

A new political landscape

Engaging with Cameronism

Oscar Reyes

With Gordon Brown becoming Prime Minister on the back of an opinion poll lead for Labour, Conservative strategists might now be thinking that they should be more careful in what they wish for. Since David Cameron became Conservative leader in December 2005, much energy has been invested in pre-emptive strikes against Brown. A central plank of this approach has been to talk up environmental and social issues, promoting a Conservative vision of 'wellbeing' designed to outflank the former Chancellor's perceived economism. The 'Brown bump' may yet be a temporary phenomenon, but it must nevertheless worry the Conservative leadership that the contrasting political styles of Brown and Cameron have not consolidated personal support for their candidate, who still trails Brown by some distance in perceptions of his 'prime ministerial' qualities.

The Cameronites' attempts to stage their own 'Clause Four moment' have likewise resulted in failure, indifference or confusion. In September 2006, the Conservative Party adopted *Built to Last*, a new statement of aims and values that aimed to project the image of an 'open, meritocratic and forward-looking' party (Conservative Party, 2006). Faced with a straight choice between voting for a bland new statement or the perceived political suicide of voting against it, most party members chose a third way and did not vote at all. A 92.7 per cent endorsement could not mask the indifference of a 26.7 per cent turnout. David Willetts and David Cameron's attempts to slaughter the sacred cow of the party's commitment to grammar schools delivered a more convincing symbolic moment, but an even less satisfactory outcome for the Conservative leadership. It is a moot point whether the two Davids deliberately sought this debate to signal the party's break with its past. What is far clearer is that the subsequent policy confusion, and Cameron's inability to project a decisive victory for his 'modernising' project, marked a significant setback.

From a left perspective, it is tempting to take no more than a sporting interest in the Conservatives' latest failures and leave it to Tory strategists to puzzle over their wider implications. This would be a mistake. Relying upon the Conservative capacity for self-harm and infighting is not as safe a bet today as it has been for much of the past 15 years. Whether we are thinking through our own politics post-Blair, or confronting the Conservative Party's potential for resurgence, we need to move beyond our own stereotypes to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the Cameronite project. It is also tempting, and comforting, to conclude that the Cameron leadership offers merely

cosmetic changes that do little to alter the Conservative Party's anatomy. David Cameron is basically an iPod, a fashion device onto whom right-wingers of all tastes can download their favourite Conservative tunes, be they 1950s crooners or 1980s classics. The left can play with this Cameron iPod too. We can project him as a vacuous moderniser, the Conservative marketing department's chosen successor to Blair. We might equally interpret the Tories' endorsement of a pro-fox-hunting Etonian as a reversion to type. But these caricatures do not take us far in understanding the specificity of the emerging Cameron agenda – its distinctive mix of something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue.

The grammar school debate is quite instructive in this regard since, reading beyond the headlines about Tory splits and U-turns, it is possible to find within it key statements about the direction of future Conservative education policy. Cameron emphasises the 'liberalisation of the supply side of education', stressing the importance of competitive pressure between schools in a system where money follows pupils. Both Cameron and Willetts stress the successes of Sweden, the Netherlands and some US states. These examples are, of course, far from arbitrary. Sweden has a voucher scheme; the Netherlands allows parents a constitutional right to establish private schools with state funding, while US public schools are often semi-autonomous charter schools.

Cameron presents these cases as examples of 'best practice' from around the world, pitting them against the 'ideological self-indulgence' of those Tories who remain fixated on grammar schools. There is more than an echo here of Tony Blair's favoured mantra that 'what matters is what works', which he most frequently juxtaposed with a rejection of 'outdated ideology'. Ideology itself was presented as being outdated, rigid, dogmatic. Disavowing ideology is not the same as overcoming it, however, since the pragmatic face of 'what works' begs important questions about the criteria by which success is judged, not to mention the basis for selecting what counts as evidence of 'working' in the first place. In fact, the success of the cases cited by Cameron, as well as the study upon which he draws (Hoxby, 2003), remains subject to a keen ideological and empirical debate – after which, there remains the question of their applicability in the UK context.

