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"Technology" in UK Conservative Party rhetoric, 1979–2019: An integrative dual-method conceptual and ideological analysis

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Abstract

This article presents an integrative dual-method conceptual and ideological analysis of British Conservative Party rhetoric from 1979 to 2019, focusing on the concept of "technology". It demonstrates the Conservatives have embraced "technology" rhetoric, and increasingly done so more than Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The article contends that "technology" rhetoric provides a window into the fluid process of ideological adaptation in Conservative Party politics. It contributes to the subdiscipline of British rhetorical studies in three ways: (1) methodologically, through development of a novel, theoretically informed integrative approach to mixed quantitative-qualitative rhetorical analysis; (2) empirically, through original analysis of a new composite corpus of British political rhetoric; and (3) theoretically, by interrogating use of the versatile political concept "technology" in Conservative Party rhetoric and ideology.

Keywords

conceptual history, ideology, integrative methods, rhetorical political analysis, technology, text analysis, UK Conservative Party

"Technology"[1] rhetoric seems to be the sole domain of the UK Labour Party. It is strongly associated with former prime ministers Harold Wilson (in office 1964–1970, 1974–1976) – especially Wilson's 1963 'white heat' party conference speech – and Tony Blair (1997–2007) – in Blair's case, futurist rhetoric heralding the 'information society'. Wilson and Blair aligned themselves and Labour so successfully with a "technology"-dependent modernisation narrative that they obscured the contemporaneous Conservative "technology" record of the post-war era. This is problematic but explicable. Progressive politicians articulate more comfortably a narrative of modernity imagining a utopian near-future achieved

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through widespread technological change. Such a narrative creates rhetorical discontinuity for Burkean conservatives who favour organic, measured change of society and politics. Nevertheless, "technology" rhetoric was not solely Labour Party fodder throughout post-war British history, despite assumptions to the contrary – much like with technology[2] policy (Crowcroft, 2017; Edgerton, 1996a, 1996b; Tomlinson, 1996, 2016). Further redressing this misconception is important, and a minor contribution of this paper – demonstrating long-standing use of "technology" as a political concept in Conservative Party rhetoric. Indeed, I demonstrate the Conservatives have embraced "technology" rhetoric *and* increasingly done so more than Labour and the Liberal Party/Social Democratic Party-Liberal Alliance/Liberal Democrats.[3] At first glance, this appears an ideologically counterintuitive rhetorical-political strategy – why would Conservatives embrace the non-conservative notions of progress and change so often associated with "technology"? But it is a long time since Burkean conservatism was the predominant ideological tradition within the Conservative Party. The puzzle is not why Conservatives favour "technology" rhetoric but rather which strands of their ideological heritage allow them to harness "technology" and conceptions of the future to political benefit – and whether non-conservative rhetoric may nevertheless serve conservative ends. Overall, in an era of divisive internal Conservative factionalism (Webb, 2024), I contend "technology" rhetoric provides a window into the fluid process of ideological adaptation in Conservative Party politics.

To make this case I develop an interdisciplinary, dual-method analytical framework. Theoretically, this combines rhetorical political analysis (RPA), a subdiscipline within British political studies, with conceptual history, a subdiscipline within intellectual history. Methodologically, this integrates quantitative comparative content analysis (CA) with qualitative RPA (both computationally, in NVivo). The corpus contains Conservative, Labour and Liberal* general election manifestos and leader's conference speeches between 1979 and 2019.

The first section presents a conceptual history of "technology", surveys theoretical literature and defines analytical terms. A methodological literature review follows, before detailing CA and RPA methods. In the third and fourth sections, I present the quantitative (comparative CA) then qualitative (RPA) analyses. Finally, I integrate these analyses and consider their implications.

"Technology" hitherto seldom featured in studies of British political rhetoric. This article contributes to the subdiscipline in three ways: (1) methodologically, through development of a novel, theoretically informed integrative approach to mixed quantitative-qualitative rhetorical analysis; (2) empirically, through original analysis of a new composite corpus of British political rhetoric; and (3) theoretically, by interrogating use of the versatile political concept "technology" in Conservative Party rhetoric and ideology.

Analysing "technology" rhetoric: Theoretical literature

To study "technology" as a concept over time risks ahistoricism. '*New technologies* is a historically relative term' (original emphasis; Marvin, 1988: 2). "New" technologies' impact is equally contingent. Political rhetoric incanting "technology" would have us believe otherwise. "Technology" rhetoric frequently commits and masks technological determinism – the idea that technologies dictate social and political organisation and values. Technological change, on these terms, is often connected with material and economic progress. This interlinkage developed only recently. "Technology" in the early

20th century denoted a *field* of study, both the social relations (knowledge and practices) and means (technological machines, domesticated animals or otherwise) of production. Schatzberg (2006) explains how the concept's breadth at this time enabled nuanced critique of capitalism, made comprehensively by Veblen. Veblen (1908) emphasised the contingency of technological change and the neutrality of new technological inventions. It was only through labour and knowledge of application *combined with* new inventions that technological change equalled progress. Over time this meaning of "technology" – enabling a nuanced view of capitalism, labour and undetermined technological affordances – faded away. It was mostly replaced by an uncritical technological determinism focused narrowly on "technology" as *object*. Williams' (2014: 249 cf. "science": 215–218) treatment of "technology" suggests this semantic shift is partly due to the elevation of "science" to an authoritative, higher-order discourse. Because "science" now implied specialised knowledge, "technology" came instead to mean, as in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (COED): (1) 'the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes' or (2) 'machinery and equipment based on such knowledge' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2008).[4] Thus relegated by "science", Veblen's earlier emphasis – on the collective nature of technological knowledge and the importance of labour in its application – is already lost in the COED. However, the concept's polysemy degenerated further. During the later 20th century, the second COED definition – 'machinery and equipment' rather than 'application of scientific knowledge' – increasingly captured the public's imagination through each successive 'digital novelty' (Edgerton, 2013: 142). In effect, the second meaning of "technology" swallowed the first. The trajectory for "technology" as a concept has been from critique of capitalism to celebration of it.

My approach for study of "technology" rhetoric draws primarily from RPA (Finlayson, 2007). More broadly, I follow colleagues working in the interpretive, ideational or discursive traditions in political studies (Bevir and Rhodes, 1998, 2003; Blyth, 1997; Finlayson, 2004; Hay, 2006; Schmidt, 2008). However, my interest in conceptual evolution required bridging RPA with other disciplines. I drew inspiration from the German tradition of intellectual history, *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), particularly Koselleck (cf. Nikiforova, 2015), and also Williams' work on 'keywords' in cultural studies. Williams (2014: xxx) highlighted the 'active social and political values' inscribed in the 'meanings' of concepts. These meanings were tied to 'their contexts' – a historically contingent time and place. Similarly, Koselleck (2004) repoliticised concepts within their historical context and focused on the construction of *time* within texts (a crucial feature of "technology" rhetoric).

