

The Conservative party's devotion to Thatcher's legacy may be blinding it to new and innovative solutions to current problems.

David Cameron's current trouble with his party over Europe is increasingly being compared with that of his predecessors. [Tim Bale](#) argues that while comparisons with previous Conservative leaders can be helpful, the modern Conservative party must resist the urge to continually look to the past, and seek to build its own narrative and solutions to problems it now faces.



"You know what?" David Cameron said in his speech to this year's Conservative Party Conference, "We don't boo our leaders. We're proud of our past and what those people did for our country." It was the line that won him the longest round of applause from his audience. But it also pointed, albeit unconsciously, to one of his party's biggest problems – possibly even bigger than the one it has on Europe.

Now, Karl Marx, in many people's opinion, wrote a fair amount of rubbish. But because he wrote so much he was bound to say a few things that still make a lot of sense, the best example being his oft-quoted observation that;

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

In other words, the scripts and schemas we all of us carry around in our heads mean that, even when we think we are acting of our own free will and striking out upon a new path, we are often doing little more than reprising a role and following in the footsteps of those who went before us. We are all the more likely to do this if we allow our past to be populated by heroes who did pretty much everything right, and must therefore be emulated, and villains who got it all wrong and can therefore serve only as an example of what not to do.

I have yet to come across a fully-paid up member of today's Conservative Party who will admit, least of all in public, that Margaret Thatcher may have got things seriously, fundamentally wrong, especially on the economy. Sure, they can be persuaded to criticise her tone and maybe even the odd social policy. But that's as far as they will go, so hard-wired into them is the idea that she toughed things out and, in so doing, turned a country that was a basket case into the envy of the world.

As a result, any notion that the policies being pursued by the current government may well be making a bad situation even worse is simply anathema. Any Tory remotely tempted to depart from that common sense is referred, politely or otherwise, to what happened to Edward Heath (mention of whose name, incidentally, has actually been known to provoke booing and hissing at Conservative conferences in the past). Sticking, like Maggie did, to the plan will save the nation and win you election after election. U-turning like Ted can only end in tears. So powerful is this script, this schema, that it defines even twenty, thirty years later what it is to be a Conservative and how a contemporary Conservative should think, talk and act.

Yet all this, one can argue, is actually profoundly un-conservative. A Tory should of course take the past seriously. But, equally, that past should stretch back a good deal further than some sort of year zero (say, 1979) before which everything was bad and all principles were betrayed. Moreover, the tales told about the past – indeed, the tales told about anything – should be taken with a large pinch of salt and a heavy dose of the sort of healthy scepticism recommended by [Michael Oakeshott](#) and, more recently, by Kieron O'Hara.

Conservatism has not always been what it now risks becoming – a combination of bastardised Gladstonian Liberalism, mounting Europhobia, and a populism so pathetic that it glories in the restoration of weekly bin collections and the possibility of marginally raising motorway speed-limits, never mind political correctness gone mad. Nor, traditionally, did conservatism regard regulation, and taking on vested commercial interests, as always and everywhere a bad thing, particularly if the evidence suggested that it was the only workable way of 'elevating the condition of the people'. And if doing the latter also meant building hundreds of

thousands of houses a year, Conservatives have even done that, too.

When David Cameron first took over the Party in 2005 it looked for a while as if a reunion between big- and small-c conservatism might finally be on the cards. '1979 and all that' would become not an aberration (it was never that) but at least just one episode in a longer tradition – one capable of realising, firstly, that action on the part of government does not, by definition, crowd out private initiative, either in the economy in the social sphere and, secondly, that the answer to a country's problems does not lie simply in trying to make it as much like the USA as possible. That tradition also understood, incidentally, that true localism involved not just the abdication of responsibility for problems but devolving the power to solve them.

But if conservatism is what a Tory government does, then on the evidence of what has happened since May 2010, those hopes for a reunion have been dashed. Disraeli, Baldwin, Chamberlain, Churchill and Macmillan – forget them all. There is, it seems, still only one ancestor worth worshipping, only one script that can be followed, only one game in town.

There is method in this madness, of course, not least the strength and unity of purpose which it lends to everything the present government is determined to do. But there is a downside, too. It closes minds. It limits possibilities. It risks painting Tory politicians into a corner in which they waste their time re-fighting the last war rather than seeking truly creative and possibly eclectic solutions to our present discontents. George Osborne, the Chancellor, apparently has a rule: 'in politics what makes you strong is also what kills you.' Funny. But as a bit of a small-c conservative myself, I fear he may very well turn out to be right.