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What Evidence for a Post-Liberal Turn in the British Conservative Party?

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the extent to which the Conservative Party has been receptive to postliberal ideas, through a longitudinal analysis of the leadership launch speeches given by all candidates in Conservative Party leadership contests since Britain voted to leave the European Union in 2016.

There has been much debate among commentators, academics and politicians about the nature of the relationship between post-liberalism and the Conservative Party, which started with Phillip Blond's seminal book *Red Tory*.[1] *Red Tory* concluded with an assessment of the then nascent Cameronism. For Blond, Cameron's speeches given at Davos in April 2009 and the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture in November 2009 represented "a genuinely new civic conservatism that privileges human association above the state and market ideologies", with Cameronism offering a blueprint of "an associative society that is based on human relationships", in contrast to the failed social and economic liberalism of both Thatcherism and New Labour.[2]

Of course, Blond – and other post-liberals – would soon become disillusioned with Cameron and his governing project. Cameronism turned out to be a combination of social and economic liberalism, marred by aggressive austerity, with the Big Society acting to paper over the cracks of a retreating state.[3] Instead, after the 2015 general election the search for Conservative post-liberals shifted – Pabst identified Michael Gove and Robert Halfon as potential

[1] Blond 2010.
[2] Blond 2010.
[3] Blond 2021.

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standard bearers, and approved of the Conservative's support for a national "living wage" and apprenticeship levy to support a social-market economy.[4]

The result of the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, when Britain narrowly voted to leave the EU, was understood by postliberal commentators as representing a desperate cry of anguish from left- behind voters who were keen to give a bloody nose to the elites who forced a socially and economically liberal status quo onto an unwilling population. These voters, it was argued, had seen globalisation and immigration change the profiles of their areas, and rarely for the better. The vote to leave the EU was not, in this reading, really about the EU – it was about bringing down the existing political economy. For postliberals, it "was a vote against all that liberalism has wrought and all that liberalism has brought: a world of rampant social, economic, and cultural insecurity" fuelled by mass immigration, without thought of cultural compatibility, or whether recipient communities actually want inward migration.[5]

This was certainly how Theresa May read the situation.[6] Careful not to blame her predecessor (or indeed Thatcher/Thatcherism), May instead claimed the referendum result was "not just about a vote to withdraw from the EU" but "was about something broader – something that the European Union came to represent", namely the liberal status quo. May "presented Brexit as an opportunity to address Britain's long-term economic problems [...] low productivity and an overreliance on the financial services industry based in London".[7] In a direct repudiation to the Thatcherite strain in the Conservative Party, May stated that she believed in the "good that the government can do".[8] May also claimed that her Industrial Policy White Paper "epitomises my belief in a strong and strategic state that intervenes decisively whenever it can make a difference".[9]

4 Pabst 2015: xxvii.
5 Blond 2019.
6 Costello 2023: 69–92.
7 Goes 2017.
8 Espiet-Kilty 2023.
9 HM Government 2017: 4.

The Mayite mix of one nation conservatism, Christian democracy and social democracy – or, "One Nation blue to its fingertips, but with a hint of papal purple and a dash of Labour red"[10] – won the support of postliberal commentators. Blond argued that May's popularity was at its highest when "she announced on the doorstep of No 10 a clear *Red Tory* agenda. It collapsed when she tragically turned out to lack the necessary electoral charisma and policy options to realise any of it",[11] although this reading obviously ignores the Brexit melodrama, and its clear electoral consequences, cf. coming fifth in the 2019 European Parliament elections, or her broader failure to exercise statecraft.[12] The postliberal wing of the Labour Party – Blue Labour – also warmly welcomed May as "the inaugural Prime Minister of a 'postliberal' age that marks the return of national jurisdiction over free markets, the bringing back of lawmaking within national borders, and the reprisal of national-communitarian forms of political belonging".[13]