Combining RPA with conceptual approaches is important because tracing the changing meaning of "technology" over time is a task more familiar to 'intellectual history after the linguistic turn' than political analysis (Schatzberg, 2006: 488n.5). The distance from political theory is not so great, however: I follow Palonen (2005: 351) in thinking analysts can 'read politicians as theorists'. Interest in politicians' rhetoric therefore becomes intellectual historical analysis of everyday politics. Speeches and manifestos as analysed here present 'political ideas as they are found "in the wild"' (Finlayson, 2012: 751). Koselleck (1989) and Skinner (1969) maintain such analysis must *repoliticise* and *rehistoricise* concepts divorced from their context (Palonen, 2002). At the level of linguistic analysis, Hall's (1996) dissection of race as a 'floating signifier' – or concept mobilised for divergent political ends – performs this repoliticisation. Similarly, Freeden (1998: 88) argues ideologies are 'loose composites of *decontested* concepts' (my emphasis). Ideologies in this view take competing definitions of concepts and fix their meaning – 'remov[e] their

meanings from contest' – to promote one possible vision of a political issue (Freeden, 2003: 54). The conceptual approach I propose follows Hall and Freeden by studying each mobilisation of "technology" – effectively the desired *signified* rather than the signifier – as deployed in a specific political context.

Beyond repoliticisation through ideological analysis, conceptual RPA requires attention to *time*, to rehistoricise concepts. There are no natural meanings: 'even "timeless" truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure' (Skinner, 1969: 53). "Technology" rhetoric often seeks to organise 'temporal experience' such that its audience perceive "the future" rushing faster towards them, embodied in each new technological novelty (Koselleck, 2004: 4). Koselleck calls this *temporalisation*, and located its effect in numerous concepts likewise evident in the British rhetoric studied here: "modernisation", "progress", "history" and "revolution".

This rhetorical approach to ideological analysis (Finlayson, 2012) acknowledges the disputed complexity of *ideology* but follows Vincent's (1994: 206) 'ordinary mundane expectation of the term', that is, a collection of 'interconnected concepts, values and principles providing a set of relatively coherent beliefs about human nature, human agency, action and social, political, moral and economic interaction'. Thus, I give short shrift to the Conservative claim to ideology-free governance – perhaps the Party's most effective piece of rhetoric and indeed an ideological claim itself. Oakeshott (1962: 122–123) may have warned that ideology 'is ultimately dangerous' and cannot 'take the place of understanding a tradition of political behaviour'. Yet the experiential, practical rationality of the dispositional 'tradition' argument conceals the hierarchical conservatism in its 'organic' view of change and order in politics.

A key question is whether the Conservative Party remains *conservative* or not (having established it as *ideological*). Garnett (2023: 174) correctly labels British party-based Conservatism an 'elastic tradition'. The Party's success as an electoral vehicle for non-conservative ideas is clear: 'the Conservative Party offered ideological liberals of various kinds a chance to pursue their favoured causes under a much more successful brand name' (Garnett, 2023: 168). Various assessments of the Party nevertheless suggest social conservatives (Heppell and Hill, 2005) or the 'traditional right on law and order' (Norton, 1990: 42) remained important to the project, despite heavier emphasis on economic neoliberalism since Thatcher's election. The following analysis takes such observations as a starting point – including Heppell and Hill's (2005) distinction between three ideological policy divides in the Party, over economic, European, and social/sexual/moral policies. I then ask what "technology" rhetoric can teach us about ideological competition and adaptation within the Party. However, rather than setting the analysis within the groupings offered by such typologies, I follow most closely an ideological categorisation proposed by Perri 6 (1998: 12) when considering the intellectual reconstruction of the British centre-right during the years of New Labour hegemony: neoconservatism, neo-Burkeanism, neoliberalism and political libertarianism.

The fact the Conservative Party has provided a home for non-conservative ideas does not answer whether the Party remains conservative. The capital-C, small-c distinction is important; non-conservative rhetoric may serve conservative ends. What do I mean by *conservative*? Taking conservatism seriously as an ideology requires identification of its core principles. In the original, Burkean vein these are: tradition and prescription; order and authority; hierarchy and natural inequality; organic, measured change; scepticism of reason, preference for experience and prejudice; community over individual (Barnes, 1994; Burke, 2012 [1790]; Freeden, 1998). In what follows I hew to Huntington's (1957:

455) situational definition of conservatism as a 'system of ideas employed to justify any established social order'. Conservatism is oriented 'towards the process of [institutional] change' – controlling it – 'rather than towards the purpose and direction of change' – like non-conservative ideologies, such as (neo)liberalism (Huntington, 1957: 458).

"Technology" in rhetoric: An integrative, dual-method analytical approach

Methodological literature

Hitherto, scholars showed more interest in new technologies' impact *on* rhetoric rather than rhetoric *about* new technologies (Finlayson, 2014: 431; Toye, 2011: 192). Where "technology" features, this is brief and generally related to Wilson's and Blair's modernisation projects:

> Blair, like Harold Wilson before him, described the present as 'new times', defined by technological, social, and scientific change. (Robinson, 2017: 40)

> [P]rime ministers' rhetoric has served different, but often interrelated functions[, such as] Wilson and Blair's respective efforts to associate themselves with visions of a progressive, technologically-dynamic nation. (Toye, 2011: 186–187)

In Wilsonian and Blairite rhetoric, "technology" hurries change towards modernity, promoting progressive replacement of traditional hierarchies. Yet these works focus more on "modernisation" than "technology" (Finlayson, 2003; Freeden, 1999).

Occasional exceptions exist. Edgerton (1991: xvii) argued 'the history of science, technology and industry [does not] tend to be seen in [its] political and ideological context'. He likewise lamented how 'our future-oriented rhetoric has underestimated the past, and overestimated the power of the present' – therefore limiting most accounts of technological change to 'reheated futurism' (Edgerton, 2008: 206, x). Hicks (2017: 4) warned our 'false sense of futurity' obscures how 'new technologies often help certain classes consolidate power while stripping power from others' (cf. Mullaney et al., 2021; Winner, 1980). Within political studies, Finlayson's (2011) dissection of David Cameron's Big Society agenda is an outlier. The Big Society demonstrates that 'Cameronism', in Finlayson's telling, was an anti-statist, individualist, "entrepreneurial" cultural mindset that was deeply technologically determinist.

Studies utilising computer-assisted text analysis similarly offer little direct knowledge for my purpose. Perren and Sapsed's (2013) interrogation of *innovation* in UK parliamentary debates between 1960 and 2005 provides a close but unsuitable parallel. While they do analyse decade-by-decade changes in concepts associated with *innovation*, their computational corpus linguistic approach is highly structuralist and multi-synchronic, so by design runs counter to my commitment to rehistoricise and repoliticise "technology".

"Technology" also plays a minimal role in the policy agendas project (PAP; see, for example, Jennings and John, 2009: 845; John et al., 2013: 90). Moreover, the PAP's broad statistical method ill-suits my purpose. Hofferbert and Budge (1992) provide more insight. Following the approach of the comparative manifestos project (CMP), their content coding method is comparable to the PAP but applied to party competition rather than policy making, tracing change in policy emphases within election manifestos. Hofferbert

and Budge (1992: 173) further dispel the myth the Conservatives had no post-war technology policy. Applying their CMP coding method would demand substantial effort beyond the purpose CA serves here. However, NVivo provides a comparable tool to assess concepts' relative frequency in manifestos.

