

Don't expect too much: what can Conservative experience tell us about how much Labour will change before the next election?

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Given Labour's current lead in the polls and the Coalition's current difficulties, it is easy, even tempting, to forget that only two-and-a-half years ago the Labour Party suffered one of the worst general election defeats in its history. In part because that defeat has not (so far at least) triggered the kind of factional infighting witnessed in the 1950s and 1980s, and in part because so much media attention has been focused on Tory-Lib Dem troubles and tensions, there has – with the honourable exception of *Renewal* and some other left-leaning think tanks, journals and blogs – been far less public debate than one might have expected about how (and how much) the party needs to change in order to regain office.

Perhaps, however, we are expecting too much. We assume – as if it were somehow a simple matter of stimulus and response – that a big defeat will, or at least should, lead automatically to big changes, be they in personnel, in organisation, or in policy. But what if we are wrong? Political scientists have long been interested in the question of what drives political parties to change who represents them, how they run themselves, and what they stand for. Until now, however, their work has been confined to fairly abstract cross-national comparisons, on the one hand, and very brief country case studies on the other. Even so, it casts doubt on the idea that change is always, or even mainly, driven by the 'external shock' of defeat and/or loss of office. It finds that leaders and, to a lesser extent, factional shifts make a big difference too.

In a new book published this autumn and called *The Conservatives Since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Bale, 2012b), I conduct what is probably the first full-length study designed explicitly to explore the reasons how and why parties change. The result, I hope, will interest not just political scientists and political historians but also help social democrats to revise their expectations about the extent and scope of any renewal that Labour is likely to undertake between now and the next general election (1).

Taking periods of Conservative opposition and government (of which there have been four each since 1945) as separate cases, and using, as raw material, internal papers, memos and records of meetings from party archives, along with historical and contemporary accounts, memoirs and interviews, the book examines each case for evidence of changes in how the party is organised, what human and material resources it draws upon, what it says it stands for, and what it actually does. The book then explores the role of the three drivers most commonly expected to have played a part in producing that change, namely defeat (where one occurred), the leader, and the dominant faction, before, in each case, going on to discuss additional factors that seemed to have played a part in prompting the party to do things differently.

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As so often, the devil is in the detail. Still, since there is more than enough of that detail in the book itself to satisfy and (fingers crossed) delight even the most demanding of political anoraks, and since the main purpose of this article is to allow us to draw parallels and make predictions, the focus here will be on the take-home messages.

The extent and scope of party change since 1945

- 1) Until 1979, at least, the Conservative Party changed more in opposition than it did in government.
- 2) Policy always changed more than organisation, and organisation always changed more than the party's public face. Indeed, the lack of changes made to what one might term the Tories' sales force – its high-profile politicians and, in particular, its parliamentary candidates – is one of the most striking (and possibly most depressing) features of the entire post-war period.
- 3) That said, changes to the public face of the party were rather more extensive in office than out of it – although, because such changes were rarely rapid or deliberate, this was probably due, in the main, to the fact that (until 1997 at least) the Tories tended to spend much longer in government than they did in opposition.
- 4) Changes in policy were actually more extensive in government than in opposition – partly for the same reason but also because, once in office, the party, instead of simply coming up with a more or less realistic manifesto, had to respond to real challenges thrown up by circumstances, while those who became ministers inevitably came up with their own personal (or at least departmental) initiatives.
- 5) Organisational changes (many of which had to do with the introduction of innovative campaigning practices and technologies) were considerably more extensive in opposition than in office.

The drivers of party change since 1945

- 1) Of the three drivers of change thought by political scientists to be most important (defeat and/or loss of office, leader, or dominant faction) the first tended to have a significant impact when it occurred. However, even in those circumstances, the leader of the party was often just as important, if not more important – especially when it came to driving policy change.
- 2) A big defeat at a general election did not necessarily trigger more change than a narrow one. Most of the change in the Conservative Party in the 1960s, for instance, came after the very narrow defeat of 1964, not the drubbing of 1966. And the big changes that came about after 1975 occurred after the party lost two incredibly close elections the year before.
- 3) None of the three drivers – electoral defeat and/or loss of office, leader, and dominant faction – drove change in the party's public face as much as they did change in organisation and, most of all, in policy.
- 4) Leaders had more impact on the public face of the party than they did on organisation. This had nothing to do with their setting out to recruit a new type of parliamentary candidate – indeed, David Cameron was the first Tory leader to take

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deliberate (albeit baby) steps in this direction. Rather, it was due to their power to appoint Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet colleagues. Their minimal impact on organisation is due to the fact that, at least before William Hague (a former management consultant) came along, few, if any, of the party's leaders were in the slightest bit interested in such matters, which were often contracted out to Party Chairmen, very few of whom were chosen because of their executive ability or enthusiasms.