Pabst, to some extent, agrees with Blond's analysis. "May's early pronouncements as Prime Minister offer a glimpse of what could have been for postliberal policy making – instead of just using the state to protect people from the hard edges of capitalism, Mayism promised fundamental reforms to change the nature of the market itself, greater local and regional self-government, and an industrial strategy."[14] Furthermore, he approvingly notes how May was "prepared to underpin her rhetorical commitment to greater economic justice and social cohesion with a more explicit political economy [...] not so much to offer mere compensation for the side effects of globalisation as to provide fundamental reforms which would begin to change the nature of the market itself", but does critique May for not significantly departing "from the liberal-progressivist fusion of state with market power, in particular her commitment to state-sponsored free trade" and for focusing on a "form of liberal meritocracy which sees individual

[10] Goes 2017.
[11] Blond 2019.
[12] Roe-Crines – Jeffery 2023.
[13] Bolton–Pitts 2020: 88–109.
[14] Pabst 2017.

merit as the key driver of individual success, with state intervention there to boost one's odds of success", which ignores or sidelines the intermediary institutions championed by postliberals.[15]

The Conservative Party has always been a broad church, and as such not everyone agreed with this reading of Brexit. As Blond himself has noted, economic liberals represent the "overwhelming majority of the Conservative government".[16] For some, such as the former MEP and leading Brexiteer Dan Hannan, the purpose of leaving the EU was to go even further with free-market economics. This platform became known as "Singapore-on-Thames", and was primarily pushed by the Conservative Party's libertarian wing and free-market think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute for Economic Affairs. However, research found that leave voters were less likely to support Singapore-on-Thames, and more likely to support a "Belarus-on-Trent" vision of Britain,[17] one that is more socially conservative and more economically protectionist – more postliberal (although Pitt argues a Tory Socialist agenda would serve to exacerbate existing dividing lines within the party).[18]

Others Conservative MPs were committed remainers, who saw the job of the government to minimise the economic disruption of formally leaving the EU – one of the foremost being May's chancellor, Philip Hammond. For those advocating for a postliberal political economy, remaining in the Single Market, or even remaining closely aligned in goods and services, was anathema. As a result, there was no consensus around what the political economy of a post-Brexit Britain should actually look like during the May era – indeed, arguably, there still isn't.

Johnson's emergence as party leader, and thus prime minister, was off the back of his position on Brexit. As mayor of London he was broadly seen as a cosmopolitan liberal, although he was widely seen as ideologically chameleonic – perhaps best epitomised by writing an article in favour of both leave

[15] Pabst 2017.
[16] Blond 2019.
[17] Dunin-Wasowicz 2018.
[18] Pitt 2021: 267–291.

and remain during the referendum process, purportedly to help him choose a side to back – he placed himself firmly in the one nation territory at his first party conference speech as leader.

Beyond Brexit, and before Covid-19 appeared on the scene, the focus of Johnson's "people's government" was levelling up, a place-based economic policy which sought to use the state to address issues of regional inequality, which, in Hickson and Williams' view, represented "an ideological shift from the heyday of economic liberalism".[19] While this could be seen as a postliberal policy, at its core was the idea that these left-behind areas were underperforming economically, and increased state involvement in local economies was necessary to boost GDP. The logic was still that of the economic liberal. On a practical level, the effectiveness of the policy of levelling up was hamstrung by limited state resources, a demand for economic resources from other geographic areas, "decisions and outcomes ultimately favouring Conservative-run areas",[20] ably shown by Hanretty's analysis of how the Towns Fund was allocated.[21]

For Blond, Johnson's 2019 victory was symbolic of the success of the Red Tory message:[22] he later wrote "Boris as a Whig is empty and conventional (it is hard to name any of his achievements as London's liberal mayor) and won't help anyone. But Boris the Red Tory, well, that is and would be a different matter".[23] For Pabst, however, the Johnsonian agenda was confused: while it did break with the social and economic liberalism of previous eras, it also combined "Keynesian state activism with deregulated free trade" – levelling up meets global Britain is not, for Pabst, a coherent postliberal position, and while there was a flirtation with social conservatism, the Johnson Government "embraced a brand of state centralism that undermines community and does little to support the family".[24]

[19] Hickson–Williams 2023.
[20] Hickson–Williams 2023.
[21] Hanretty 2021: 7–13.
[22] Blond 2019.
[23] Blond 2019.
[24] Pabst 2021: vii–viii.

