Conservative Party Ideology in the Age of Brexit

Matt Beech[1]

Introduction

In the period from the Conservative Party's general election victory on the 7th May 2015 until the passing of the Johnson Government's European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act which received Royal Assent on the 23rd January 2020, British politics was preoccupied initially (until the 23 June 2016) by the question of whether the United Kingdom (UK) should remain or leave the European Union (EU), and then latterly by the questions of the precise terms upon which it should withdraw, and the exact nature of its future relationship with the EU27. The Conservative Party was sharply affected, disrupted and once again riven by the subject of Europe. Brexit was, and is, a decentring phenomenon for the British state, for the Government in office, for the Conservative Party and for its executives (Beech, 2020; 2022). This chapter argues that in spite of a series of debilitating crises which led to unprecedented constitutional tumult - including Prime Ministerial resignations, minority governments, Cabinet splits, parliamentary gridlock and the emergence of new parties - the Conservative Party demonstrated its ideational breadth. Unlike its great rival - the Labour Party - which embarked upon the narrowing of traditions (Beech, 2021), the Conservative Party, under immense pressure from internal struggle and disputation, proved to be sufficiently pliable. Or, to put it another way, the Conservatives remained a broad church.

The subject of Europe, and more specifically of the UK's place within the post-war project of European integration, has been the most problematic question for the Conservative Party. It is perhaps analogous to the Labour Party's dilemmas over the defence of the realm and foreign affairs, inasmuch as the quantity and quality of perspectives within the party make it a multi-

layered problem. The vigour with which beliefs are held, and the mutual exclusivity of traditions of thought about the European project, result in internecine struggle and reputational harm for the Conservative Party (Dorey, 2017). Hindsight is a most useful tool and yet when retracing earlier footsteps, it can play tricks with the mind and with analysis. By this I mean that the competing visions of the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union were not co-equal when David Cameron emerged as the victor in the 2015 general election. In fact, the various perspectives which can be explained and understood as Eurosceptic were a minority view in the Parliamentary Conservative Party. The position of Cameron, and the mainstay of his supporters in Parliament, did not desire to sever the British state from the federal polity and the cosmopolitan project of the European Union. On the other hand, Eurosceptic, small 'c' conservatives motivated by love of nation, including its history, institutions, traditions and culture were eminently recognisable across the country, especially in the shire counties of England. In the minds of millions of Conservative voters and a significant swathe of socially conservative Labour-inclined voters, a Eurosceptic mood had risen to the surface of British politics (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). This mood was driven by the negative externalities of cosmopolitan policy including mass low-skill and no skill immigration, the diminution of the sovereignty of Parliament, the influence of a superintending foreign court, exorbitant subscription fees with little corresponding value for money, and the steady erosion of national identity.

Whilst it is common knowledge that Leave voters are more socially conservative than Remain voters, one of the most penetrating observations from the data on socio-cultural values and viewpoints of voters, is that erstwhile Labour supporters who voted Conservative in 2019 are more socially conservative than any other bloc of voters (Bale et al, 2020: 12-13). This is evidence that small 'c' conservatives, in significant numbers until recently, supported both great parties of state. Lord Ashcroft's research found that Leave voters came from a variety of

party affiliations and comprised 37% of electors who had voted Labour, 58% electors who had voted Conservative, 96% of electors who voted for the staunch eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party of Nigel Farage and, somewhat counterintuitively, 30% who had supported the Euro-enthusiast Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg in the 2015 general election the year before (Ashcroft, 2016).

This chapter asserts that the *Age of Brexit* was one of sharp ideological conflict in the Conservative Party and yet, despite such tumult, the Conservative Party demonstrated its ideological breadth by surviving schism and thriving electorally, by winning a third successive UK general election in 2019 with an increased majority. I argue that the Conservative Party is a broad church, containing a plurality of intellectual traditions and that its success is largely due to a particular approach to statecraft (Bulpitt, 1986) also understood as an overarching commitment to political realism. The post-war Conservative Party's plurality of traditions, which has enabled it to evolve as a broad church and to thrive electorally, are contrasted with the relative narrowness of those of the second great party of state, the Labour Party. However, the chapter concludes that, whilst the Conservative Party has survived the tumult of the *Age of Brexit*, the political, economic and social aftershocks, so to speak, have not abated.