On this last dilemma, the Conservative message is, put simply, that we need a massive extension of the current Academy programme, which has seen 'independent state schools' run and part-funded by private sponsors. Cameron's Conservatives, like Blair before them, defend this scheme on the grounds that it empowers parents to have genuine choice. Yet parent powers are weaker in academies than in maintained schools, since they reduce parental representation on governing bodies, weaken appeals processes for admissions, and have proven to be keener to exclude pupils. More generally, they are symptomatic of a wider loss of democratic control, and a missing sense of the rationale for genuinely public services as a means to enable mutual ownership of collective goods. There is little that is genuinely new in this extended Academy scheme itself – which is, essentially, a beefed up rehash of the Conservatives' earlier City

Technology Colleges programme – but its presentation and the ideological rationale for its extension do present some characteristically novel aspects. In proposing to extend Academies, the Conservatives have drawn on ideological elements that new Labour has itself kept in play: a valorisation of competition and ‘choice’ that, in practice, masks a significant transfer of assets and power to unaccountable religious and business groups. But they have also articulated this account to what remains the Cameronites’ ‘big idea’: a new politics of localism.

To an extent this insistence upon ‘localism’ is itself a rehash of the communitarian strand of Blairism. *Built to Last* commits the party to ‘harnessing the entrepreneurial spirit in our communities’, praising social enterprise, community and voluntary organisations as vital agents in the battle against poverty and deprivation (Conservative Party, 2006). Just like New Labour’s ‘new localism’ this promises devolution-by-marketisation. Extending competition in the provision of services that were once public is preferred to, say, the democratisation and reinvigoration of local government through participatory decision-making.

So far, so Blairite. But the grounds for accepting this ‘localist’ framework are drawn from a more conventionally conservative canon. Danny Kruger, special advisor to David Cameron, has written of the central importance to Conservatism of social enterprises, ‘the institutions that stand between the individual and the state’ (Kruger, 2006). The point being that the Conservatives perceive the need to ditch their Thatcherite association with aggressive, me-first individualism – not least because such values undermined the social basis of conservatism, breaking down traditional social bonds and melting venerable prejudices and opinions into air. Beyond this, the new Tory localism offered a pre-emptive strike against the Gordon Brown leadership. Conservative strategists long ago identified Brown as the head nanny within the New Labour household. At the extreme end, they accuse him of a ‘nationalisation of childhood’, claiming that initiatives for more childcare centres and after school clubs serve the sinister purpose of enforcing an equality-of-outcome upon children.

More generally, Brown is accused of encouraging the micro-management of public services from the centre, and misunderstanding the free market with his insistence on a web of tax credits to mitigate its inegalitarian effects. In their 2001 book *A Blue Tomorrow*, Ed Vaizey, Nicholas Boles and Michael Gove – now three of Cameron’s closest allies – condemn this ‘misplaced dogma ... that government intervention, from a distant centre, always makes things better’ (Vaizey et al, 2001). Boles, in particular, argues that the Tories should dismantle this ‘centralised state’, a position that he later consolidated as Director of Policy Exchange, Cameron’s favourite think-tank.

Compassionate Conservatism, Policy Exchange’s book-length attempt to furnish these next generation Tories with a political philosophy, extends the argument by differentiating between ‘social’ and ‘state’ provision (Ganesh and Norman, 2006). Whereas the state encourages vertical linkages between people, society is characterised by horizontal connections. The goal of compassionate conservatives should be to reflect this positive vision of society and more ‘beyond the state’, which they see as fundamentally unproductive.

These distinctions can seem obscure, but they are worth noting as clues to the ideological framework through which Cameron's new generation Tories understand the world, and in relation to which they will develop their policies. New Labour had a vision of the 'entrepreneurial state', the state as contractor of services. Cameron and company are not wrong that this is unsustainable. Market-driven states tend to produce corporate monopolies and expunge democratic accountability. Sensing a political opportunity here, Cameron's turn to Danny Kruger is noteworthy, since he is also a leading figure behind the 'Direct Democracy' manifesto (www.direct-democracy.co.uk). Its signatories pledge, among other things, that 'independent schools and hospitals should be free to compete for state-funded parents and patients'. Perhaps this is what Kruger meant when, during the 2005 election campaign, he referred to a Conservative 'plan to introduce a period of creative destruction in the public services'. The most recent initiative to emerge from this source, supported by the Centre for Policy Studies, is a series of *Localist Papers*. The fifth of these papers continues the trend of using localism as an ideological wedge to undermine the welfare state itself – attacking its universalist basis, and advocating the transfer of services from the state to the charity sector (Carswell, 2006b).