Of course, Johnson was not brought down by policy but morality. His successor, Liz Truss, was a committed free-marketeer Thatcherite, and in turn her successor, Rishi Sunak, has no clear policy goals beyond a grey economic managerialism that seeks to placate markets and remove barriers to growth. One example of this is the role of the state vis-à-vis childcare. State-funded childcare is good insofar as it gets mothers back to work – the role of the family in providing care, and the importance of a mother–child bond so vital to postliberals is lost in this managerial GDP-at-all-costs economic liberalism, a critique not lost on members of his own party, for instance Miriam Cates.[25]

The direction of the Conservative Party, and its political economy, is by no means settled. The likely Conservative loss in the next general election will give the party time for either soul searching or brutal in-fighting. But before we can map out a future, we must understand the past. This chapter will shed light on the contours of the debate around social and economic policy in the Conservative Party during the leadership elections of 2016, 2019 and 2022, and explore the extent to which postliberal ideas could be identified. Before this exercise, however, we should define what we mean by postliberalism.

POST-LIBERALISM AND THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

What do we mean when we talk about postliberalism? This is a question that has been addressed in more detail in the other chapters of this volume, but it is worth establishing a basic framework before moving to the leadership speeches. Postliberalism is often – incorrectly – conflated with simply going left on the economy and right on culture, but as social democratic and socialist governments have shown worldwide it is completely possible to be economically left-wing and still prioritise the state as the main vehicle of delivering socially equitable outcomes. Similarly, as centre-right or right-wing governments have

[25] Cates 2022.

shown, one can support "family values" and see the state as the ideal motor for encouraging them – see, perhaps, Poland and Hungary today.[26]

For Pabst, postliberalism sits at the intersection of one-nation conservatism and ethical socialism.[27] Flaherty proposes "conservative-liberal-socialist" as a potential – if not confusing – label for postliberal ideology.[28] It is conservative in the sense that it seeks to conserve natural human institutions beyond the state – families, communities, Burkean little platoons – against an abstract notion of the individual. For postliberals, liberalism divides "communities, social and economic classes and nations into a constellation of individuals warring among each other in search of self-advantage" and as a result "liberalism negates any possibility of collective action or solidarity".[29] Thus postliberalism cautions against liberal excesses such as individualism, market fundamentalism and identity politics. As Franklin notes, postliberals "do not believe that the maximisation of personal freedom is the be-all-and-end-all of politics", but rather is just one instinct competing against others, such as "family, community, nation, fairness and beauty".[30]

Postliberalism *is* liberal in the sense that it values key liberal rights such as freedom of speech, thought, and association – all of which underpin a healthy and vigorous civil society. This is why Pabst claims it is wrong to hold Poland and Hungary up as examples of postliberal states – their pro-family policies are not rooted in a postliberal political economy, but instead are supported by "fiscal dumping and deregulation to attract foreign capital". Furthermore, they are sliding into an authoritarian nationalism, undermining constitutional freedoms – postliberals support the liberal notion of representative government – and this authoritarianism threatens the very organic associational bodies postliberals claim to value.[31] This last point provides a key dividing line between libertarians and postliberals: whilst both distrust the state, the former sees the state as

[26] Roussinos 2021.
[27] Pabst 2021: 19.
[28] Flaherty 2021.
[29] Roussinos 2021.
[30] Franklin 2019.
[31] Pabst 2021.

inherently dangerous to individual liberty, but postliberals critique the state as crowding out other forms of associational life.