Conservative Intellectual Traditions in the Age of Brexit

In the period this volume is studying the Conservative Party continued to be a political home for a plurality of intellectual traditions. This aspect of the character of the Conservative Party is well-documented in studies of its thought and practice in the post-war era (Gamble, 1974; Gilmour, 1978; Norton and Aughey, 1981; Letwin, 1992; Hickson, 2005; Garnett and Hickson, 2009). The purpose here is not to present a typology, nor refer to every ginger group, faction, dining club or internal publication, for that is clearly beyond the scope of an essay. What can

be said is that in different seasons in the post-war history of the Conservative Party, up to and including the period we are discussing, there have been identifiable conservative, libertarian, liberal, and progressive/One Nation traditions of thought. This loose ideological quadrumvirate has been seen in the Conservative Party in Parliament on attitudes to economic, European, constitutional, social, foreign policy questions. These traditions are diverse and, from time to time, sharply conflict and collide on matters of party policy. Examples would include, but are not limited to, Peter Thorneycroft and his Treasury team's resignation from the Macmillan Government over what they believed to be unsustainable public expenditure commitments in 1958 (Cooper, 2011); the 23 Conservatives who voted against the Major Government's Maastricht Bill in 1993 (Cowley and Norton, 1999); the rebellion of 91 Conservative MPs over the Conservative-Liberal Coalition's plans to reform the House of Lords in 2012 (Cole, 2012); the 134 Conservative MPs who voted against the Cameron-led government's gay marriage legislation the year after (Gilbert, 2014); and the 25 Conservative MPs who rebelled against the Johnson Government's policy to reduce the proportion of international aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of Gross National Income in 2021 (Parkinson, 2021). Nonetheless, the adhesive which binds such competing intellectual traditions is a common philosophical adversary namely, socialism, and most often utilised in the Parliamentary crucible through the ideas, beliefs, and aspirations of Labour Party politicians.

Cameron and the Cameronites appeared secure as the results of the 2015 general election were announced (see Fear in this volume). After governing for five years in concert with Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats, the Conservative Party secured its first majority in the House of Commons, albeit a modest 12 seats. This was the Conservative Party's first majority government since John Major led them to a fourth consecutive general election victory with a majority of 21 seats in 1992. As Leader of the Opposition from 2005 and chiefly as Prime Minister from 2010, in a political marriage of shared ideological purpose with Clegg's wing of

the Liberal Democrats - the Orange Book liberals (Marshall and Laws, 2004) - Cameron's intellectual tradition is best understood as liberal (Beech, 2011). By 2015, this liberal intellectual tradition within the Conservative Party in Parliament was the most influential. As Cameron had undertaken social liberal reform and austerity measures there was sufficient evidence of a form of politics that was more liberal than conservative (Beech, 2015). With regards to the other ideological traditions with the Conservative Party in 2015, a meaningfully conservative intellectual tradition within Parliament was represented by the Cornerstone Group of MPs under the leadership of Sir Edward Leigh and Sir John Hayes. The progressive or One-Nation intellectual tradition was most clearly seen in the thought and speeches of Damian Green and Sir Alan Duncan, whilst the libertarian intellectual tradition was embodied in the ideas, arguments and voting behaviour of Steve Baker. The fact that the 2015 Parliament comprised a Conservative Party in which a plurality of intellectual traditions was apparent, despite the dominance of the Cameronite liberal wing, bears witness to the argument that the Conservative Party was a broad church at the beginning of the *Age of Brexit*, with Eurosceptics and Euro-enthusiasts, the pagans and the pious, the statists and Hayekians, and the many dispositions in between.

