped with this theorisation attention now turns to recent developments within the Conservative Party. The remainder of the article explores the nature of change outlined by Cameron in 2005, considering whether modernisation, as defined above, was in evidence, how this project proceeded between 2005 and 2015, and why it ultimately failed. Mapping change across this period it is argued that although Cameron embarked on a modernisation project this was not delivered in practice. This outcome is traced to the level of change pursed and the onset of events that destabilised the strategic calculations made within, and accepted by, the Conservative Party. It is argued that Conservative modernisation lacked a clear and consistent macro level dimension that diagnosed the need for ideological change in response to modern conditions.[3] Instead modernising change was articulated at the micro and meso level, focused on policy change and new principles linked to specific policy agendas. This strategy is seen to have been affected by events that caused party actors to reappraise their diagnosis of the need for change and ultimately revise and largely abandon the modernisation agenda.

CONSERVATIVE MODERNISATION IN THEORY

In 2005 the Conservative Party was ripe for change. The party had suffered successive election defeats and was experiencing its longest period in opposition since 1832 (Snowdon, 2010, p.xi). Since being ousted by the Labour landslide of 1997 they had failed to make headway, with the party's vote share rising to just 31.7 per cent in 2001 (Green, 2010), a long way short of the 41.9 per cent achieved by Major in 1992. Despite spending a significant amount of money in marginal seats, successive party leaders had not enticed greater support for the Conservatives at general

[3] This judgement does not contradict the idea that ideological change occurred in this period (as attested by Richard Hayton (2012) and Tim Heppell (2013)), it simply argues that ideological shifts were not articulated as part of a vision for modernisation.

elections (Hayton, 2012). Polling conducted in 2004/2005 by Lord Ashcroft revealed that the party faced a fundamental image problem:

> 'the Conservatives were thought less likely than their opponents to care about ordinary people's problems, share the values of voters or deliver what they promised. Majorities in key marginal seats thought the party was out of touch, had failed to learn from its mistakes, cared more about the well-off than have-nots, and did not stand for opportunity for all. And things did not improve with time - voters had a more negative view of the Conservative Party at the end of the campaign than they did at the beginning' (Ashcroft, 2005, p.3).

Against this background Cameron was elected as Conservative Party leader having spent just four years as an MP. His campaign argued for party modernisation and rebranding to promote 'a modern compassionate Conservatism that is right for our times and right for our country' (Cameron, 2005). Cloaking himself in the language of 'change', 'new', 'modern' and 'progressive' (Evans, 2008, p.297; Kerr, Byrne and Foster, 2011), Cameron came to be seen, in Oborne's words, as the 'first outright moderniser to lead the Conservative Party, just as Tony Blair was the first outright moderniser to lead the Labour Party' (2009, p.ix).

The early years of Cameron's leadership were widely seen to exhibit evidence of change (Bale, 2008; 2009; 2011; Dorey, 2007; Evans, 2008; Gamble, 2011, p.174; Green, 2010). In the place of a traditional policy emphasis on issues such as Europe, taxation, immigration and welfare, Cameron drew attention to the environment (see Carter and Clements, this issue), the NHS, flexible working and international aid. He publically illustrated this shift to a more socially liberal outlook through actions such as pledging that a third of all ministers in his cabinet would be female (see Campbell and Childs, this issue), and by travelling to the arctic to demonstrate the party's green credentials. In addition the party was re-branded, with a new logo designed to embody 'solidity, tradition, a commitment to the environment and Britishness' (Evans, 2008, p.294). In reflecting on his actions Cameron, in conversation with Dylan Jones, described his modernisation project as composed of three parts:

> 'You know, the shortage of women candidates, the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, the fact that we were representing mainly rural seats, many in the south of England. We needed to change the Conservative Party, literally to be more reflective of the country we wanted to govern. That was one part of modernization *(sic).* I think another was thinking more deeply. For too long the party had got rather intellectually idle, and so if asked the question about education it was Bring Back Grammar Schools! If asked the question about health it was Bring Back Matron! If asked about policing it was Bring Back the Bobby on the Beat! It was all a bit formulaic, and I think we needed to think more deeply and more widely about problems and I hope we have done that. Also I think there were some consequences of the changes of the 1980s. Britain had become a more open, more tolerant society over issues like race and sexuality and I think the Conservative Party needed to modernize *(sic)* to catch up there as well. And there was also a more literal kind of modernization *(sic)*, with a properly run Central Office

> and press office and better organization *(sic)* all round' (Jones, 2010, p.293).