Finally, postliberalism is socialist in that it argues everyone should have a stake in the common wealth of a society, in contrast to the winner-takes-all and beggar-thy-neighbour approach of global modern capitalism. Not everything has to be run for profit, but rather should be run for the public good – public utilities being a prominent example. Postliberals believe that the interests of capital – especially Anglo-American capitalism – need to be recalibrated, for instance "by aligning the executive with the long-term interests of the company, its shareholders, employers and consumers".[32]

This approach to the economy is not, however, reheated post-war social democracy. It is not the state that should be the primary deliverer of these outcomes. Public utilities should be run by mutuals; the family is a key site of childcare provision, not private nurseries; trade unions and employers should provide workplace insurance-based welfare, as should religious organisations and employers (possibly big businesses but ideally locally-rooted firms, co-operatives or mutuals, which would also be represented by their own employers' associations). Local authorities should have much greater powers, both because they can act as a counterbalance to the central state, but also because they are more closely rooted in their local communities.

So, then, we have a postliberalism that is conservative in the sense that it wants to support organic society at the expense of the state, liberal in the sense that it recognises this organic society requires individual liberties such as freedom of thought and association, and socialist in the sense that the common wealth is best supported by this associational culture rather than market-fundamentalist capitalism. It is an ideology that rejects the supremacy of both the state and the market, and seeks to undo the crowding out of mediating institutions. It seeks to empower these institutions in order to deliver a socially and economically just society based on reciprocity, rooted in meaningful social relations that go beyond atomistic individualism, which it rejects as the basis for social and political life.

[32] Milbank–Pabst 2016.

THE 2016 CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP ELECTION

Following Britain's vote to leave the European Union, Prime Minister David Cameron resigned and thus triggered a leadership election. Five candidates made it to the ballot of MPs: the eventual winner, Home Secretary Theresa May, Andrea Leadsom, the Minister of State for Energy and Climate Change, Michael Gove, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Stephen Crabb, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and backbencher Liam Fox, who had previously been the Secretary of State for Defence. Leadsom, Gove and Fox had backed leave, while May and Crabb had backed remain.

Fox was eliminated in the first ballot, and Crabb withdrew after winning just 10% of the vote. Gove was eliminated in the second round, and four days later Leadsom withdrew before the contest could move to a ballot of the full membership. A study of MPs' voting behaviour found that May's base was among remain-supporting MPs (who formed a majority of the party at that time), whereas leave voters were split between a socially-liberal bloc, backing Gove, and a socially-conservative bloc, which backed Leadsom.[33]

Each candidate chose to set out their stall through a campaign launch speech. There were three common themes throughout all leadership pitches. The first was how to "do" Brexit (the process and what form it should take), the second was the need to unite the country, and the third – and most pertinent for our analysis – was what exactly the vote to leave the European Union represented. All candidates interpreted the vote to leave as a signal that the economic status quo was not working for a majority of voters.

May sought to promote a sense of stability: she spoke about the underlying strength of the British economy and its position in international markets. She rejected freedom of movement, but at the same time sought access to the single market in goods and services, a circle which would prove impossible to square.

In terms of policy, she took aim at poor job security for the working class, the growing costs of home ownership, and the quality of local services for those

[33] Jeffery et al. 2018: 263–282.

who do not have recourse to private alternatives. Although these ideas were not fleshed out, it was a clear rejection of the Thatcherite view of public services which had taken hold of the Conservative Party. May's pitch is perhaps best represented by her "burning injustices" line:

> If you're born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others. If you're black, you're treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you're white. If you're a white, working-class boy, you're less likely than anybody else to go to university. If you're at a state school, you're less likely to reach the top professions than if you're educated privately. If you're a woman, you still earn less than a man. If you suffer from mental health problems, there's too often not enough help to hand. If you're young, you'll find it harder than ever before to own your own home. These are all burning injustices, and – as I did with the misuse of stop and search and deaths in police custody and modern slavery – I am determined to fight against them.[34]

However, attempting to address social inequities is not necessarily postliberal in and of itself: the one nation tradition has a long pedigree of social reform. Furthermore, in other areas, especially around Brexit, May sounded like an unreconstructed economic liberal: she sought to assuage fears that Britain would withdraw from the global marketplace after Brexit ("we are the same outward-looking and globally-minded and big-thinking country we have always been – and we remain open for business and welcoming to foreign talent") and that Britain needed to remain competitive internationally. She was also vague on ending austerity, stating "if before 2020 there is a choice between further spending cuts, more borrowing and tax rises, the priority must be to avoid tax increases since they would disrupt consumption, employment and investment".[35]