Cameron's government legislated for the in-out referendum in the *European Union Referendum Act* (2015) and confidence continued from the commencement of the campaign on 15th April 2016 until polling day, on 23rd June. What followed rocked the surety of the Conservative leadership and party elites (see Crawford in this volume). On the morning of 24th June, the nation awoke to the shock result that a majority of citizens, 52% to 48% had voted to Leave the European Union (see Miles in this volume). Cameron dutifully resigned and the *Age of Brexit* claimed its first prime ministerial career. On 11th July Theresa May won the Conservative Leadership election and the party replaced one Remainer with another. May described herself, as do many, as a One Nation Conservative, but this can't fully be evinced

from her record. She drew upon a plurality of traditions during periods of her ministerial career, moving more towards the liberal intellectual tradition as her tenure progressed.

May tenure experienced the full decentering effects of Brexit, from a legal challenge over the Government's right to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to the loss of her parliamentary majority at the 2017 general election (see Fear in this volume) which necessitated the confidence and supply deal with the Eurosceptic, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (see McGrattan in this volume) parliamentary gridlock, constitutional crises and the Speaker of the House emerging as an intentional political actor (see Norton in this volume). At root the problem was that Parliament had a Remain majority split between those for whom a second referendum was essential and others who desired some form of customs union, and/or continued membership of the single market, and/or connection with the formal legal structures of the European Union. For Leavers, May's tenure promised much - 'Brexit means Brexit' and 'No deal is better than a bad deal' - but did not deliver. This verdict was held by staunch Eurosceptic Conservative members of the European Research Group (ERG) who interpreted May's actions as nothing short of duplicitous. The ERG consistently voted against her negotiated deal with the European Union and challenged her leadership in a vote of no confidence in 2018. Eventually, after multiple failures to garner sufficient support in Parliament, even trying to work with Her Majesty's Opposition and offering a second referendum, May announced her resignation on 24th May 2019. The *Age of Brexit* claimed its second prime ministerial career.

In the ensuing Conservative Party leadership election, the Brexiteer, Boris Johnson defeated the Remainer, Jeremy Hunt, on 23rd July 2019. After withdrawing the whip from 21 pro-EU rebel MPs who supported the Benn Act, but then restoring it to 10 of them, and suffering defections to the Liberal Democrats, Johnson lost the technical majority that the confidence and supply deal with the DUP had provided. Soon after the controversial proroguing of

Parliament further heightened the internecine conflict within the Conservative Party along the Leave/Remain axis. Johnson's goal was to make the case to Parliament that constitutional gridlock could only be resolved with a mandate from the electorate at a general election. Once the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was satisfied that a no-deal Brexit had been removed, the Labour Party agreed to a December 2019 general election (see Fear in this volume).

A Plurality of Traditions Within a Broad Church

British political parties have, when exposed to extreme tumult and ideological conflict, risked schism. In the nineteenth century the Conservative Party experienced an historic schism in 1846 when the Peelites split to work with the Whigs and Radicals (eventually forming the Liberal Party in 1859) over the issue of the repeal of the Corn Laws. During the interwar period, one recalls the schism the Liberal Party had in 1931 when the Simonites split to form the National Liberals over the question of supporting the minority Labour Government. And most recently the schism the Labour Party had in 1981 when the Gang of Four split to form the Social Democratic Party over the socialist policy platform of Michael Foot and the influence of Tony Benn's New Left. All major parties have experienced some of their Members of Parliament crossing the floor of the House to join their opponents. Labour MPs have joined the Conservative Party (e.g. Woodrow Wyatt) and Conservatives have joined the Labour Party (e.g. John Bercow). Change UK, also known as The Independent Group for Change, was an example of a short-lived, minor party, formed by a handful of European Union- enthusiast parliamentarians who resigned the whip, from both great parties of state, in the aftermath of the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union and the ensuing parliamentary gridlock. Other members of political parties - not in Parliament - have resigned and joined emergent political parties, and by so doing, have shaped British politics. A strong example of

this is Nigel Farage resigning his membership of the Conservative Party and joining the fledgling United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Without UKIP under Farage, there would have been no Brexit.

