

Book Review: The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron

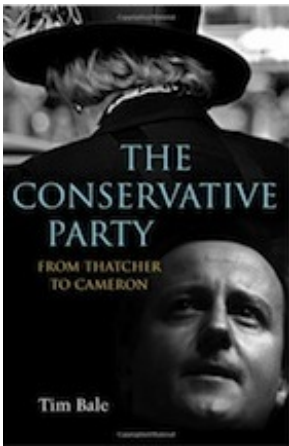
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/04/10/book-review-the-conservative-party-from-thatcher-to-cameron/?pfstyle=w p> April 15, 2011

Steve Coulter finds an excellent and readable account of how the Conservatives have turned themselves around, in **Tim Bale's** new book.

The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron. Tim Bale. [Polity Press](#). February 2011.

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The Conservatives are allegedly the Western world's oldest and most successful political party, dominating British politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thanks to their ruthless fixation with gaining and maintaining power. Ideology, loyalty to the leader and internal democracy were all subordinated to this end.



Strange, then, that between [Margaret Thatcher's ousting in 1990](#) and [David Cameron's election as party leader in 2005](#) (it would be five more years before he became Prime Minister) the Conservatives violated their tried and tested principles by doing everything they could to sabotage themselves.

The title of [Tim Bale's](#) excellent book pays obvious homage to Robert Blake's seminal history of an earlier and happier Tory period, [The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher](#). Bale, however, is a political scientist rather than a historian and his more theoretical perspective foregrounds the competing salience of 'ideas, interests and institutions' in accounting for the party's long exile from power.

All of these 'i's' played a part in the party's dismal attempts to mount a credible opposition to Blair's initially popular but increasingly dysfunctional Labour government. For example, belying their image as ideology-free pragmatists, the Conservative's obsession with Europe and immigration, as distinct from things most people cared about, left voters cold.

Party institutions, particularly the candidate and leadership selection mechanisms, filled the parliamentary party with white, privately-educated, straight(ish) men. It also insulated the leadership from grassroots activists who, given the chance, might have sounded the alarm bells earlier.

Interests, too, were important. Many senior Conservatives expended their energies on jostling for position rather than attacking the government.

Bale adds a third 'i' to this mix – 'individuals', something normally a taboo for self-styled political scientists. When talking about, at the most, a few dozen individuals who crop up time and again, the role of agency and the contributions of 'great men' (or political dwarves, in many cases here) are impossible to ignore.

So, once the party's archaic institutions had thrown up not one, but two inadequate leaders – [William Hague](#) and [Iain Duncan Smith](#) – in rapid succession, it also provided them with ample room to seal their fates through their own strangeness and ineptitude.

Bale does not ignore Labour, either. He has little time for the old saw about governments losing elections rather than oppositions winning them. But he notes Blair's success in hogging the vote-rich centre ground while also expanding it leftwards. This made it hard for the Tories to respond, as the alternative narrative proffered by the Portillo modernisers, combining free markets with social liberalism, appealed to an even smaller segment of the electorate than the faction that responded to

drum beats about Europe and immigration.

Pragmatism eventually won out when David Cameron was chosen as leader in 2005, replacing the effective but unelectable Michael Howard. Cameron dragged the party towards power by judiciously mixing centrist policies on public services, which gained him the right to be heard, with more right wing fare to mobilise the grassroots and entice former Labour voters with authoritarian inclinations.

Bale sees Cameron as a much better leader than his predecessors, and lists his contrasting accomplishments approvingly. But it's still difficult to escape the impression that it was Labour's bungling of the economy under Blair's hapless replacement, Gordon Brown, that propelled Cameron into Downing Street (and with the Liberal Democrats in tow) rather than any groundswell of public opinion.

Moreover, in this, the updated paperback edition, Bale muses in some closing remarks about the coalition's first days in power that failing to win outright has entailed the Tories forming a government combining the social liberalism of the Lib Dems with their own free market orientation. But this combination of attitudes is the opposite of where most voters lie – strong public services and a tough attitude to law and order –leaving Labour with a political route map back into power.

Whatever the case, this excellent and readable book is a fine account of how defeated parties turn themselves around. Bale is the Tories' Phillip Gould (author of the [definitive insider's guide to New Labour](#)) crossed with Andrew Rawnsley (who wrote a [breathless journalistic account of its implosion](#)). It should be studied closely by all those in the Labour Party who think their government lost because it was not left wing enough.

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