

Introduction: British Politics and the Future of Conservatism

The American conservative thinker Russell Kirk wrote, in January 1955, in an article called *The Dissolution of Liberalism* that “[t]he liberal imagination has run out; the liberal myth, feeble in its beginnings, is now exhausted; and what is best in our society will have to be saved [...] by the advocates of some older and more stalwart system of thought”.¹ Indeed, it seems that our culture, in the West, is going through such an epochal shift. Perhaps, the exhausted lingering of liberalism as the hegemonic philosophy is over. Liberalism has been the dominant economic political philosophy of the right since 1979 and the governing social philosophy of the left since the 1960s across the West. Enthroned in Western Conservatism after the election of Mrs Thatcher (1979) in the UK and Ronald Reagan (1980) in the United States. Its economic ascendancy has only seriously been challenged after the financial crisis in 2008 and socially only after the great immigration crisis that in different ways affected Europe (Bataclan Massacre and Merkel opening Germany’s borders 2015), the UK (Brexit Referendum 2016) and America (election of Donald Trump 2016). The two crises of liberalism economic and social conjoined to produce, politically at least, a rejection of liberalism in numerous Western nations as the appropriate governing philosophy for the country.

In this introduction we focus on British Conservatism in the light of the aforementioned shifts noted above. Why? Because the collection itself is cast between those who would repudiate liberalism in its entirety and expunge its current foundational status from Conservatism and those who wish to retain or in some manner recover the presence of liberalism on the right. As such the current travails of British Conservatism serves as an ideal fulcrum point to chart

¹ See PANICHAS 2007: 23.

the path of a post-liberal Conservative ideation and what it may or may not include. In the light of this the essays herein refer to developments in Europe and the United States but for this volume our governing and organising focus is on British Conservatism and its possible and desirable futures and from this we read outwards to the rest of Europe and America.

As indicated above, the conservative moral imagination and the content of conservatism is being seriously questioned from numerous perspectives. Perhaps, this is for the first time since Margaret Thatcher became the leader of the Conservative Party on Tuesday the 11th of February 1975. Indeed, the role of the state, public religion, the nation-state, free markets, the very metaphysics of Conservatism, the place of individualism, conservatism's relationship with liberalism, and family policy are all being debated at an intensity and level not seen since the 1970s. Within the British Conservative Party, MP groupings such as the New Conservatives articulate a fully formed post-liberalism, where they increasingly ally with the social conservatism of the CommonSense Group and of course the 1980's vision retains its attraction with for example Liz Truss' new Popular-Conservatism grouping with its atavistic but powerful appeal to a renewed Thatcherite settlement. Similar debates echo within the Republican Party in America where Trump is the primary scission, and a new economic and social nationalism has taken hold – leaving Reaganite Conservatives confused and increasingly isolated on the right.

Yet, the British public, and especially Conservative voters, are predominantly post-liberal conservatives.

The Conservatives, under Boris Johnson's leadership, won a landslide victory with 43.6% of the vote, which resulted in an 80-seat majority at the 2019 general election. The Conservatives at this election won many of Labour's traditional workingclass constituencies in the Midlands and the North of England and North Wales. Thus, significantly refiguring the Conservatives' geographical and class base.² Johnson's electoral coalition was fundamentally different from the one that got the Conservatives, under David Cameron's leadership, over

² See TONGE et al. 2020: 1–6.

the line just a few years earlier. The supporter base in 2019 was “older, more working class, more socially conservative, less ethnically diverse and more supportive of redistributive measures”,³ than the 2015 electorate that backed the Conservatives under Cameron. Relatedly, Brexit and pre-Brexit, there has been dealignment and realignment⁴ owing in part to an increase in the salience of “socio-cultural” questions, which have been amplified due to the rise of “woke” activism. As well as the increase in the import of “socio-cultural” debates, there has been a process of partisan class dealignment. David Denver, writing in 1994, suggested that “[l]arge sections of the electorate could stop identifying with one party and start to identify with another; some social group as a whole might switch its party allegiance”⁵ and this has largely been the case with working class voters, switching their vote to the Conservative Party. In short, the aforementioned shift or realignment could and should have been a great opportunity for the Conservatives to reimagine or to reshape their intellectual traditions recovering principles that have been underutilised or marginalised in the past. Such a task, of course, was always going to be difficult to achieve due to the tensions and competing tendencies within the Conservative Party and the largely liberal make up of its MPs.⁶ The latter matters because Brexit which reshaped the electoral foundation of Conservatism was largely a movement led by libertarians but voted for by communitarians. And the offer of Conservatism to its voters after the 2019 electoral victory was in economic terms wholly inadequate given the structural disadvantages they faced, levelling up being more a use of Johnsonian rhetoric than any genuine industrial or economic transformation. Moreover, Boris Johnson remained a social liberal and simply ignored the war that the progressives were making on the values and settled norms of ‘ordinary folk’. Needless to say, the horrendous rise in migration from the rest of the world that followed on from the reduction in EU citizens coming to the UK made a mockery of Brexit and all that these