Considering the tumult of the *Age of Brexit*, in large measure authored and reauthored by Conservative politicians, an apprehending question to pose is, why does the Conservative Party retain its effectiveness? Effectiveness here is used simply as an expression of consistent vote-winning. In the three general elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019, the Conservative Party triumphed and in the election before our period of study in 2010, it was the largest party in Parliament and the lead partner in the first post-war coalition government. So why do sufficient numbers of electors, across diverse socio-cultural communities, continue to lend their support to the party responsible for much of the polarisation and constitutional commotion of recent years? One interpretation builds upon the work of political scientist Jim Bulpitt around the idea of statecraft. In the conclusion of his famous article on Thatcher's first term statecraft, Bulpitt argued the following:

> The art of statecraft is to understand and work with the limitations placed on elite activity by the many changing structural constraints arising from within and without the polity. A distinguishing feature of the Conservative Party since the late 19th century is that, for most of the time, it has taken greater cognizance of these constraints than its opponents (Bulpitt, 1986: 39).

Following Bulpitt, the Conservative Party appears to possess a general facility or, a disposition, which pertains to 'the art of statecraft'. Crucially this disposition towards statecraft directly relates to its primary opponent, the Labour Party. The historical record of the post-war era bears the following data: between 1945-2019 the Labour Party won nine out of twenty-one general elections. At first glance this may convey the sense of a reasonably even series of electoral

contests but, on closer scrutiny, the nine victories were achieved by three Labour leaders and yielded a total of 30 years in office: 1945 and 1950 (Clement Attlee), 1964, 1970, February 1974, October 1974 (Harold Wilson), and 1997, 2001 and 2005 (Tony Blair). At times the Labour Party has proved to be a formidable opponent of the Conservative Party. When it has successfully constructed a social coalition, or put another way, when it has held together a plurality of intellectual traditions (e.g. social democratic, democratic socialist and small 'c' conservative) it has prevailed, but more often than not, it has come second to the Conservative Party. Statecraft properly understood poses a dilemma for a party of idealism and reform such as the Labour Party. The dilemma can be noted throughout the post-war period between its left-wing or socialist traditions, both Old Left and New Left and its right-wing or progressive traditions, both Old Right and New Labour (Beech, Hickson and Plant, 2018).

There is explanatory value in Bulpitt's theory of Conservative Party statecraft and in the post-war era, one could maintain that this statecraft approach was the special quality that the party acquired. It can also be understood as a type of political realism. This realism is concerned to keep the necessity of policy pragmatism connected to the changing interests of the electorate, especially those electors dubbed 'floating voters' residing in marginal constituencies. This political realism has as its overarching objective the defeat of the Labour Party at each election and, by so doing, prevent an agenda of socialism being implemented. Such an ideological agenda, whether in a full-blooded form as proffered by Corbyn's platform in 2019 or in a moderated fashion as typified by Ed Miliband's platform in 2015, acts as an essential political coagulant for the plurality of intellectual traditions housed within the Conservative Party. Within this type of political realism there is agency and structural considerations. The political and social environment is fluid and, as such, the Conservative Party's electoral tactics in any given electoral contest are dynamic. What remains concrete is the strategy of political realism, namely to stymying the appeal of the second great party of state.

What is contended here is that the post-war Conservative Party survives and thrives because it has evolved into a broad church. Broad, not in the nineteenth century Anglican sense which denotes a latitudinarianism. But broad, rather in an institutional sense, such as a church with a variety of traditions and dispositions which practices toleration between factions. This breadth is a strength and is as much as result of the attitude of individual political actors as it is a product of the electoral system. I emphasise the ideological breadth of the Conservative Party to underscore the explanatory argument of its statecraft or political realism which has, over many decades led to numerous electoral successes and, therefore, its predominance in forming administrations ahead of its chief rival and opponent.