Finally, to bridge conceptual history with RPA requires a specific theoretico-methodological approach. As such I ignored Aristotelian appeals and other classical aspects of rhetorical study (Aristotle, 2004; Atkins and Finlayson, 2013: 162–163; Finlayson and Martin, 2014: 7). Instead, I focused on argumentative structure (*arrangement*) and use of rhetorical *techniques* or style – simile, metaphor, puns, anecdotes, alliteration and so forth (Crines and Heppell, 2017: 234ff). Decisions about arrangement and techniques require judgement of the *audience* for the reception of rhetoric. This demands assessment of the broader rhetorical *situation*. Situation encompasses the venue and the audience within it (for a speech), and the process of mediation for spoken and written word. I was conscious of ready-made 'scripts' in rhetoric – like familiar ideological constellations of concepts – and how rhetoric may be influenced by the demands of institutionalised and ritualised events like conference speeches (Martin, 2014: 11). Critically, I was interested in how scripts or other rhetorical constructions form persuasive *narratives* arguing a political point or framing a case for policy change (Finlayson, 2007: 557). In sum, this approach centres on rhetorical context (situation, audience, politico-historical time and place) and how it intersects with rhetorical argument (attempted persuasion through considered combination of concepts, ideology, appeals, arrangement and techniques). By design this is a broad, historical approach to RPA.

Research questions and methods

This project sprang from an impression the Conservative Party in the 2010s spoke differently about "technology" than Labour and the Liberal Democrats, indicating a(n ideologically counterintuitive) rhetorical-political strategy. To investigate I proposed three research questions, answers to which I develop section by section:

1. Did "technology" feature equally in Conservative, Labour and Liberal* rhetoric between 1979 and 2019?
   - Method: quantitative comparative CA
2. How does the Conservative Party talk about "technology"?
   - Method: RPA
3. What can "technology" rhetoric teach us about Conservative ideological adaptation?
   - Method: historically and theoretically informed integrative synthesis

Cases. The Conservative, Labour and Liberal* parties were the three major parties by vote share at general elections between 1979 and 2019.[5]

Corpus. I analysed 156 primary texts between 1979 and 2019: 33 general election manifestos – 11 per party – and 123 party leaders' conference speeches –41 per party.[6] The corpus' total word count was 1,343,508.

CA method. I utilised CA to produce statistics on use of "technology" by the Conservatives, Liberal*s and Labour between 1979 and 2019. To quantify this data, I used

language analysis software (NVivo) to measure frequency of "technology", broken down into its composite word stems at two points, *tech/nolog/y* (Bazeley, 2007). In quantitative text analysis terminology, this automated CA is a dictionary, or counting, method (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013: 274–275; Welbers et al., 2017: 254–255).[7]

Through NVivo, I produced absolute usage data for *tech/nolog/y* and the relative percentage of each text's word count accounted for by *tech/nolog/y*. Tabulating results as descriptive statistics in frequency tables allowed comparison between texts, between political leaders and between parties. Finally, I contextualised these results through close reading, to judge relative importance of "technology" within each text and to identify implicit reference to "technology" through other words and concepts collocated immediately with *tech/nolog/y* or interspersed throughout each text.

This method allowed for narrow linguistic study of *tech/nolog/y* as word and broad contextual study of "technology" as concept. While the frequency component of the methodological framework is blunt, it illuminated patterns – like increased Conservative usage of "technology" starting from the mid-2000s – that informed the subsequent, deeper RPA. CA captured linguistic data on *tech/nolog/y* while RPA ensured inclusion of the political and social category of "technology" where *tech/nolog/y* was absent from a sentence or text. This analytic process prevented the raw frequency data from signifying false importance, thereby screening for false positives. Furthermore, by providing initial usage patterns for *tech/nolog/y*, CA served as an analytical heuristic – effectively, an initial automated coding step for the RPA.

RPA method. Taking the automated *tech/nolog/y* codes within NVivo as starting point, I "hand" coded the 156 texts in NVivo. This required (1) interpretation of comparative CA results; (2) close reading; (3) detailed thematic coding, including categorising concepts, historical events, ideology, political figures and rhetorical techniques; and (4) analysis of the detailed coding to identify patterns across the corpus. Search and display tools within NVivo assist (3) and (4) but all these steps are effectively manual. Following deep analysis of the corpus, the final RPA step was (5) contextualisation, as demanded by Koselleck and Skinner, to repoliticise and rehistoricise the texts. In practice this meant systematic reference to primary and secondary historical and political materials about the period 1979–2019.

Comparative use of "technology" in major party rhetoric, 1979–2019: Quantitative analysis

Strong differences were evident in the salience of "technology" and its use as a persuasive tool in Conservative, Labour and Liberal* rhetoric between 1979 and 2019. The strongest trends were connected with the Conservatives. "Technology" increased in salience in Conservative conference speeches starting with Cameron's double address in 2006, and in Conservative manifestos from 2010. By comparison, Labour emphasised "technology" less after Blair left office, at conference and in manifestos. Like the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats increased their emphasis on "technology" in manifestos, although this increase appeared from 2015 rather than 2010. "Technology", however, featured less in Liberal* leaders' conference speeches than the other parties, excepting Vince Cable's (2018) thorough treatment of 'relentlessly advancing new technologies' in 2018.

Table 1 presents the analysis of manifestos. As a percentage of manifesto word count, Conservative use of *tech/nolog/y* was lowest between 1979 and 2005, and highest between

Table 1. Percentage of manifesto word count accounted for by *tech/nolog/y*, 1979–2019.

Party	1979–2005	2010–2019	Percentage change
Conservative	0.081	0.208	154.825
Labour	0.161	0.105	–34.956
Liberal*	0.123	0.160	30.233

Such low percentages were expected – the most frequent keywords, *people, new* and *government*, accounted for 0.90%, 0.77% and 0.69% of manifesto word counts, respectively.

Table 2. Average use of *tech/nolog/y* per conference speech, 1979–2019.

Party	1979–2005	2006–2019	Percentage change
Conservative	1.037	2.929	182.398
Labour	2.963	1.786	−39.732
Liberal*	0.808	1.429	76.871

Table 3. Prime ministers' average use of *tech/nolog/y* in conference speeches, 1979–2019.

Prime minister	Average use of *tech/nolog/y* per conference speech
Wilson*	4.5
Thatcher	2
Major	0.5
Blair	3.3
Brown	1.33
Cameron	2.33
May	3.67
Johnson	10

The asterisk delineates Wilson from the leaders formally within this study's timeframe.

2010 and 2019. Labour's pattern was the opposite, from highest use to lowest. The Liberal* Party sat in the middle, its usage marginally increasing from 2010.

Likewise, Table 2 demonstrates that from 2006 the Conservatives' average use of *tech/nolog/y* increased markedly in conference speeches. Conversely, Labour leaders used the term less. Were it not for Blair's final address in 2006 – praising change through globalisation, '[t]oday's technology is profoundly empowering' (Blair, 2006; cf. Fairclough, 2000) – the drop would be more substantial. Liberal Democrat "technology" rhetoric increased in frequency, but the increase is less pronounced and to a lesser average frequency than the Conservatives.

Table 3 presents prime ministers' average use of *tech/nolog/y* in conference speeches. While Wilson's premierships fall outside the study timeframe – 1964–1970, 1974–1976 – given his "technological" reputation I included him to contextualise the averages of subsequent prime ministers and party leaders. On the figures alone, Wilson's reputation is justified, as is Blair's. However, high averages for Neil Kinnock, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Vince Cable suggest Wilson's 'white heat' rhetoric crowds out common acknowledgement that "technology" is a versatile political concept not tied to a particular ideological or party tradition (Tables 4–6). It has oft been used by Britain's political

leaders, although some manage to connect themselves with it more effectively in the nation's consciousness.