- 5) Leaders were more important in driving change than dominant factions, and the latter did not, in any case, normally exist in any meaningful way without an assertive leader like Heath (at least once he became Prime Minister) or, most obviously, Thatcher.
- 6) By far the biggest impact of leaders (and, where they existed, dominant factions) was on policy.
- 7) Margaret Thatcher, living up to her billing (see Jackson and Saunders, 2012), drove change (and especially policy change) more than did any of her predecessors. Arguably, however, this was more the case in opposition after 1975 (when she moved much more rapidly than is often remembered to shift the party rightwards, to sideline patrician left-wingers, and to reward her closest supporters) than in government after 1979. Once in office, her colleagues could develop their own powerbases, policy and reputations. Moreover, at that point competence, rather than ideology, was (as it had to be) the main criterion for promotion.
- 8) Of the other party leaders who were in power for any length of time, Churchill was clearly the least influential. Indeed, Heath and Macmillan were the only leaders who came close to Thatcher in terms of their ability to drive change, although Hague probably deserves a consolation prize for making the most difference to the party's organisation.
- 9) In office, fear of losing votes and possibly office at the next election – prompted by opinion research, by-election defeats, and/or feedback from the doorstep at the previous election (even if it had been won with relative ease) – had a big influence. Anticipation, in other words, counted just as much as retrospection and regret, at least when the party was in power. Care was taken, note, to match, where possible, Labour 'special offers' – most obviously those made to old age pensioners, who voted in large numbers and grew used to parties bidding for their support with cold hard cash.
- 10) The party in opposition often made changes to policy in the expectation that they would help it get things right once in government – and in the hope that it could avoid the mistakes it made last time it was in office. Taking care of unfinished business from last time round was likewise important.
- 11) Particularly in government, pressure arising either from events or (legally-binding) international agreements could also prove crucial, especially on policy – something that those who, when they consider 'external shocks', focusing solely on elections and their aftermath, would do well to remember.
- 12) 'Path dependence' (the fact that a course of action, even if it is 'sub-optimal', can be made all but inevitable by choices made earlier on, sometimes by other parties) also mattered. Most obviously, a particular policy can lead almost inexorably to another – sometimes because early attempts in government to tackle something failed, sometimes because they succeeded beyond expectation, and sometimes because policy change in one area spilled over into another.
- 13) Some more or less profound changes – in the public face of the party (such as the entry of more middle class – as opposed to upper middle class – candidates, MPs,

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and ministers); in organisation (for example, the declining number of ordinary members and activists); and in policy (for instance, hastening the break-up rather than holding together the British Empire) – were driven not by the party but by inexorable social and geo-political changes which were way beyond its control.

- 14) Although the voluntary party (sometimes), and the parliamentary party (occasionally), drove organisational change, both had only the most marginal effect on policy. It is overwhelmingly the case that Tory MPs and activists enjoy (if that is the right word) veto rather than motive power.
- 15) 'Business' and think tanks (for all their boasting) had surprisingly little direct impact on anything at all, including policy, except insofar as the latter contributed to the *zeitgeist* or climate of opinion which, although difficult to measure, were undoubtedly important.

Lessons for Labour-watchers

Clearly, one cannot simply extrapolate from the Conservative experience and predict precisely what we will see from Labour. True, the two parties are rather less different in practice (particularly when it comes to the internal distribution of power) than they are in theory – a truth brilliantly demonstrated by Bob McKenzie (1964) back in the 1950s and 1960s, while the reforms to Labour's organisation carried out as part of the New Labour project unwound a good deal of the so-called democratisation pursued by the left in the 1970s and 1980s (see Russell, 2005). On the other hand, it remains the case that a Labour leader is more constrained than his Tory counterpart. It also remains the case that the direct influence on Labour of large trade unions is much bigger than the direct influence of business on the Conservatives – indeed, Ed Miliband's critics argue that that is more true today than ever given how crucial the unions were to securing his narrow win over his brother in the leadership contest (Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011; Quinn, 2012) and how much Labour now relies on the unions for funding (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2011). That said, however, there are still sufficient similarities between the parties, indeed between all political parties, to make it worth hazarding some educated guesses.