The Labour Party's experience of the *Age of Brexit* led to what I have called 'the narrowing of traditions' (Beech, 2021). By this I refer specifically to the narrowing of acceptable intellectual traditions regarding the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union. During the 2016 referendum, and in the years of tumult and constitutional crises that followed, and especially during the 2019 general election campaign, the Labour Party marginalised and barracked its own members who held a contrary view to its cosmopolitan Euro-enthusiasm. Whether the target was Labour parliamentarians, local councillors or local party members in constituencies across the country, in person or online, the intellectual tradition of Labour Euro-enthusiasm demonstrated its intolerance of the Labour Leave campaign headed by John Mills and, in particular, of Labour politicians such as Gisela Stuart, the Chair of the Vote Leave campaign. This narrowing of acceptable intellectual traditions is peculiar for a number of reasons. First, Labour was the original Eurosceptic party (Hickson and Miles, 2018). Second, in the *Age of Brexit*, Labour was led by Corbyn, a long-standing critic of the European Union and the United Kingdom's membership. Third, 37% of electors who voted for the Labour Party in the 2015 general election, voted Leave in the 2016 referendum (Ashcroft, 2016). And yet, in the post-referendum period, the hostility to centre-left Euroscepticism increased. The

consequence of the Labour Party's intellectual homogeneity on the question of the United Kingdom's place in European Union was most clearly revealed by losing dozens of Red Wall seats to the Conservative Party in the 2019 general election. These communities possessed solid Leave voting majorities and when faced with a Labour manifesto commitment to hold a second referendum, and the prospect of a radical socialist as Prime Minister, the cross-pressures involved led thousands of erstwhile Labour voters to choose the party led by Johnson, on the promise to 'Get Brexit Done'.

It should be noted that it is not merely on the question of the United Kingdom's place in European Union that the Labour Party demonstrates its sectarian character, but also on a wider set of questions pertaining to socio-culture. From gay marriage to abortion, to transgenderism and the Black Lives Matter movement, the Labour Party has eschewed its former broad-church disposition. Questions of political economy and foreign and defence policy continue to separate the Labour Left from the Labour Right - as they have done throughout the post-war era - but not matters of socio-culture (Beech, 2018). On this there is unity, or put another differently, uniformity. Intellectual traditions of small 'c' conservatism, which helped to birth the Labour movement, emanated from historic, working-class communities embedded within the religious and moral fabric of Protestant non-conformity and Roman Catholicism have been largely erased from the party's institutional memory. Even *Christians on the Left* is indistinguishable. Barely anything discernibly Christian remains[2]. To parse the famous dictum of the British Labour movement, the contemporary Labour Party owes more to Marx, or more accurately to the cultural turn in Western Marxism, than it does to Methodism[3]. The Labour Party has evolved into a cosmopolitan, social justice, Euro-enthusiast organisation. It is inclusive and welcoming to all who can make such a religious confession and excludes those with a heterodox perspective. As a Unionist organisation, it has little to say in response to the Scottish National Party - the dominant progressive force in Scotland - whose added weapons of

nationalism, anti-Englishness and threats of independence referendums, continue to strengthen its arm North of the border. The result is that the Labour Party is authoring and re-authoring its intellectual traditions on deeper, yet narrower, moral and intellectual territory.

Conclusion

The Conservatives managed to win the 2019 general election despite the tribulations over Brexit and the disputatiousness within the Parliamentary Party in the 2015-2017 and the 2017-2019 parliaments. A third consecutive election victory was delivered, and one headed by its third chief executive in three years. This momentous period in British political life could have witnessed the complete unravelling of the Conservative Party, so riven was it by barbed conflict over exiting the European Union. In 2017, Corbyn's Labour Party posed a robust electoral challenge, but by 2019, with a change in Conservative leadership, and a genuine desire to extricate the United Kingdom from the federal polity of the European Union, Corbyn and the Labour Party's offering was much diminished.