Her main rival, Leadsom, also recognised that the current economic system failed many, and her pitch was boldly for the lower-paid, even going as far to say "the richest people of Britain should know that they will not be my priority" (a bold statement to make when you want the approval of Conservative Party

[34] May 2016.
[35] May 2016.

members), and "those people who have become rich by winning boardroom pay rises that bear no relation to company performance should be aware that I find this unacceptable".[36] She also claimed that her "real passion in politics is my desire for social justice – for a transformation of our society" – but this transformation was, again, within an economically liberal framework.

There was little discussion of intermediary institutions: Whitehall would redirect funds for roads, railways and broadband, house building would be delivered by a new ministerial post, and the state would deliver skills policy. Support for the lower paid would come from tax cuts, and the tax system would be simplified, all while reducing the deficit. The Northern Powerhouse was name-checked, but of course this is largely a centrally-funded project rather than an alternative site of democratic, communitarian power to rival Westminster.

Like his rivals, Gove understood the vote to leave the EU as showing voters "want an end to politics-as-usual and they want a new direction for this country".[37] He highlighted his reforms in education and the justice system – especially around the rehabilitation of criminals – before railing against globalisation and free movement as creating an unequal society that has left people behind. "Background matters far too much" and those at the bottom of society "are flotsam and jetsam in its powerful flows of global capital and free labour".[38]

Although powerful, this was not a postliberal critique of the status quo but rather an attack on managers and shareholders. Privatisation of public utilities, for instance, is not seen negatively, but rather has become discredited because of poor pay and reward structures:

> I am a passionate supporter of free markets, free trade and free enterprise [...]. But in our own country far too often the rewards have gone not to risk takers and job creators but insiders in our financial system and big business who have rigged the market in their interests.[39]

[36] Leadsom 2016.
[37] Gove 2016.
[38] Gove 2016.
[39] Gove 2016.

Instead of a postliberal alternative, which would see utilities and firms come under greater local democratic control, Gove instead argues for a fairer form of economic liberalism: "We must think how we can reform capitalism, give shareholders more control over how public companies operate and ensure pay once more incentivises the right sort of corporate behaviour."[40] Similarly, in Gove's vision, government funding in science and technology is geared towards strengthening the economy, as is tax reform and free trade deals.

Fox took a similar approach to Gove: he began his speech with a paean to globalisation, arguing that Britain is well placed to seize the benefits of global trade, but noting that British capitalism has lost its way:

> I'm also a capitalist – but not a corporatist. My capitalist heroes are not the big bankers who pocket bonuses whether or not they are successful, but the corner shop owners and the small businessmen and women who make sacrifices throughout their lives, including family time and holidays in order to pass something on to the next generation. I believe that innovation, talent and effort must be rewarded and that our economic system must reflect these values.[41]

For Crabb, the bulk of his speech focused on telling people who he was, the importance of delivering Brexit (and controlling immigration), and of Conservative Party unity. Free trade agreements were a priority, but beyond that little was said about policy. Crabb had a "one nation vision", and stated that he "joined the Conservative Party under John Major because that's what the Conservative Party represented for me"[42] – which is ironic given that Major would go on to oppose the exact type of Brexit Crabb was proposing. This was, ultimately, a policy-light speech and where vague platitudes were mentioned, the focus was on traditional one nation conservatism – economic liberalism with a bit more spending on public services.

[40] Gove 2016.
[41] Fox 2016.
[42] Crabb 2016.

For all leadership contenders, we see no evidence of a nascent postliberalism emerging in the 2016 leadership contest. The pitches were more one nation than postliberal: they all focused on how to better manage economic liberalism. Capitalism was seen as good, but also as having lost its way. The answer was various forms of muscular economic liberalism, which would use the power of the state to shape markets and deliver socially desirable outcomes, in a top-down manner, rather than truly a postliberal approach of empowering communities to democratically shape their own social and economic futures.