The confluence of technological rhetorical pitch, electoral cycles and time in office for the incumbent government may provide a partial explanation for Wilson's and Blair's success. Grube's (2011) theory of 'cycles of election-defining rhetoric' highlights the recurring patterns of communication in electoral politics, to which some "technology" rhetoric can be mapped. In the 'pre-government' phase of the rhetorical-electoral cycle, the 'key rhetorical themes' are '[f]uture focussed' and '[c]ritical of [the] incumbent's longevity' (Grube, 2013: 64). "Technology" rhetoric suits this critique, and in 1964 Labour had been in opposition for 13 years, by 1997 for 18. As Blair and Wilson sought to establish themselves as legitimate alternate prime ministers, this political and historical convergence rendered Wilson's 'white heat' and Blair's comparable "technology" rhetoric more potent. Thus Blair's average use of *tech/nolog/y* in conference speeches is higher when his period as opposition leader is considered (Table 5), and Wilson's average before the 1964 election is far higher than any other leader studied here.[8] To reinforce this point, Wilson's emphasis on "technology" faded by his second premiership (at least on this linguistic data): his average for 1974–1975 is 0. Similarly, at conference in 2006,[9] Cameron called for modernisation of the Conservative Party (Dommett, 2015; Peele and Francis, 2016) and the British state by arguing neither had kept pace with technological change:

> [I]n an age of amazing technological advance, instant information exchange, and empowered consumers who don't have the deference of previous generations, people expect more . . .
>
> We are inventive, creative, irreverent and daring. In this young century, these old advantages give us [Britain] the edge we need . . . Preparing the ground as we [the Conservative Party] move to the centre, meeting the priorities of the modern world.

A crucial component of Cameron's modernisation pitch was personal. In the peroration, Cameron (2006) referenced his age: 'In eight days' time I will be forty years old. I have so much to look forward to'. He knew, perhaps, he would be the youngest prime minister in 198 years if elected in 2010 (Seldon, personal communication, 2020). "Technology" reinforced his message of generational change, as it had for Wilson and Blair.

Tables 4–6 present average use of *tech/nolog/y* at conference for party leaders. Conservative data in Table 4 demonstrate the increase from Cameron on.

Table 4. Conservative leaders' average use of *tech/nolog/y* in conference speeches, 1979–2019.

Conservative party leader	Average use of *tech/nolog/y* per conference speech
Thatcher	2
Major	0.5
Hague	0.25
Duncan Smith	0
Howard	0
Cameron	2
May	3.67
Johnson	10

Johnson's high average should (mostly) be understood in light of Brexit, as should May's. Indeed, Brexit propelled Johnson much like the millennium helped Blair and New Labour, the 'two cultures' debate assisted Wilson (Ortolano, 2009; Snow, 1959), and time in opposition drove Blair, Wilson and Cameron. Context changes; the role of "technology" to aid persuasion remains.

Looking further back, Blair's hegemony over "technology" and "information" at least partially explains 8 years of low Conservative averages under William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard. Conservative conference speeches during this period, and the 2001 and 2005 manifestos, feature a reactionary, authoritarian conservativism through focus on crime and, increasingly, immigration (cf. Bale, 2010: 123ff). "Technology" assists little with such an agenda, except through advances in surveillance technology – an affordance Major discussed multiple times at conference.

Finally, Thatcher's average is four times higher than Major's. Personal interest may partially explain this: Agar (2011) argues Thatcher's experience as the only scientist-turned-prime minster influenced her politics on science (and technology) policy. I contend urgency of message holds greater explanatory power: Thatcher utilised "technology" to support her change agenda. Thatcher's conference speeches in the early- to mid-1980s invoked "technology" most frequently, arguing Britain must become more productive by "modernising" its industrial relations framework and denationalising its industries, or forgo international economic competitiveness permanently. 'We can't opt out of the technology race and try to stand comfortably aside. If we were to do so we should lose not just particular products but whole industries' (Thatcher, 1982).

"Technology" was a comparatively more sustained concern of Labour leaders at conference (Table 5).

Table 5. Labour leaders' average use of *tech/nolog/y* in conference speeches, 1979–2019.

Labour party leader	Average use of *tech/nolog/y* per conference speech
Wilson*	4.54
Callaghan	1.5
Foot	0
Kinnock	3.63
Smith	1
Blair	4
Brown	1.33
Miliband	1
Corbyn	2

Kinnock's high average could be interpreted as inheritance of "technology" as an aspect of Labour rhetorical leadership passed from Wilson on eventually to Blair. The legacy is naturally more complex. All three spoke about 'rapidly and radically changing technology' (Kinnock, 1985). Blair shared Wilson's (1963) emphasis on controlling the 'rate of progress we have to face' rather than allowing the 'blind imposition of technological advance'. Yet, both put faith in modernisation to solve problems caused by technological change. Thus Wilson (1963) promised 'the conscious, planned, purposive use of scientific progress' – *science* in the sense of knowledge producing technological novelties – would 'provide undreamed of living standards and the possibility of leisure ultimately on an unbelievable scale'. Similarly, Blair (1995) declared '[k]nowledge in

this new world is power, information is opportunity and technology can make it happen if we use it properly and if we plan and think ahead for the future'. Their optimistic visions of "the future" constructed the present as *new* and therefore organised time such that neither present nor past experience provided knowledge for current political problems. Robinson (2017: 39–40) explains how this rhetoric emphasises 'social democratic time' – the inevitability of modernisation and progress – over 'socialist understandings of time' that respect 'interplay between past and future'. In this regard Wilson and Blair broke with the Party's socialist tradition, seeking ideological renewal (Crines, 2014), while Kinnock trod more carefully.

In the context of "technology" and Conservative ideology, it is worth expanding Robinson's temporal schema. Where Conservative leaders welcome modernisation and technological change, they likewise embrace social democratic time, although they likely prefer to see it as a neoliberal 'preemptive orientation toward the political future' (Cooper, 2017: 313). Conversely, they break with what I will term *conservative time* – deep connection to the institutions, traditions and hierarchies of the past, and preservation of them in the present. Unlike socialist 'interplay between past and future', conservative time denies the future almost entirely (Burkean openness to organic change allows more evolution than the preservationism of traditional conservatism, for example). It is not solely a neoliberal openness to modernisation that allows Conservatives to harness conceptions of "the future" in their "technology" rhetoric, however. Cooper (2017: 312–314) explains how neoconservatism broke with the past-focused nostalgia of traditional conservatism when it realised it offered no response to the 'antinormative and redistributive promises' of the liberatory movements of the 1960s. Nostalgia had to be replaced with a future-focused reactionary rhetoric of 'reinvented tradition' (Cooper, 2017: 313), a 'moralization of a certain imaginary of the West and its values' (Brown, 2006: 697). Reinvented tradition entails a simultaneous acceptance (impossible for traditional conservatives) that some things have changed for good but that the expanded remit of the welfare state offered political possibility if neoconservatives could moralise state power through a re-imagined future. This tendency is stronger in the United States' strain of neoconservatism but is nevertheless evident in the United Kingdom. Reinvented tradition and associated neoconservative understanding of time is most visible in rhetoric about Brexit; Cooper's and Brown's arguments recall O'Toole's (2018) and Hay's (2024) dissections of Brexit imaginaries. Thus neoliberalism *and* neoconservatism offer Conservatives a means to deal with the future, albeit in different ways – determinist optimism for neoliberals and moralist authoritarianism for neoconservatives – with a shared ahistoricism.

Aside from David Steel and Vince Cable, Table 6 demonstrates Liberal* leaders rarely drew on "technology" at conference.

Table 6. Liberal* leaders' average use of *tech/nolog/y* in conference speeches, 1979–2019.