Cameron can therefore be seen to have embraced modernisation as he tied a programme of change to a diagnosed shift in modern conditions. These shifts were outlined at the meso and micro level, evident in changes to the party's procedures (i.e. organisational reform to make the party more representative of society), priorities (by promoting new social concerns), and policies (such as pledges to legalise gay marriage). For example, in Cameron's speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2006 he stated:

> 'Today, people want different things. The priorities are different. Safer streets. Schools that teach. A better quality of life. Better treatment for carers. That's what people are talking about today. But for too long, we were having a different conversation. Instead of talking about the things that most people care about, we talked about what we cared about most. While parents worried about childcare, getting the kids to school, balancing work and family life - we were banging on about Europe. As they worried about standards in thousands of secondary schools, we obsessed about a handful more grammar schools. As rising expectations demanded a better NHS for everyone, we put our faith in opt-outs for a few. While people wanted, more than anything, stability and low mortgage rates, the first thing we talked about was tax cuts. For years, this country wanted – desperately needed - a sensible centre-right party to sort things out in a sensible way. Well, that's what we are today' (2006b).

Elsewhere Cameron's foreword to *Built to Last*, a statement of the aims and values of the Conservative Party, similarly diagnosed how:

> 'We live in a world that is undergoing far-reaching change. A huge shift is taking place in economic power to the new developing economies of the east, bringing with it unprecedented competition and unimagined opportunity. The threat of climate change is forcing the world to innovate and to co-operate in new ways. The global terrorist threat demands not just new international security effort abroad but new efforts to integrate at home. The endemic poverty of Africa and the spread of killer diseases like HIV/ AIDS are no longer someone else's problems....The old answers are not working well...I am clear about the new direction we must set for Britain' (Conservative Party, 2006, p.2).

These statements placed emphasis on new, modern conditions, and asserted the need for change in reaction to modern attitudes and events. Hence, *Built to Last* outlined the need to 'encourage enterprise', 'fight social injustice, 'meet the great environmental threats of the age, 'provide first-class healthcare, education and housing', 'take a lead in ending global poverty', 'protect the country we love', 'give power to people', and to 'be an open, meritocratic and forward-looking Party' (Conservative Party, 2006, pp.4-11). These concerns were, in many instances, not those traditionally associated with the Conservative Party, indicating a change in the principles,

priorities and policy agenda of the party. What is notable, however, is that these changes were not accompanied by a narrative of macro level, ideological change.

Whilst some scholars have described a programme of ideological change under Cameron's leadership towards a form of more liberal conservatism (Hayton, 2012; Heppel, 2013; McAnulla, 2010) the party's modernisation strategy was not explicated in terms of a new ideology, but rather new policies and, in some areas, new principles. Hence, whilst Cameron asserted the need for the party to move onto the centre ground in his 2006 conference speech, this was articulated in the context of vocal support for traditional Conservative values and ideas. In *Built to Last*, for example, Cameron asserted 'Our aims and values are built to last; they are as relevant now as they have ever been' (Conservative Party, 2006, p.2). Elsewhere Cameron's leadership acceptance speech argued that to provide 'a modern compassionate Conservatism' the Conservative Party needed 'to change in order for people to trust us' (2006a), not alter its ideology. Hence reform, he argued, was needed of 'the way we look', 'the way we feel', 'the way we think' and 'the way we behave', altering 'the scandalous under representation of women in the Conservative party', and stopping 'grumbling about modern Britain' (Ibid.). These changes, whilst signalling reform, were not accompanied by the articulation of a new ideological vision but were instead voiced alongside the conviction that 'We have the right values'. In this way Cameron focused on creating a 'strong Conservative Party' underpinned by traditional values. This message did not, therefore, suggest macro level ideological reform, but rather meso and micro level change that altered the policies, principles and organisational structures seen to be out of kilter with modern conditions. As such Cameron's modernisation agenda appeared to constitute a pragmatic alteration to long-term shifts in contemporary attitudes and practices rather than a far reaching realignment of party aims. This is significant because change at the meso and micro level can be vulnerable to reform if environmental conditions change, rendering Cameron's modernisation project at risk of marginalisation if events – such as those evident after 2007 – prompted a re-evaluation of Conservative strategy.

CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION IN PRACTICE

In practice Cameron's modernisation project failed to live up to the vision presented between 2005 and 2007 as after this period the Conservative Party began to move away from many of the ideas depicted as central to the party's new, modern image (Bale 2008, p.278; 2011, p.351; Garnett 2010: 114). Instead of emphasising the environment, poverty, childcare, flexible working, and injustice, the leadership placed emphasis upon economic concerns such as financial responsibility, enterprise, and deficit reduction. This alteration was stimulated, in part, by the rising electoral fortunes of Gordon Brown in 2007 and 'the election that never was', but in main by the global financial crisis of 2007-8. Whilst some shift in focus was to be expected given the scale of this latter event, it lead not only to declining emphasis on the modernisation agenda but to a renewed focus upon the importance of family, strong immigration policy (see Bale and Partos, this issue), state retrenchment (see Martin, this issue), Europe (see Lynch, this issue), bureaucracy and tax. As Steve Williams and Peter Scott have argued, in this period many aspects of modernisation 'became marginalised, as themes dominant under the Thatcher and Major administrations reasserted themselves' (2011, p.518). In understanding the reasons for this shift the nature of change is seen to be critical. Whilst macro level, ideological change aims to bring about fundamental change in party positions by adapting to long-term shifts in modern society, lower levels of change – of the kind pursued by Cameron – do not alter the party's outlook but

alter parties' message and mode of operation. Such changes are liable to being revised if events affect actors' perception of the electoral need for modernisation.

In this context the global financial crisis that occurred in 2007-8 is seen to have had seismic implications for Cameron's modernising vision as it re-framed the context of British politics and altered perceptions within the Conservative Party of the viability and desirability of different strategies. Hence, whilst prior to 2007-8 the presumption of economic growth led to a concern with social welfare policies and state investment, during and after the banking crisis parties across the political spectrum adapted their messages to new economic conditions, leading the Conservative Party to the marginalise the majority of ideas associated with modernisation and reassert more established conservative concerns. Recognising this process of re-appraisal helps to explain why, when the Conservative Party entered into Coalition with the Liberal Democrats - a partner that was ideologically disposed to support many of the new policies outlined by Cameron between 2005 and 2007 – emphasis was placed not on the new modernisation agenda, but on deficit reduction, financial responsibility and traditional conservative issues. In the foreword to the coalition agreement, for example, Cameron and Nick Clegg asserted:

> 'We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure. We believe that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today; to recognise that we will only make progress if we help people to come together to make life better. In short, it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government. That way, we can build the free, fair and responsible society we want to see' (HM Government, 2010, p.7).

A traditional conservative message of decentralisation, smaller government, personal responsibility and a free and fair society is pre-eminent here. The extent to which traditional Conservative ideas came to dominate was apparent in a series of high profile policy shifts that saw the party not simply move away from the modernising vision, but actively pursue policies and principles divorced from the modern ideas previously identified. In relation to Europe, for example, whilst Cameron lamented in 2006 that the party was 'banging on about Europe', in 2013 he proclaimed:

> 'some people say a lot of things on Europe. You'll never be able to veto an EU treaty. You'll never cut the Budget. And if you did these things - you'd have no allies in Europe. Well we've proved them wrong. I vetoed that treaty. I got Britain out of the EU bail-out scheme. And yes - I cut that budget. And in doing all this, we haven't lost respect - we've won allies to get powers back from Europe. That is what we will do...and at the end of it - yes - we will give the British people their say in a referendum. That is our pledge. It will be your choice: in or out' (2013b).