First and foremost, we should not imagine that the scale of Labour's defeat (which in any case was mitigated by the Tories' disappointing performance) will necessarily lead to big changes, whether it be in the kind of people who represent the party, the way it organises itself, or the policies it comes up with. This lack of impetus is not likely to be counter-balanced by leadership or factional activism. Ed Miliband – and this is not necessarily a criticism – is simply not that type of leader (at least not yet) and he has been careful to distribute key portfolios across (although not right across) Labour's ideological spectrum rather than reward the like-minded. Moreover, anyone hoping that the parliamentary party or the grassroots will prove powerful sources of inspiration and innovation is probably going to be disappointed. For their part, left-leaning think tankers should concentrate on trying to influence the wider climate of opinion rather than wasting their time trying to ensure some pet project becomes a centrepiece of (or even a lowly paragraph in) Labour's manifesto.

Least likely to change is Labour's public face – its sales force, if you like. With a handful of exceptions at the top, those standing for the party will look pretty much (indeed almost exactly) the same as they did going into the last election. Don't expect an influx of working class, private sector workers without a university education any time soon – if ever. And, given turnover at the top tends to be slow, too, don't expect more than the odd new face in and around the leadership.

If, the other hand, there are going to be any organisational changes, then they will



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almost certainly occur now rather than when or if the party gets back into government. If they do happen, they will probably be well below the radar of most onlookers and focus on campaigning rather than anything else.

There will be a few changes in policy but not that many. The policy review now being coordinated by Jon Cruddas will doubtless be fascinating (see Sunder Katwala's article in this issue), but such exercises traditionally have more to do with signalling change than with shifting substance. David Cameron's policy groups, for instance, made 782 recommendations in total, of which 120 made it into the manifesto (and 88 into the Coalition agreement) – a 'hit rate' of 15 per cent which would be even lower if we were to exclude minor changes from the calculation (see Bale, 2011). Somewhat depressingly for those on the left, we are more likely to see Labour adapt its policy to any institutionalised (and therefore administratively and financially costly) regimes created by Conservative reforms – in particular in education and welfare – than we are to see promises to reverse those reforms.

Overall, the lack of big changes may alarm some who believe that, without them, Labour has no chance of projecting itself as 'new and improved' to a jaded electorate. This might, however, be too pessimistic. For one thing, as Cameron showed when he was Leader of the Opposition, quite a lot (though obviously not quite enough) can be achieved by continually talking about and providing striking visual 'proof' that one's party is changing. For another, parties in opposition often focus on changing policies in order to address the things they feel they got wrong in government and/or to address societal and economic challenges that are widely agreed to be pressing. Two fields which clearly fall into both categories are immigration and the regulation of banking and finance – and one could make a good case as well for including a chronic failure to provide sufficient new housing. Since these subjects are also highly salient with voters, changes here – perhaps packaged around the meme of 'responsible capitalism' (see Cooke, 2012) – are likely to be worth far more electorally than a raft of more minor alterations.

Conclusion

In politics, as in most areas of contemporary life, change is almost universally regarded as a good thing by all but the most cautious and the most sceptical – so much so that even biding one's time is seen as akin to a crime. 'He who rejects change', said Harold Wilson in the late 1960s, 'is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.' In fact, political parties (as Wilson himself found out to his cost) are, like any big organisation, highly prone to inertia: they are, to coin a cliché, oil-tankers rather than speedboats. Change, as many political scientists who work on parties are fond of repeating, doesn't just happen. Something and someone has to drive it. Getting your proverbial butt kicked at a general election isn't always enough. And by no means all leaders have the convictions and the capacity (or the committed colleagues) to change things either. This tendency to inertia can, however, be offset, firstly, by a strong sense of wanting to fix what went wrong when the party was previously in government; secondly, by an appreciation of the urgency and the public salience of particular issues; and, finally, by a willingness to adapt strategically to the policies of the current government rather than impotently rage against the dying of the light. This is a message that presumably makes perfect sense to the readers of *Renewal*.

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2011) and is about to start work on a study of Labour in government and opposition. The third edition of his *European Politics: a Comparative Introduction* will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013.

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Note

1. I am assuming here that the contest will not occur any earlier than 2015 – but only for the sake of argument: see Bale, 2012a.