Liberal* party leader	Average use of *tech/nolog/y* per conference speech
Steel	1.6
Ashdown	0.44
Kennedy	0.14
Campbell	0.5
Clegg	0.43
Farron	1
Cable	6.5
Swinson	1

Steel's addresses in the mid-1980s provided the most interesting material. Against the backdrop of Thatcher's push for industrial change, Steel maintained that only the Liberals would properly manage such upheaval. Neither Labour nor the Conservatives could 'reconcil[e] the necessities of industrial modernisation and technological innovation with the human needs of understanding and security' because they were blinded by ideology, respectively 'the half-baked Marxism of the left or the fanatical market-ism of the right' (Steel, 1984). Where "technology" featured in other Liberal* leaders' speeches, it was in vague statements familiar to all three parties about the 'revolution we are experiencing in knowledge, in technology and communications' (Ashdown, 1997) or, increasingly, the importance of 'a clean, green economy. . . powered by the new low-carbon technologies' (Clegg, 2012).

Deeper comparative study is beyond my scope.

Three key points arose from this analysis. First, the Conservative Party's use of "technology" demonstrated awareness of the concept's ideological malleability (or semantic plasticity) and therefore its utility in rhetorical construction of specific, delimited political possibilities, such as the necessity of large-scale industrial change in the 1980s under Thatcher, or Cameron's embellishment of his electoral pitch. Second, "technology" increased in salience for the Conservatives from 2006, in comparison to a decline for Labour and marginal increase for the Liberal Democrats. This provides novel, "technology" rhetoric-specific evidence for parallel work on Conservative modernisation in this period, and demonstrates a point of difference in recent British political party rhetorical strategy. Finally, we began to see the ideological traditions within which Conservatives voiced their "technology" rhetoric – neoliberalism and neoconservatism provided opportunity whereas neo-Burkean conservatism did not.

Conservative Party "technology" rhetoric: Qualitative analysis

The Conservatives' "technology" rhetoric divided into two overarching themes between 1979 and 2019: "technology" and the economy, and the relationship between new technologies and the state. I analyse each in turn.

"Technology" and the economy

The main theme in Conservative "technology" rhetoric between 1979 and 2019 was the role of "technology" in capitalising on opportunities for economic growth. "Technology" served as a tool of Conservative rhetorical political economy – assisting the Party to render neutral its shifting ideological case for organisation of the economy, society and political interests. Rhetoric within this theme utilised "technology" to justify systemic economic visions and set (moving) limits on state intervention in the economy.

Two narratives emerged within this theme. The first argued for unfettered private enterprise, framing "technology" as product of and tool for private sector success. The second narrative promoted national and regional revival, framing "technology" as emblem and guarantee of British competitiveness. This narrative drew on euphemisms for localised underperformance – 'rebalance our economy', 'levelling up' – and built on geographic slogans – the 'Northern Powerhouse' – to create a near-future of national unity in improved economic performance.

The first economic narrative framed "technology" as *opportunity*. Close association between progress, the private sector and "technology" was critical to the execution of a neoliberal ideological argument common under Thatcher and revived under Cameron in different form as he sought to modernise the Party and revive its electoral fortunes.

In the 1980s, "technology" reinforced Thatcher's case for 'denationalisation', free markets and industrial relations reform. She argued it was 'vital to *our future*' to ensure 'good management and good industrial relations' by 'accept[ing] new technology' (my emphasis – note Thatcher's (1982) modernising temporality). "Technology" helped her dismiss those resisting change – by inference, the union movement (Tomlinson, 2021) – as opponents of prosperity achieved through technologically enhanced productivity. During this period "technology" connoted private sector job creation and new methods of production, within a broader vision of systemic economic dynamism enabled by privatisation and regulatory change. Thatcher framed "technology" as an inexorable yet neutral determining force, but in truth it performed ideological work. It was uncritically positive despite its (purportedly temporary) negative employment impact: 'new technology . . . has two effects. The first one is redundancies; the second, and slightly later, new jobs and new products become possible' (Thatcher, 1984).

Thatcher's conference "technology" rhetoric recalls Mallock's vision of conservative political economy a century earlier. Mallock (1882) dismissed the labour theory of value, instead valorising invention through ability. Individual genius, and the technological innovations it produces, require protection from state interference. Redistribution or other fetters on property and capital deny progress for all made by the intellectual contribution of those few with greater ability (Barnes, 1994: 333–334). Mallock's defence of inequality was more explicit than Thatcher's but both render labour subsidiary to new technological means of production while celebrating those developing new technologies.

Thatcher likely never heard of Mallock, however. Hayek is the most important influence on her political economic thought, and the intellectual source for the consistent emphasis on free enterprise and the dynamism of free markets in this first economic "technology" narrative (Hayek, 2015; Shearmur, 2006). As in Hayek's case against planning, the argument is that state interference in economic affairs stifles innovation that produces hitherto unimagined breakthroughs. A Hayekian stress on dynamism is critical to both economic narratives analysed here, although market fundamentalism is deemphasised in the second narrative post-Brexit.

This first economic "technology" narrative faded during Major's premiership and was essentially absent during the Conservatives' first 9 years in opposition under Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard. The absence of "technology" for the Conservatives reflects the politics of the time: Blair and New Labour occupied this rhetorical ground too effectively. Following the unpopular poll tax, recession of the early 1990s and bruising defeat in the 1997 election, Hague and the Party initially sought other means of renewal, for example, Hague's (1997) claim at conference that the Conservatives favoured 'a democratic, popular Conservatism that listens, that has compassion at its core'. This faded into a socially conservative, immigration-focused rightward turn under Duncan Smith and Howard (as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) grew in popularity). The 2005 manifesto, for example, opined '[i]t's not racist to impose limits on immigration' (Conservative Party, 2005: 18). Taking the leadership in Blair's premiership's twilight years, "technology" (among other issues) offered Cameron fertile ground to revive the Conservatives' fortunes.

Under Cameron, "technology" no longer meant industrial manufacturing but first and foremost *digital* "tech". The individualist entrepreneurial philosophy of Cameron's Big Society favoured small consumer technological devices and Internet applications because it promoted the aspiration that everyone could create them once people's creative potential was unleashed from the state's shackles (Finlayson, 2011). Having the resources to manufacture the 'wings of the world's biggest jumbo jet' is beyond most risk-taking, innovative East Londoners, but founding the next 'Facebook, Intel, Google [or] Cisco' is not (Cameron, 2011). Class would be transcended through (technological) equality of opportunity as Britain became a place 'where brains matter more, where technologies shape our lives' (Cameron, 2012). Much as Thatcher and the New Right constructed their case for change around a claimed crisis of economic and state failure in the 1970s (Hay, 1994: 703), so too the financial crisis provided urgency for Cameron's vision. '[E]conomic recovery and growth' demanded austerity to 'deal with Labour's debt crisis' (Conservative Party, 2010: viii). Technological innovation through the promotion of an entrepreneurial culture enabled the minimisation of state support for industry and public services.

Yet an apparent decoupling from Thatcherite rhetoric also began under Cameron. In one sense, the Big Society attempted to manage increasing dissatisfaction with the instability brought by the neoliberal economic settlement. Industries and companies had proved mobile while people in the regions did not. That this undermined a conservative desire to protect a particular "way of life" had hitherto gone mostly unacknowledged. In response, the Big Society – through the Internet and digital communications devices – would reconnect people with community long since lost. Cameron highlighted the Burkean conservative notions of personal responsibility and greater family/local/self-reliance, arguing technological change would empower communities: '[w]e now live in an age when technology can put information that was previously held by a few into the hands of the many' (Conservative Party, 2010: 63).