In this contest, the individual loomed large, and there was very limited talk of communities as meaningful units of political association, nor of creating a framework within which intermediary institutions could thrive, nor empowering people to exercise direct democratic influence over their economies or their public services. For all the talk of the vote to leave being a wakeup call that the status quo was not good enough, the 2016 leadership contest promised more economic liberalism and more social individualism: plus ça change, plus la même chose.

THE 2019 CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP ELECTION

The 2019 leadership election followed a period of Conservative Party infighting over Brexit (the calls for party unity in 2016 being roundly ignored). Ten MPs were nominated, including previous candidates Gove and Leadsom, who were joined by eventual winner Boris Johnson, Rory Stewart, Esther McVey, Jeremy Hunt, Matt Hancock, Dominic Raab, Sajid Javid and Mark Harper. There were five rounds of voting by MPs and then a membership vote between the final two candidates. Academic research found that, in the final ballot of MPs, Johnson won the support of leavers, Hunt of remainers, and Gove of those who backed May's Withdrawal Agreement in the first meaningful vote.[43]

[43] JEFFERY et al. 2020: 113–134.

Like the 2016 leadership election, this was a contest structured around Brexit and economic policy. In terms of Brexit, the debate focused on whether formally leaving the EU on 31 October was a dealbreaker, candidates' willingness to countenance a "no deal" Brexit, and candidates' views on Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement. Economically, there was a general agreement that austerity had to end, especially in terms of education and skills spending, with the differences being around the appropriate levels of taxation and spending. Many candidates continued the 2016 refrain of the economy not working for the average person, of a broken capitalism that could be fixed through free-market reforms.

A prime example of this is Raab, who clearly, if not charismatically, combined the key mantras of the 2016 leadership election: "Too often, for too many people today, capitalism looks like some kind of stitch up amongst the corporate vested interests." He would stand up for the "economic little guy", reducing national insurance on low earners, and promoting "a revolution in competition policy to smash monopolies, to liberate the startups and to strengthen consumer clout", but this would be within the framework of a "buccaneering approach to global free trade".[44] These views were largely shared by Leadsom, Harper, Hunt and Stewart (whose speech is worth watching just for how weird it was, being structured around a series of "energies" his leadership would embody, namely "the energy that comes from prudence, the energy that comes from shame, the energy that comes from seriousness, the energy that comes from action, the energy that comes from conviction".)[45] Broadly speaking, all these candidates wanted to strengthen capitalism through free-market reforms, competition and free trade, and use the tax revenue generated to spend more on public services.

Javid offers a similar policy platform, albeit that he self-identifies as a libertarian. He claimed "I first took an interest in politics when I realised the power of government and the power it had to give people the opportunities they deserve"[46] – which is an interesting understanding of libertarianism.

[44] BrexitCentral 2019a.
[45] Guardian News 2019.
[46] Javid 2019.

He wanted to take on public and private cartels to build world-class public services, and recognised "the vital role that is played by families and communities" to support individuals to "achieve their potential" – but this potential is framed as economic potential. The broad thrust of this argument, shared by other candidates, is that intermediary institutions, like the family and communities, are only good insofar as they support an individual's ability to thrive in an economically liberal free-market economy. In this instance, being "left-behind" means failing to contribute your optimum amount of tax revenue to HM Treasury, rather than achieving eudaimonia.

Hancock's pitch is perhaps the least post-liberal of the lot, and was built around the reliability of progress and the role of technology in promoting that. Technological change is an unalloyed positive due to the rocket boosters it would put under economic growth, even if it results in radical social change – in Hancock's view, the role of the state is to prepare the country for this new industrial revolution, rather than recognising the damage rapid economic change could bring on society. Hancock's vision of how a good society leaves no space for the local, for the little platoons – unless they want to develop an app.