Elsewhere in regards to health, despite high profile criticism in opposition of NHS '[t]argets imposed from above, endless re-organisation - nine in the last ten years' (Cameron, 2007), Conservative Minister Andrew Landsley initiated a top down process of NHS reorganisation widely criticised by health professionals. Similarly, calls to place less emphasis on immigration around 2005 were followed by policies that implemented a cap on the number of economic

migrants and a high profile publicity campaign, authorised by Home Secretary Teresa May, that urged illegal immigrants to "go home or face arrest". In this way key aspects of the party's modernisation agenda were sidelined or dismissed in their entirety, with emphasis being placed on principles and policies that did not align with previously diagnosed modern conditions. These outcomes signal a reversion at both the micro level in the policies pursued by the party, and at the meso level in terms of the priorities and principles articulated by Cameron, suggesting a strategic shift away from the long-term changes diagnosed pre-2008.

Change was also evident in relation to organisational reform. Whilst when first elected Cameron had placed significant emphasis on the importance of reforming the Conservative Party to make it more representative of the country, in office few advances were made. Progress initially achieved in attaining greater diversity of MPs elected in 2010 following the introduction of the 'A list' (a list of candidates for marginal seats composed of women and ethnic minority candidates) was hindered by the Party's decision to drop the policy in government (Morris, 2012). Cameron also failed to achieve his target of a third of all ministers to be female, with his reshuffle in July 2014 resulting in just five out of twenty two ministers being women (for more see Campbell and Childs, this issue).

These outcomes in part reflected a re-appraisal by party elites who backtracked on previously articulated goals and sanctioned new policy prescriptions. For example, in relation to the environment, despite Cameron's repeated assertions of his party's green credentials in opposition, once in office these were often not demonstrated in practice. In the months after the election, for example Caroline Spellman, Conservative Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, announced plans to sell off parts of the national forest, provoking widespread anger amongst environmental groups. Elsewhere, in his autumn statement in 2011 George Osborne asserted that despite being the chancellor to bring in the green investment bank:

> 'I am worried about the combined impact of the green policies adopted not just in Britain, but also by the European Union … if we burden [British businesses] with endless social and environmental goals – however worthy in their own right – then not only will we not achieve those goals, but the businesses will fail, jobs will be lost, and our country will be poorer' (Osborne, 2011).

In other policy areas changes in the party's modernising agenda appear to have been motivated by internal party dissent with backbenchers, party members and some ministers placing pressure on the party leadership to relinquish modernising objectives in favour of more traditional, conservative ideas. In relation to Europe, for example, the modernising agenda pursued by Cameron – that ostensibly saw less attention paid to the topic - was subject to extensive criticism. Dissent was exemplified in 2011 when nearly half of Cameron's backbenchers defied a three-line whip to vote for a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU (including two private parliamentary secretaries who respectively resigned or were sacked). The scale of the rebellion served as a visible challenge to the modern agenda outlined in 2006, and was used to call for a new policy position. Indeed, following the vote, one rebel commented 'Let's just see if the prime minister can deliver this great opportunity [a referendum] for Britain. If he can't, there will be another motion on Europe that will be trouble for him' (Watt, 2011). This climate of internal dissent preceded a change in policy from Cameron, culminating in his pronouncement in January 2013 that:

> 'I am in favour of a referendum. I believe in confronting this issue - shaping it, leading the debate. Not simply hoping a difficult situation will go away' (Cameron, 2013a).

These examples signal that modernisation requires commitment from the leadership and from within the party, but that these traits were lacking in this case. As Jane Green has illustrated, there 'was a genuine split within the Conservative Parliamentary Party about the strategy the Conservative Party should adopt' (Green, 2010, p.699) manifest in calls from Lord Saatchi for '(genuine) conservatives 'to man the ideological barricades' against those who seek salvation on the centre ground' (Dorey, 2007, p.151). Whilst Cameron was able to secure consensus for change within the party between 2005 and 2007, following the financial crisis and the subsequent failure to secure an outright majority at the 2010 General Election, this consensus began to dissolve, leading the party to drop key modernising pledges.

And yet, the Conservative Party did not abandon the entirety of its modernising vision. In coalition key pledges on gay marriage and international aid were enacted, even in the face of severe internal criticism. Understanding why certain policies remained whilst others were dropped is complex and there is no simple formula for explaining these outcomes. In certain instances modernising policies can become a token of a leaders' political credibility; demonstrating their resilience and leadership in the face of internal criticism. In other cases political conditions beyond the party context may make it expedient to retain certain policies or organisational reforms (for example international pressure from the UN for the Government to enact its commitment to the Millennium Development Goals could have been significant in the decision to enforce the pledge to spend 0.7% of the national income overseas aid by 2013).