This response sought to tackle the social consequences of economic dislocation without addressing the root causes within the extant economic model (Gray, 2019). The technological elements of the Big Society only envisaged connection for those of a certain class, education and, usually, urban postcode. "Technology" as concept in this period therefore displayed a privileged cultural myopia. The rhetoric was promising equality of opportunity when the political demand was for equality of outcome. As such, this rhetoric could not correct the disruption of social and cultural traditions inherent to neoliberal free-marketism – indeed austerity only turbocharged this disruption and thus undercut the Big Society agenda (Maschette and Garnett, 2023). Neoliberal policy outweighed the Burkean conservative promise of this aspect of the Party's "technology" rhetoric. The Big Society therefore failed as an experimental evolution of Conservative Party ideology. The Internet and other digital technologies were not the means to incorporate a Hayekian economic model with a neo-Burkean social one.

A shift came with the 2016 Brexit referendum. Prioritisation of national and regional progress, over undistributed economic growth, introduced a narrow interventionist tone – focused on infrastructure construction and research and development (R&D) funding (where "technology" denotes *product* of state-funded "science", following the COED definition). This shift was sufficient to form a separate narrative, whereby the first, market-oriented economic "technology" narrative coexisted alongside the second, soft-interventionist economic "technology" narrative. While this tendency existed under Cameron and his Chancellor, George Osborne, it became more evident during May's premiership. This second narrative emphasised *British competitiveness*, incorporating a stronger conception of national performance, as opposed to market fundamentalism and finance capitalism.

This shift necessitated a dual rhetorical strategy – and return to different ideological traditions within the Party – to counter the class division amplified by economic neoliberalism. First, the paternalist tendency of Benjamin Disraeli's one-nation conservatism: promising increased economic redistribution (through apparent soft-interventionist collectivism), with a view to promoting social unity (see Hickson et al., 2020: 336). Second, the equally unifying assurance of nationalism, in this case through enhanced national economic performance (channelling Disraeli's earlier emphasis on empire; Barnes, 1994). Merging these two required "technology" to simultaneously signify British prosperity outside the European Union (EU), and a tool to redress regional imbalances. This shift first appeared before the Brexit vote but took more complete form afterwards. It introduced tension into the Party's "technology" rhetoric, but this is not fatal. Competing ideological traditions, and the rhetoric invoking them, speak to different audiences but mutually create a government's 'meta-narrative' – its 'all-encompassing story' (Grube, 2012: 569). So, on the one hand, in the Peelite-cum-Thatcherite liberal tradition, Brexit was justified through emphasis on British competitiveness and future prosperity via trade deals with non-European partners – supported by technological breakthroughs like 'commercially viable miniature fusion reactors for sale around the world', as Johnson (2019) fancifully promised to conference a month before the 2019 general election. And yet, on the other hand and taking after Disraeli (in the neo-Burkean tradition), Johnson's commitment to 'levelling up' the regions, May's pledge to move 'forward, together' and 'govern in the interests of ordinary, working families', and Osborne and Cameron's earlier 'Northern Powerhouse' all recognise the message in the Brexit vote of economic opportunity denied and political representation unfulfilled in the regions (Conservative Party, 2015, 2017: 6–10, 2019).

May is the critical figure in the shift to a soft-interventionist "technology" narrative. She struck a conciliatory economic tone for the working class, promising 'to tackle some of the economy's structural problems that hold people back' (May, 2016). Yet her reclamation of the one-nation conservative tradition was balanced with nationalism. The Party under her and since has promoted identification with Britishness through technological-patriotic appeals. The argument is that 'the UK can only fully exploit its distinct innovation strength outside the single market' (Edgerton, personal communication, 2020). Thus May (2017) recalled how '[i]t was here in Britain that we discovered the structure of DNA', and '[a]ll the technologies for sequencing the human genome have been developed in this country' so 'the future is bright, our potential is great, and if we choose the right path, the British Dream can be renewed'. This quote is instructive in understanding the trajectory of "technology" as a concept in Conservative rhetoric. Whereas "technology" was predominantly digital, individual and consumer-oriented in Cameron's usage, under May and Johnson it became expansive, scientific and national.

This seems to mark a return to national projects more familiar to the pre-Thatcher industrial R&D era. Liberal economist Jewkes (1972: 12) would dismiss such vainglorious attempts to boost 'national independence and prestige' through 'spectacular successes in technology'. Yet, this was exactly what Brexit called for: the referendum prompted this apparent return to planning for the British state. Neither Jewkes nor Hayek would take issue with the emphasis on dynamism that runs through this rhetoric, but they would beware the ostensible return to nationalist industrial strategy. This makes for a strange combination between the first economic narrative and the second, via a technologically determinist faith in innovation to produce progress, whether through the free market or limited state intervention.

New technologies, "technology" and the state

The secondary theme in the Conservatives' "technology" rhetoric dealt with "technology"in an *applied* sense. Conservative rhetoric within this theme negotiated the relationship between new technologies and the state. As with the first economic "technology" narrative, in the first narrative within this applied theme the Conservatives framed "technology"as *opportunity*, to assist reform of the British Civil Service. "Technology" reinforced the claimed need for the Civil Service to increase efficiency, promote competition and improve quality through creation of service markets, all to 'bring private sector enterprise into the public services' (Conservative Party, 1992). To succeed, the Civil Service must show 'greater readiness to adapt efficiently to change, including technological change, to manage the public service more effectively, and to see that the taxpayer gets value for money' (Conservative Party, 1987).

The Party argued that by 'harness[ing] the latest information technology [it would] place the public sector directly at the service of the citizen' (Conservative Party, 1997). In so doing, it would unleash the dynamism of technologically enabled, post-bureaucratic 'government direct' (Conservative Party, 1997). Such language held across eras. Fast forward to 2013: '[n]ew technology also means that for the first time individuals, entrepreneurs and businesses can now access and exploit public data in a way that increases accountability, drives choice and spurs innovation' (Cabinet Office, 2013). In truth this was not the 'first time' for the Conservative Party, the Civil Service or the public (cf. Hood and Lodge, 2007). Indeed, Francis Maude is the very same Conservative figure carrying this reform agenda from Major's government through to Cameron's. First, in 1991 as minister responsible for the Citizen's Charter (a public services reform programme; Prime Minister, 1991: 2) – which Major promised would 'make public services answer better to the wishes of their users' – or in 2013, as minister delivering the Government Digital Strategy, within which Maude promised '[i]n the future our services will be fit for the 21st Century – agile, flexible and digital by default' (Cabinet Office, 2013). What *was* new in 2013 were the technologies, which again helped the Conservatives argue for a transformed state. This meant advancement of a long-held ideological goal and equally served the then contemporary imperative of austerity. Such clear Conservative commitments were masked by the claimed necessity of public service modernisation due to technological advance.

This argument perpetuated a decades-long rhetoric of public services reform, called 'new public management' (NPM; Kane and Patapan, 2006). The Conservatives drew on the rhetorical power of "technology" to further prosecute this case for top-down bureaucratic reform and rationalisation of the state (Pollitt, 1996). Likewise, the Party relied on the temporalisation inherent to constructions like the 'post-bureaucratic age' to render their reforms seemingly timely or necessary – but NPM was no more the 'spirit of the age' in 2010 than when introduced decades earlier (Conservative Party, 2010: 35).