³ CUTTS et al. 2020: 22.

⁴ See EVANS–NORRIS 1999; NARDULLI 1995: 10–22.

⁵ DENVER 1994: 53.

⁶ PITT 2021: 267–291.

voters had hoped for. But in point of fact the MPs in the Parliamentary Party after 2019 were wholly unsuited to the mandate that they had been given. Those who were elected before this shift in voting allegiance remained in terms of values, southern market or social liberals, they were never going to understand what the abandoned or ignored needed from Conservatism. Similarly, many, but not all, newly elected Tory MPs in 2019 were often the last Thatcherites left standing in the local party. And again, opening up northern economies to global competition was never going to raise the living standards of the poorly skilled or renew their areas or lives. The misalignment of Tory MPs and their electorate is not remarked on enough, but it is the weight of Parliamentary opinion that also guides policy and Government direction. These tensions are noteworthy as according to Rose “the realignment of policy groups within and across party lines has been as significant, if not more significant, than shifts in government caused by general elections”.⁷ Competing “attitudinal clusters”⁸ within the party matter a great deal and in terms of MPs there were and are still not enough who understand the new 2019 coalition and what it needed to mean in terms of policy and practice.

Christopher Fear writes that “conservative theory and conservative practice are different things and are discussed differently. But they are not separable things; in reality, they continuously modify and delimit each other.”⁹ T. S. Eliot, in his *The Literature of Politics*, wrote of two discernible and distinct approaches to the development of political thinking. At the beginning there is “a body of doctrine” or “a canonical work” and a group of “devoted people can set out to disseminate and popularise this doctrine through their emotional appeal to the interested and the disinterested”. After this, according to Eliot, a political party will “endeavour to realize a programme based on the doctrine”. Therefore, even before being in a position to govern a country, the “mechanical” political thinkers “have envisaged some final state of society of which their doctrines give the outline”. The consequence is that “[t]he theory has altogether preceded

⁷ ROSE 1964: 36.

⁸ WEBB 1997: 89–110.

⁹ FEAR 2020: 197–211.

the practice". This approach to political thinking and to governance has been rejected by conservatives. The reason for this being they embrace the "organic" approach to political thinking. To explicate let us turn to Eliot again. He wrote that when a "political party may find that it has had a history, before it is fully aware of or agreed upon its own permanent tenets; it may have arrived at its actual formation through a succession of metamorphoses and adaptations, during which some issues have been superannuated and new issues have arisen". He then also notes that what "its fundamental tenets are, will probably be found only by careful examination of what its more thoughtful and philosophical minds have said on its behalf" and that "only accurate historical knowledge and judicious analysis will be able to discriminate between the permanent and transitory".¹⁰ Yet even this discernment assumes too much continuity between past and present for it excludes from consideration what happened. That Conservatism in Britain in the 1960s atrophied and was in essence replaced in the 1970s by a supremacist Whig ideology that privileged individual freedom above duty, obligation and in a refrain Eliot might have endorsed: the hegemony of the good. A longer study is required to chart the eclipse and loss of post-war Conservatism to Liberalism in the British Conservative party but for now it suffices to name that this indeed is what happened, and the full consequence is yet to be fully experienced (an electoral defeat worse than that of 1997) and that any putative or envisaged recovery is even further off.