Even MPs with the greatest potential for postliberal thought came up short. Gove, for instance, had the right instincts when he based his speech around "our undervalued communities and our overlooked families",[47] but his solution was one nation in practice, emphasising free trade and minor welfare reform. Similarly, Esther McVey, who founded the Blue Collar Conservatism group of Tory MPs, devoted around just 10% of her speech to non-Brexit policy, essentially promising a pay rise for public sector workers, more police and scaling back the aid budget. Finally, Johnson's speech – less important in this analysis because we've seen how he governed (or failed to) – was essentially centred on levelling up and post-Brexit free-trade deals.

None of these politicians even began to articulate what a genuine shift in the relationship between individuals, communities and the state would look like – and perhaps in the context of the Brexit drama the fact the Conservative

[47] BrexitCentral 2019b.

Party retreated to the safe space of economic liberalism should not be much of a surprise, but it does mean there was scant evidence of a groundswell of postliberal thought among the leadership candidates. In terms of social policy, whilst candidates vary on specific policy issues there is no real challenge to the idea of the individual as sovereign, or supporting the idea that community should be a key site of political life: the two poles of political life, as preached by these candidates, remain the individual at one end and the state on the other.

The difference between candidates was one of degrees, or of how far to go: all candidates sought to use capitalism, boosted by post-Brexit free-trade deals, to generate higher tax revenues to spend on public services or to cut taxes for lower-paid workers. This speaks to Blond's post-2019 general election warning that "economic liberals constitute the overwhelming majority of the Conservative government [...]. In the short term it is unlikely that the Tories can tack to a truly postliberal stance [...] they remain convinced that a new global trading nation will lift all boats".[48]

THE 2022 CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP ELECTIONS

There were two Conservative Party leadership elections in 2022. The first took place from July to September, following the resignation of Boris Johnson. The second took place in October 2022, following Liz Truss' disastrous premiership.

The first contest saw eight candidates stand – Truss, Rishi Sunak, Penny Mordaunt, Kemi Badenoch, Tom Tugendhat, Suella Braverman, Jeremy Hunt and Nadhim Zahawi – with Truss and Sunak making it through to the final membership ballot. Truss then defeated Sunak with 57% of the members' vote. As with previous contests there was no real challenge to the idea of the liberal status quo. Academic analysis has found that, in the final round of the ballot of MPs, Sunak won the support of remainers, Mordaunt of leavers, and Truss of the hardline-Brexiteer European Research Group.[49]

[48] Blond 2019.

[49] Jeffery et al. 2023: 555–572.

Truss' speech was only short, but it was unashamedly free-market. The focus was on supply-side reform: lower taxes, lower regulation, lower government spending. Levelling up moved from a state-led process of increased funding to a happy consequence of greater economic growth. There was one policy which did seek to recentre the family – a review of "the taxation of families to ensure that people aren't penalized for taking time out to care for children or elderly relatives"[50] – but this was part of a broader liberal review of tax policy, rather than a postliberal package of reforms.

Most candidates followed Truss' tax-cutting lead. Zahawi also pledged to cut the lower rate of income tax by 2p in two years.[51] Mordaunt sought to return the Conservative Party to "the good old stuff", of low taxes, a small state and personal responsibility. Her government would focus on economic growth, competition and tackling inflation, VAT on fuel would be reduced, income tax thresholds would be increased and the tax system would be simplified.[52] Tugendhat outlined a ten-year plan for growth, which relied on the party "returning to the core values that unite us all as Conservatives: I believe in liberty and the low taxes necessary to defend it", including reducing fuel duty and reversing the national insurance increase.[53] Ironically, for those who followed subsequent events, Hunt also positioned himself as a low- tax Conservative. He did not go as far as Truss, but he sought to reverse the rise in corporation tax (which went from 19% to 25%) and then cut it to 15%, and cut business rates. His main point of differentiation was to not have served under Johnson.[54]

Braverman's campaign sought to combine economic liberalism – "proper tax cuts" and shrinking the size of the state – alongside railing against so-called "woke rubbish".[55] In her leadership campaign video, she railed against unfair