This narrative of public services reform necessitated by new technological affordances has been mostly absent from conference speeches and manifestos since 2010 – austerity did the job in practice so the rhetoric became redundant. Throughout this period new technologies featured in another Party narrative, however. Conservatives believe that alongside their commitment to state transformation (through Civil Service reform or otherwise), there remains a countervailing duty to guarantee state authority (Cecil, 1912: 210; Scruton, 1980: 19–20). Conservatives, Thatcher (1980) counselled, must provide 'a strong state determined to maintain in good repair the frame which surrounds society. But the frame should not be so heavy or so elaborate as to dominate the whole picture'. As

regards "technology" rhetoric, the Party tendency to expand state authority manifested in two areas. First, usage of new technologies for law enforcement. Second, expansion of legal/regulatory frameworks to prevent perceived and actual harm caused by new technologies. This has added two new conceptual associations to the Party's "technology" rhetoric – implicitly, "technology" as *control*, and explicitly, "technology" as *threat*.

From the early 1990s, the Party articulated a narrative of state control enhanced by 'revolutionised police technology' (Thatcher, 1990). Major displayed the most sustained interest. He promoted 'DNA testing', closed-circuit television (CCTV) – '[m]ore cameras mean less crime' – and physical surveillance, for example through 'an electronic way of tagging [young] offenders so we can confine them to their homes, and know that. . . curfew is being kept' (Major, 1993, 1995, 1996). Through the 2010s, the Party took up – and expanded upon – Major's interest in physical surveillance through new technological affordances. There is a sense of transition from support for the carceral state to the less overtly coercive potential of the surveillance state in its place. 'We need to complete our revolution in the way we manage offenders in the community, using the latest technology to keep criminals on the straight and narrow' (Conservative Party, 2015: 58). This transition from incarceration to surveillance aligns with the party leadership handover from former Home Secretary Michael Howard – fond of the slogan 'prison works' – to Cameron and the techno-social emphasis of the Big Society.

Conversely, new technological developments presented challenges for state control. For the Conservatives these can be split into two. First, perceived threat to social, cultural or moral norms created by new technologies, particularly for entertainment. Second, actual threat to citizens – especially concern for children – through exploitation or abuse made easier by new communications technologies and the Internet. In responding to the first challenge the Party articulated its clearest defence of social conservatism, opposing progress embodied in new technological developments. In this regard, the Party rejected determinist narration of "the future", but in delimited fashion. It thus displayed comfort in exercise of state power on morally subjective "technology" issues where it proved averse in economic affairs.

One example is the brief moral panic about "video nasties" – uncensored, violent films released straight to video – during Thatcher's premiership. The Party declared in manifestos at consecutive elections its alarm over 'the dangerous spread of violent and obscene video cassettes' (Conservative Party, 1983). It argued 'broadcasters [should] take full advantage of the opportunities presented by technological advances' but acknowledge 'deep public concern over the display of sex and violence on television' (Conservative Party, 1987). This narrative of suspicion of technological change carried through the first years of Major's premiership, then faded.

More recently, under May, the Party emphasised "technology" as threat. The fifth 'giant challenge' in the 2017 manifesto was 'fast-changing technology', which comes 'with new challenges and threats – to our security, privacy, emotional wellbeing, mental health and the safety of our children' (Conservative Party, 2017: 7, 77). Articulating this concern was a logical step from May's commitment to one-nation conservatism, promoting a paternal state on economic affairs, into an apparent neo-Burkean social conservatism, protective of cultural traditions and wary of change. Whereas May's rhetorical disparagement of economic neoliberalism sat uncomfortably with Thatcherite neoliberals, the Party's contemporaneous warning about the social implications of the advance of new technologies fit more comfortably with the conservative-authoritarian dimension of Thatcher's legacy.

Framing of "technology" as threat culminated in the 'Online Harms' white paper and associated legislative processes. This shift under May and since had multiple social and political precedents: ISIS beheading videos – including two British aid workers – disseminated online in 2014; the suicide of British teen Molly Russell in 2017 after viewing self-harm content on Instagram; the Cambridge Analytica data privacy scandal on Facebook, from 2015 onwards. As such, the challenge with this agenda and its rhetoric was breadth. Threat from "technology" spanned terrorism and child sexual abuse, to teen self-harm imagery, to cyberbullying and even online incivility. The neo-Burkean motivations for such an agenda were therefore difficult to square with the Party's liberal tradition. Westlake (2019) summarised the interventionist shift under May as temporary dominance of the 'Home Office View' – preference for direct solutions to control (supposedly) contained problems – over the 'Treasury View' – indirect, behavioural nudges for interconnected problems in a broader system. While Westlake contained his analysis to 'Tory economic thinking', the influence of the Home Office View during May's premiership clearly extended further. It shaped the May administration's conception of "technology" and the responses it saw as appropriate for it.

This is a critical point. Specific conceptions of "technology" in rhetoric are representative of the ideological commitments and political thought of the Party. Constructing "technology" as threat or control signifies starkly different choices – about the state, society and what to do with or to new technologies – than "technology" as opportunity or national competitiveness. Through these conceptions, it becomes clear the Party's ideological traditions exert a competing influence on "technology" rhetoric, but not evenly, not in all policy areas, and not linearly from one administration to the next (cf. Willetts, 2021). The function of "technology" shifts in the Party's rhetoric depending on its desired size of the state and its strategies for new technologies and technological affordances. No matter these shifts, however, "technology" remains a valued and versatile rhetorical device.

"Technology" rhetoric and Conservative ideological adaptation: Discussion and conclusion

"Technology" provides power for persuasion because it transcends its specific political and historical use. It does so because of its ideological malleability: it is effectively a rhetorical blank canvas. The term is almost always used as a generality, and this denial of specificity allows positive or negative associations. In this integrative, dual-method analysis, the term's polysemy extended to: opportunity, national competitiveness, dynamism, threat and control. These meanings are then attached to the common understanding of "technology" that developed over the 20th century: an object inscribed with power to determine the future. Such mystification of new technologies cuts against better public understanding of technologies' actual impact, but serves political rhetoric well. The Conservative Party has recognised this rhetorical potential. Moreover, as demonstrated, the Conservatives have recently sought to capitalise on this potential more than Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Brexit reinforced this development. The Conservative Party's embrace of "technology" rhetoric is no descriptive analytical curio, rather a creative political strategy. But how does this strategy sit with the Party's ideological traditions?

Freeden (1998: ch. 8) claimed two concepts define the core of small-c conservatism: control of change and maintenance of order. Futurist, determinist "technology" rhetoric should therefore introduce cognitive dissonance into the core of conservative ideology. Yet, the Conservative Party's embrace of "technology" rhetoric is only ideologically

counterintuitive if you assume the Party remains conservative in a neo-Burkean sense. Although it counts proponents of this tradition in its parliamentary and undoubtedly public membership, neo-Burkeanism finds only rare voice in Party rhetoric and policy, at least since Brexit and particularly since Johnson's purge of Party loyalists in September 2019 (Garnett, 2023: 159). The Party has come a long way since Burke's (2012 [1790]) reaction to the French Revolution. In particular, it has in recent decades proven itself adept at finding 'a response to the challenges of modernity' that goes beyond conservative defence of gradual, organic change (Hamilton, 2020; Hogg, 1947: 29). Scruton (1980: 27) once maintained conservatives are 'unable to appeal to any future that is not already present and past'. This is no longer the case for capital-C Conservatives. Accordingly, the terrain is set here by Oakeshott's private concession to Garnett (2023: 170) that 'Thatcher was not a "conservative ruler"'.