At the time of writing (Spring 2024) the current British political climate in Conservatism is characterised by four key factors:

1. The Failure of the Liberal Conservative/Thatcherite Political Economy. Growth has been stagnant since the 2008 financial crisis, productivity and investment have never recovered and the failure of all the above has pushed the state to the edge of collapse and hugely increased public expenditure and taxation to compensate. The economic legacy of Liberal Conservatism whose under performance preceded Brexit and reached a nadir with the Truss budget has yet to be appreciated or corrected. A failure which is

¹⁰ ELIOT 1955: 13–14.

explicable only in terms of ideology, as many in the Parliamentary Party want more of the same. That Conservatism requires an entirely new political economy is an inescapable conclusion that eludes most Conservative MPs and virtually all Governmental thinking.

2. The failure of Brexit – while partisan debate continues on the precise economic cost of Brexit it is genuinely hard to quantify the current economic gains. Our regulatory divergence from the EU has not happened or if it has it has not gained any discernible advantage – mainly because our customers in economic and regulatory blocks require us to converge to gain market access including those in the EU. The UK has embraced nationalism at the same time as the world appears to be deglobalising into regional civilisational blocs with increasing barriers to trade and investment betwixt and between them. The trade deals we have struck so far, have not served the national interest, risking food and environmental insecurity at a time of heightened international tension and ever greater threat to global supply chains. But the main rationale for voting for Brexit was a new largely class-based economic settlement for the 2019 electorate and control of migration. As concerns the latter there were 968,000 non-EU long-term arrivals in the year ending June 2023, over two and a half times more than the number recorded in 2019 (368,000) a number itself which has been rising steadily since 2010.¹¹ The additional import of 600,000 non-EU migrants into the UK in 2023 is perhaps Brexit's most manifest default. Yet the failure to deliver policy adequate to Boris Johnson's avowed wish to level up remains the most pernicious failing of the Brexit realignment.
3. Absent Boris Johnson, the Conservatives have been unable to provide any convincing or long-lasting leadership figure. One might surmise that if Covid and the ensuing Party Gate scandal had not occurred Johnson would still be in office but in all likelihood the Party would still be in trouble by not levelling up sufficiently before the election. Primarily because of Johnson's inability to action any positive domestic policy demands or offer.

¹¹ See The Migration Observatory 2024.

After the travails of Liz Truss who offered proof positive that even if the classical liberals had faith in the markets, it did not mean the markets had faith in them, the Conservatives opted for competence rather than vision and installed in Sunak not revival but managed decline.

4. Given all the above there is a philosophical crisis in the Party that the next election may well not solve. Will the Party revert to its Home Counties liberalism, or will it make the post-liberal turn that other right of centre parties have been doing with marked success across Europe and in the US? Such is the hold of the 1980s on the Parliamentary Party and looking at the MPs who are likely to survive the coming election, continuance of this failed agenda seems most likely. Given the first past the post system of the United Kingdom the emergence of any genuine post-liberal offer on the right (though polling suggests it would be highly popular) looks a remote possibility.

In consequence, the future of British conservatism seems to be open, but highly fractured, contested and polarised. In truth the Party seems incapable of re-inventing itself or its offer and the question remains in terms of British politics what happens if it does not? Will it suffer the fate of the Liberals after the First World War and be gradually erased over a succession of general elections, or will it somehow manage to get the right MPs who are intellectually capable enough to lead a Post-Liberal revival and recast Conservatism? We obviously favour the latter but the former seems more likely. What does not seem to offer any future electoral success or support is 'double liberalism' which would focus on extending economic and social libertarianism, though ongoing economic stagnation in the UK will no doubt promote calls for exactly that. In consequence, and in the hope of an alternative to the presiding and failing order, the book aims to tackle both explicitly and implicitly key and pressing questions such as: how can post-liberal conservatism serve the common good? Can post-liberal conservatism provide economic and cultural security for working people? What is conservatism's relationship with liberalism and what should it be? What is the role of the nation state within conservative thought? Re-imagining

a conservatism that cares and advances all, that sustains the environment in which they live and that can provide economic growth and economic stability to working people, whilst robustly defending their culture is, we would argue, paramount. It is or should be the future of the Conservative party.

STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

The aim of this volume is to provide a variety of perspectives on the future of British conservatism, from the most interesting thinkers in the field, including authors who are both critical and supportive of conservatism and/or post-liberalism. In this volume you will find both agreement and disagreement between authors that are situated in differing traditions, such as social democracy, traditional conservatism, classical liberalism, Thatcherism and, yes, post-liberalism. All the authors do share a common interest in the future of conservatism, even if there is evident disagreement on what that future is or should be.