[50] Guardian News 2022.
[51] Walker 2022.
[52] Sky News 2022b.
[53] Sky News 2022a.
[54] Riley-Smith 2022.
[55] Diver – Riley-Smith 2022.

taxes and ineffective public services, and claimed that the British people could turn Britain around – "if only the government would allow them to do it".[56]

Sunak, however, pitched himself as the only one willing to make serious alternative to Truss' low-tax liberalism with [...] slightly-higher-tax liberalism, in order to control inflation and debt, alongside public sector reform involving the integration of technology.[57] Similarly, Badenoch's pitch echoed Sunak's in that she would not promise unfunded tax cuts, but she did focus on how the economy was overburdened and overregulated. Indeed, in a very un-postliberal turn of phrase, she claimed "the right has lost its confidence and courage and ability to defend the free market as the fairest way of helping people prosper" and that businesses' main aim is "productivity and profits".[58]

Unlike 2016 and 2019, where the focus was on responding to Brexit as a cry of anger from those left-behind, and a rejection of the Thatcherite austerity economic liberalism, the first 2022 leadership election was essentially a call for a return to a low-tax, low-regulation economic system. Where there was to be intervention into the economy or society, it was to be the state that did it, either by lowering or simplifying taxes, or reshaping public services so individuals could return to employment quicker. The postliberal unit of analysis – families and communities – barely featured in the debate, and with the victory of Truss, any nascent postliberal strand within British Conservatism withered on the vine.

The second leadership election was a much shorter affair. The threshold for nominations to make it onto the ballot of MPs was set to 100 MPs, much higher than the 20 needed in the previous election. Only Rishi Sunak submitted the requisite number of nominations. Johnson withdrew from the race, despite reportedly having over 100 backers, knowing he could not unite the Conservative Party. Mordaunt withdrew a minute before the deadline, having failed to reach the nomination threshold. Thus, Sunak became the new party leader and prime minister.[59]

[56] Braverman 2022.
[57] Sunak 2022a.
[58] Badenoch 2022.
[59] Booth et al. 2023.

Given the fast nature of the contest and how rapidly it followed the previous contest, there were no launch speeches to analyse. But in his first speech as Prime Minister, on the steps of Downing Street, Sunak reiterated his commitment to the 2019 manifesto and restoring the economy.[60] Once again, the opportunity was not taken to rethink the liberal status quo: instead, the public were promised more of the same.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the extent to which leadership candidates articulated postliberal values in the post-Brexit Conservative Party leadership contests. For British postliberals, it does not make for happy reading. Whilst the candidates are more than capable of identifying the economic and social issues that face our country, including the failure of 21st century capitalism to deliver for society as a whole, they are completely unable to think beyond the liberal-individualist status quo.

There has been no real postliberal candidate in any of the Conservative Party leadership elections: all have promised a variation of liberal economic reform, which would boost tax revenues and allow the state to spend more on public services. Completely absent from all of this is any reformulation of the role of associational society: the relationship between the individual and the state is still the key frame of reference within British Conservatism, the good life is still measured in terms of economic contribution, and local democratic control of markets remains as distant as ever.

The 2016 and 2019 leadership elections were a false dawn for postliberal thought, and by the 2022 leadership contests the postliberal ship had sailed. Perhaps this was inevitable – the current British postliberal intellectual movement is dwarfed by their free-market rivals and false friends like the National Conservatism Conference, which does not know whether to be a cheerleader for Singapore-on-Thames-style

[60] Sunak 2022b.

rampant economic liberalism or state-directed social authoritarianism – either way, it is no ally of those who value community-driven associational culture.

Some postliberals might believe that there never was much hope, just a fool's hope, for postliberalism to thrive within the Conservative Party. But given the likelihood that the next general election will see the Tories heavily defeated, they will be spending their time in opposition looking at where it all went wrong. It should be the role of postliberals to both remind the party of the four missed opportunities to adopt a more postliberal direction post-Brexit, and also to offer the Conservative Party a postliberal policy platform that is able to meet the challenges of our time.

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