I have argued that the Conservative Party utilises conceptions of the future to political ends through "technology" rhetoric. It does this mostly through neoliberal determinist emphasis on progress via economic reform, or (less commonly) neoconservative social and moral criticism. While accounts of the Party and Thatcherism, in particular, often opt for (traditional) social conservatism as ideological descriptor (e.g. Heppell and Hill, 2005), over neoconservatism, this misses the will to *state* power/authority present under Thatcher and since, as opposed to distributed authority in non-state institutions. Furthermore, I established earlier the future orientation in neoconservatism that is lacking in traditionalist social conservatism and only warily accepted in Burkean conservatism, thus avoiding rhetorical discontinuity when wielding "technology" rhetoric. Therefore neo-Burkeanism was mainly apparent when rejecting technological change, as with video nasties or Online Harms.

The neo-Burkean outlier is the Internet-enabled community envisioned by the Big Society: 'Burke's Little Platoons . . . gone digital' (Hoskin and O'Brien, 2010). Traditional accounts of the Conservative Party argue its ideological flexibility explains its electoral success (Seldon and Snowdon, 2001), and although the Big Society failed in practice, as a neo-Burkean/neoliberal hybrid it is emblematic of Cameron's attempt at Conservative modernisation. Writing about fertile ideological domains for centre-right renewal in the early New Labour period, Perri 6 suggested the most promising combination for the Conservatives was just such a hybrid. Neoliberalism coupled with neo-Burkeanism would represent 'a quite new cultural settlement between authority and liberty' (Perri 6, 1998: 79). Cameron indeed shifted the Party rhetorically in this direction, after a lengthy, less-liberal interregnum under the three opposition leaders before him. Much like the Big Society, though, the progressive modernisation of Conservatism never eventuated in practice (Griffiths, 2014 cf. Peele and Francis, 2016). Whether we blame the financial crash or the politics of power – after governing in coalition but particularly because of the failed ploy to resolve perennial Party division over Europe – the ideological combination now in ascendency (albeit asymmetrically) is neoliberalism and neoconservatism. My analysis highlighted this ascendency through a bifurcation in the Party's "technology"rhetoric between economic and social-cum-moral issues, whereby the tendency to neoconservatism only asserted itself consistently on the second category (cf. Gamble, 1994; Heppell and Hill, 2005; Hoctor, 2021).

What then is the relationship between "technology" rhetoric and Conservative ideological modernisation? This analysis documented modernisation at the level of "technology" rhetoric and the ideological justifications attached to it at different times. Under Thatcher, Cameron and Johnson, the technological pitch supported a rhetorical claim to

party and national modernisation, informed by electoral calculations. In a sense, "technology" rhetoric was both tool and symptom of broader Conservative rhetorical modernisation. Yet, underneath these rhetorical shifts, there is a story of substantive ideological continuity throughout this study's timeframe. Much as the neo-Burkean, community-building promise of the Big Society was undermined by austerity in practice, the purported return to interventionist, nationalist industrial strategy brought by Brexit is rather a continuation of Thatcherite industrial policy with a different rhetorical pitch to suit the politics of the times (Silverwood and Woodward, 2018, 2024). What matters is not the technologies discussed but whether one votes for the political and economic future on offer. Thus, while this rhetorical analysis suggests modernisation was necessitated at the level of the 'politics of support', it equally demonstrates the Thatcherite neoliberal economic settlement persists at the level of the 'politics of power' (cf. Gamble, 2021) – regardless of the heterodox nature of the Party's present factional groupings (Webb, 2024).

In this sense, the Conservatives' use of "technology" ceased to be progressive, the more cemented that Thatcher's neoliberal settlement became. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism may differ from neo-Burkeanism ideationally and in practice, but in desired outcome, particularly with regards to political economy, they have come to share a conservative desire for institutional stasis. "Technology" rhetoric may seemingly represent Conservative affinity with modernity. However, its benefit as a versatile rhetorical device comes from its potential to aid attainment of power (Cameron, Johnson) and maintenance of existing ideological and political institutions (Cameron, May, Johnson, even Major on crime), as opposed to a more radical '"ought demand"' of neoliberal institutional change (Thatcher; Huntington, 1957: 458). For conservatives, this makes "technology" rhetoric worth the risk of ushering in aspects of modernity through its use – while simultaneously demanding ongoing reticence towards "technology" on social/sexual/moral policy issues (Thatcher, May).

Conversely, the Conservatives have consistently proven themselves more adept (less conservative?) at capitalising on new technologies' potential impact on politics. Take WebCameron from 2006 to 2010, Cameron's video sharing while opposition leader, or Johnson's livestreamed People's Prime Minister's Questions in 2019. Indeed there is a case (for future research) that conservatism internationally is more entrepreneurial and proficient at both harnessing the affordances of new communication technologies – for example, the vast conservative media ecosystem (Benkler et al., 2018) – and at utilising these same technologies as rhetorical tools – for example, conservatives decrying alleged online censorship despite evidence social media platforms amplify conservative voices (Barrett and Sims, 2021). We should understand conservative "technology" rhetoric and new technologies as being in dynamic interrelation.

To close, some reflections on the integrative method. The institutionalised and ritualised corpus of manifestos and conferences speeches would have been more inert without historically contextualised RPA; while comparative CA identified changing rhetorical patterns, hinting at strategic differences for analysis, that would have been less visible. Through integration, and the iterative, synthetic dialectic between inductive and deductive thinking in both methods, a richer picture emerged. Undoubtedly, RPA demands deeper, time-consuming work – particularly to capture the political and social category of "technology" where *tech/nolog/y* was absent from corpus texts. In practice this meant many other Party and government documents served as an informal, secondary corpus. Future research should delve formally into this peripheral rhetorical universe. Specific

case studies might also prove fruitful: what of "technology" and indeed "science" during the early Covid response? Or, given the largely domestic focus in this article, the role of "technology" in geopolitical and security calculations, for example Conservative debates over Huawei? The Conservative Party has embraced "technology", but the potency of this rhetoric depends on the case at hand.

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Notes

1. Double quotation marks indicate discussion of "technology" and other terms as political concepts (cf. Schatzberg, 2006: 486n.1).
2. I risk committing the error I criticise: where "technology" has no scare quotes I follow common usage, per the second *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* definition, 'machinery and equipment based on [scientific] knowledge' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2008). 'Device' or 'machine' are transferable.
3. Henceforth Liberal* as catch-all.
4. I use the COED, not the OED, to strike a balance between a dictionary of usage and one recording etymological development.
5. The Liberal Democrats finished fourth behind the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 2015; for continuity and given the SNP's geographical concentration I still include the Liberal Democrats.
6. The Liberal Democrats hold two annual conferences. For consistency I include only autumn conferences, to align with the other parties – excepting spring 1990. Archive *British Political Speech* lacked Liberal Democrat leader's speeches for 1989, 1990, 1991, 1995 and 1997. Through archival research I located all except autumn 1990. I located Ashdown's spring 1990 speech; it must suffice.
7. In addition to stemmed forms of *tech/nolog/y* this dictionary included words formed with noun prefixes, such as biotechnology and nanotechnology (utilising wildcard character queries).
8. 16; however, from a base of one.
9. Cameron delivered two substantive conference speeches in 2006; this came first. For methodological consistency I include only closing leader's speeches in frequency calculations, meaning this speech is excluded. Helpfully, however, this speech's inclusion instead would produce identical statistics.

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