The embryo of this book was the conference that was co-organised by the Eötvös József Research Centre of the Ludovika University of Public Service and the Danube Institute. The conference served as a platform for an assessment of the current state of affairs in British politics and within post-liberalism. The conference's special flavour came from being organised in Budapest, which is in the focus of much conservative attention at an international level. This edited book is the flourishing of the conference proceedings, but it is not merely that as some of the contributors to this volume have been selected to contribute to the work after the conference that took place in March 2022.

We have divided the book into three distinctive sections; part one of the book focuses on the debate around internationalism and the Nation State in the future of conservative thought and politics. Part two evaluates the different traditions of conservatism and its relationship with both liberalism and post-liberalism. Part three draws on perspectives on conservatism from the USA and Hungary and the relationship with British conservatism, if there is indeed a relationship at all. In the first chapter, Phillip Blond writes on the universal

and the particular in conservatism, nationalism and post-liberalism. This is followed by Cornelis J. Schilt whose chapter is on post-liberal conservatism and the nation state. Then moving into part two of the volume, Christopher Fear's chapter is on the post-liberal climate and the Tory faith. In the fourth chapter, Kevin Hickson discusses the relationship of Liberalism and Conservatism within the British nation state and Matt Beech analyses God, Marxism and the Culture War in the fifth chapter. Daniel Pitt makes the case that there is a conservative environmentalism in his chapter. In the seventh chapter, David Jeffery analyses the evidence (or lack thereof) of a post-liberal turn in the British Conservative Party. Henry George's chapter provides the reader with a perspective on disability and post-liberalism that is aimed towards the common good. Eric Kaufmann, in the ninth chapter, writes about a liberal post-liberalism and Andrew Roberts brings part two of the book to a close with his reflections. Part three of the volume opens with a chapter by Imogen Sinclair on the uses of Freud after faith and the order of the covenant in conservative thought. In the next chapter, Ferenc Hörcher elaborates on Anglophilia in Hungarian political thought and Ishaan Jajodia writes on the demise of fusionism and the rise of American post-liberalism in the final chapter. Daniel Pitt, in the conclusion, provides a personal perspective on the future direction on conservatism.

Daniel Pitt
Phillip Blond

REFERENCES

- CUTTS, David – GOODWIN, Matthew – HEATH, Oliver – SURRIDGE, Paula (2020): Brexit, the 2019 General Election and the Realignment of British Politics. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(1), 7–23. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12815>
- DENVER, David (1994): *Elections and Voting Behaviour in Britain*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14905-6>
- ELIOT, T[homas] S[tearns] (1955): *The Literature of Politics*. London: Conservative Political Centre.
- EVANS, Geoffrey – NORRIS, Pippa (1999): *Critical Elections. British Parties and Voters in Long-Term Perspective*. London: Sage. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218518>
- FEAR, Christopher (2020): The “Dialectical” Theory of Conservatism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 25(2), 197–211. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1750760>
- NARDULLI, Peter F. (1995): The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political Change. *American Political Science Review*, 89(1), 10–22. Online: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2083071>
- PANICHAS, George A. (2007): *Essential Russell Kirk. Selected Essays*. Wilmington, NC: ISI Books.
- PITT, Daniel (2021): Future Conservative Electoral Prospects: Time for Tory Socialism? *Observatoire de la Société Britannique/French Journal of British Studies*, (27), 267–291. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4000/osb.5513>
- ROSE, Richard (1964): Parties, Factions and Tendencies in Britain. *Political Studies*, 12(1), 33–46. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1964.tb00609.x>
- The Migration Observatory (2024): Net Migration to the UK. *The Migration Observatory*, 22 January 2024. Online: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk>
- TONGE, Jonathan – WILKS-HEEG, Stuart – THOMPSON, Louise (2020): Introduction: A Conservative Victory Like No Other? *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(1Suppl), 1–6. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa020>
- WEBB, Paul (1997): Attitudinal Clustering Within British Parliamentary Elites: Patterns of Intra-Party and Cross-Party Alignment. *West European Politics*, 20(4), 89–110. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402389708425219>