In this chaotic period for the Conservatives, one could identify a plurality of intellectual traditions long-held within the party, and recall them aired, time and again, in the course of ideological exchange and argumentation. Questions were raised and debated about nationalism and cosmopolitanism, free trade and protectionism, controlled immigration from the Continent and free movement of people, the nature and authority of regulatory frameworks, the dilemma over the Northern Irish border and, last but not least, the financial cost of quitting the club. Although the Conservative Party as a broad-church, comprised of a plurality of intellectual traditions has succeeded in weathering the violent storms of the *Age of Brexit*, the aftershocks have not abated. It does not follow that the Conservative Party will maintain its position or retain its statecraft and approach of political realism. Politics, like traditions of thought, evolve.

It is important to note that the act of recovering the British nation-state, after over four decades of ever-closer political integration, required a fundamental divestment of resources, law and practices. In this sense, the Leave campaigns were radical projects rather than conservative projects and, to some extent, rubbed against the traditions of conservatism. The counterpoint to this interpretation is that recovering the British nation-state - in a meaningful sense - required the return to what Noel O'Sullivan terms a limited style of politics:

> By a limited style of politics is meant one which has as its primary aim the preservation of the distinction between private and the public life (or between the state and society) which emerged in Europe at the end of the medieval period. It is this distinction that moderate conservatives have believed to be increasingly threatened by the ideal of radical change – an ideal which has meant in practice the constant extension of state power into every sphere of life, in the name of equality, social justice and welfare (O'Sullivan, 1976:12).

In other words, the radical change was the 1972 European Communities Act. This piece of legislation set the United Kingdom on a path to European integration and that which evolved was a set of supranational institutions that subordinated the sovereignty, and therefore, much of the law and policy of the United Kingdom, as a meaningfully independent nation-state. The project of recovering the United Kingdom is not finished. Whilst recovery for conservatives can never be a mere desire to reverse, it does include the impulse to re-found politics on the essential institutions that have been the nation-state's inheritance. It is because the task of each generation is to find the wisdom to manage change, that Russell Kirk's statement resounds:

> Society must alter, for slow change is the means of its conservation, like the human body's perpetual renewal; but Providence is the proper instrument for change, and the

> test of a statesman is his cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces
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> (Kirk, 1953:8)

This generation has been granted the Providential opportunity to re-found politics on British intellectual territory with a mandate that points both to the land of home and to the sea. By home one means British institutions, practices and English common law and by sea, one means trade, markets and new partnerships. This project of re-founding or recovery has no easy parallel. It does not do to speak of events in British history such as the post-war recovery (too great) or post-recession recoveries (too meagre). The re-founding of politics in the *Age of Brexit*, has no analogy. And yet, by its very nature, it is a recovery of the centuries-old traditions of liberty, sovereignty and legitimacy of the British nation-state and, by popular demand, a re-founding of the will of the majority of the British people.

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[1] Versions of this essay were given as presentations at the *Anglo-American Politics in Transition: After Brexit and Trump* online workshop organised by the American Political Science Association British Politics Group on 8 December 2021 and at *The Post-Liberal Turn and the Future of British Conservatism* workshop organised by the University of Public Service, Ludovika and the Danube Institute in Budapest on 19 March 2022. I am grateful to colleagues at both meetings for their questions and comments. Any errors are, of course, my own.

[2] For a history of the role of Christian intellectual traditions on socialist thought and the formation of the Labour Party, up to the end of the Second World War see, A.A.J. Williams (2022) *Christian Socialism as Political Ideology: The Formation of the British Christian Left, 1877-1945* (London, Bloomsbury Academic).

[3] For more on Cultural Marxism see, D. Dworkin (1997) *Cultural Marxism in Post-War Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).