Cameron's Tories are engaged in a similar ideological realignment in their approach to foreign policy. In a speech on 11 September 2006, co-authored by Kruger, Cameron now claims to be 'a liberal conservative, rather than a neoconservative'. But the substance of such statements is that he accepts all of the basic premises upon which the 'war on terror' has been conducted: the idea that the scale of today's terrorism is unprecedented (the world changed on September 11); the legitimacy of pre-emptive military action as a means to tackle this; and a belief in 'promoting freedom' in ways that include regime change. Liberal conservatism apparently means accepting all of these things, while recognising that the US has so far failed to provide sufficient ideological cover for their use by means of multilateral fig-leaves and the wider extension of its soft power. It is not a criticism of empire, in other words, but an argument for its extension. Moves to withdraw from Iraq, and criticism of Israel's policies towards Lebanon and Palestine, are viewed as appeasement of 'jihadist anger' – much as, on the home front, Michael Gove has railed against progressives' 'appeasement' of 'Islamist totalitarianism' (Gove, 2006).

It is hard to explain this as simply a marketing exercise. Despite the unpopularity of the Iraq war, the Notting Hill neo-cons have embraced it with fervour. If they differ from their US counterparts, it is only in placing a faith in the good of interventionism above a strategic lust for oil as their guiding principle. The differences in the basic approach are minimal, but they are accompanied by a large shift in emphasis. To sell such moves to a domestic audience, Cameron and his supporters now seek to embed neo-con interventionism with an embrace of market-driven strategies on global poverty and climate change.

Their stance on the latter is particularly revealing, with Cameron claiming that 'climate change is the single biggest challenge facing our planet.' Underlying this are attempts to

rest environmentalism as an issue from the left – much as Blair, while Shadow Home Secretary, sought to claim law and order authoritarianism for Labour. No doubt there are several layers of greenwash here, as well as an instrumentalisation of environmentalism as a means to portray a softer, more ‘caring’ image of the new look Tories. But that should not blind us to the fact that there is a conservative tradition of environmentalism – as well as one of environmental damage and complacency – built around a mix of localism and market fundamentalism. (For a recent example, see the Centre for Policy Studies’ *Localist Paper* on the environment, which fits squarely within this tradition (Carswell, 2006a)). ‘Green growth’ is to be encouraged by market incentives alongside increased capacity for sustainable production. As Kruger wrote in the September 2006 issue *Prospect*, ‘micro-generation might be seen as the policy trope of the Cameron project: decentralised, diverse and sustainable’ (Kruger, 2006) – terms as glowing as any anarchist or deep green activist might wish.

This is not entirely cynical. Cameron’s Tories would no doubt welcome a flourishing niche market in microgeneration – a useful reminder to the green left that anti-capitalism is not a necessary condition for autonomist self-sufficiency. Instead of dismissal, then, a better response would be to engage with this argument – highlighting the contradictions of a free-market environmentalism accompanied by a push for deregulation, usually a code for removing environmental protections, while at the same time pushing for an environmental justice approach that attends to the inequalities and perverse incentives produced by carbon markets.

Such ideological engagement, rather than dismissal, should serve as the wider spirit underlying our approach to the new look Tories. Cameronism is not yet an ideological project in the Thatcherite mould, but it certainly represents a more considered attempt to develop a politics for the post-Blair age than recent Tory leaderships gave us reason to expect was still possible. On the left, we would do well to recognise its conditions of emergence, and its attempt to reframe politics around a mix of market-driven localism and soft-power, neo-conservative internationalism, if we are to mount our own hegemonic challenge to reshape British politics after Blair.

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