What is notable in considering these developments is the significance of the level of change pursued to the success of the modernisation project. Rather than developing a clear ideological vision for change and securing (or enforcing) support for these goals within the party, Cameron formulated an agenda that was liable to challenge and revision, especially as events altered perceptions of modern conditions and viable electoral strategies. For some commentators this behaviour reflects the idea that Cameron 'has always been, more of an incarnation of modernisation than its driving inspiration' (Bale, 2013, p.8), suggesting that he lacked a personal commitment to change and instead adopted a pragmatic approach designed to maximise electoral appeal.

Acknowledging this possibility it is nevertheless interesting to consider that in a period of political stability the Conservative Party may have remained committed to the modernising agenda outlined by Cameron at the outset of his leadership. Events after 2007 allowed the party to redefine their approach, re-emphasising traditional Conservative ideas and practices as the best response to the financial crisis, but this development was by no means inevitable. It is, however, likely to have negative long-term implications for the party – especially as the 2015 General Election approaches. The decision to emphasise short term considerations over long term attitudinal changes arguably contributed to the party's failure to secure an outright electoral victory in 2010 as its message did not change to reflect the attitudes of key demographic groups. As the Conservatives attempt to win a majority for the next Parliament the legacy of this decision is likely to be felt as a gap remains between the party's policies and practices and the attitudes of those voters. Moreover, the party's chances of securing further

support have been damaged as voters are less likely to believe future pledges of change because of the party's recent failure to modernise.

CONCLUSION

In passing judgement on the nature of Conservative modernisation this article has argued that Cameron's modernisation project was limited in scope and not executed in practice. Whilst a modernisation programme was outlined between 2005 and 2007 that emphasised issues such as flexible working, climate change and female representation, after 2007 many of these concerns were marginalised, replaced or dropped. This outcome stemmed in part from the kind of change pursued by Cameron. In seeking to modernise Cameron articulated a vision of micro and meso level change that adapted Conservative policies, principles and party procedures to reflect modern attitudes. This was not underpinned by a new ideological agenda that was capable of embedding change. This approach proved problematic in the light of events as both the financial crisis of 2007-8 and the outcome of the 2010 General Election placed new, short-term concerns at the forefront of Conservative calculations. As such traditional Conservative positions re-emerged and came to characterise the party's agenda, with only a few symbolic modernising policies such as gay marriage and ring fenced spending on international aid remaining. In this way the failure of Conservative modernisation can be understood as a product of both the level of change pursued and of events in the period examined.

The conception of modernisation advanced within this article therefore helps to cast empirical light on events within the Conservative Party, but it also offers insights more generally on the nature of modernisation. Whilst modernisation is often implicitly seen to involve a process of ideological change this article has argued that modernisation can occur at different levels, resulting in different forms of change. As such a modernising party can re-brand, change its policies, alter its priorities, re-work its structures and adapt its ideology, with these processes either conducted simultaneously or in isolation. What is significant about these forms of change is that whilst some are cosmetic and can easily be reversed, others indicate a more fundamental shift that revises the vision offered by the party. In seeking to maximise political appeal parties are keen to give the impression of fundamental change but in practice events and internal dissent make such shifts difficult to secure.

In advancing this argument the article has also revealed that modernisation is by no means simple to achieve. Whilst it is easy for politicians to deploy the language of modernisation and offer visions of change, delivering these shifts in practice requires significant skill. Not only must a leader develop a vision for change, they must also secure consensus for change within their own party, and consistently articulate and enact their prescription to achieve success. Such achievements would be challenging in a period of political stability, but the above analysis has demonstrated the additional difficulties that emerge when unforeseen events arise and redefine the political landscape. Negotiating the tension between long and short-term trends, and considering their implications for a party's strategic fortunes is therefore key to modernisation, and can often cause politicians to renege on modernising pledges and pursue alternative policies and practices. Such challenges indicate the need for politicians to exercise caution in deploying the language of modernisation, as whilst promises of change can deliver electoral benefits, the majority of modernisation projects can expect to be implemented in a turbulent political environment in which securing change is exceedingly difficult.

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