

# How has the Conservative Party's limited electoral success affected their achievements in other areas?

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*This edited volume examines the effectiveness with which the Cameron led coalition has adapted to the demands of government. While the main focus is on the first year in office, there are insights into why a Conservative modernisation statecraft strategy resulted in a hung Parliament and the need to form a coalition. **Catherine Haddon** notes the book is a reminder that much is in flux in British politics. Yet it still provides a useful anchor – both for conceptual political theory and for practical policy analysis.*



**Cameron and the Conservatives: The Transition to Coalition Government. Timothy Heppell and David Seawright (eds.). February 2012.**

The Conservatives failed to win the 2010 general election outright. For political scientists examining that party's fortune through the lens of "statecraft" this raises some important and difficult questions. A central dimension of successful statecraft, as defined by Timothy Heppell and David Seawright's in their edited volume *Cameron and the Conservatives: The Transition to Coalition Government*, is having a "winning electoral strategy". Therefore how 'successful' have the Conservatives actually been? How has this limited success in electoral strategy affected their achievements in the other four dimensions – successful party management, political argument hegemony, governing competence and (looking forward) another winning electoral strategy? These are the questions that Heppell and Seawright seek to address. That they only partially answer the question is a reminder that both the Conservatives and British politics generally are going through uncertain times.



The book is an edited collection of essays by wide variety of political scientists and commentators covering the Conservatives' more recent experience of opposition, through the 2010 election

campaign and up to the end of their first year in office. The chapters cover Cameron's progress in modernising the party, the election campaign and electoral result, close analysis of developments in a number of key policy areas, Cameron's Premiership, the cohesiveness of coalition and ideological trends, and some reflections on Labour's experience in Opposition.

The uncertain success of Conservative progress as measured against the notion of statecraft is a central theme of the introduction, but the chapter authors only partially adhere to the analytical framework. Instead, a core focus in the book is where the Conservatives now sit ideologically, particularly how the party is coping philosophically and electorally post-Thatcher and post-Blair. It is seen in Christopher Byrne, Emma Foster and Peter Kerr's chapter on the attempts to "modernise" the party, where we are reminded that there are "fundamental problems or contradictions built into the project which Cameron shows no signs of being able to adequately deal with". The contrast between Cameron's modernisation and Blair's is thoughtful on how to improve electoral prospects whilst staying in tune with wider ideological trends: both efforts aimed to legitimise a move towards a "centre ground", as well as refreshing the party's brand after a long spell in opposition. For the Conservatives, it is an interesting discourse on the way the party has struggled with its Thatcherite inheritance, whilst at the same time showing the vagueness of "modernisation".

Likewise, Stuart McAnulla's chapter on the ideological coherence of liberal Conservatism reminds us that the "Cameron coalition has developed themes which are in many ways designed to differentiate their approach from that of Thatcherism" and yet "we still lack a fully designed sense of what a Cameronite state should look like". Richard Hayton's chapter on welfare reform gives us a policy area where some degree of ideological coherence has been established, largely through the work done by Iain Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice rather than the Conservative Party itself. The various chapters are also a reminder of the challenges of government. In Andrew Gamble and Victoria Honeymoon's respective chapters on economic and foreign policy we are reminded of the vulnerability of governments to events.

The mix of analysis of the party's philosophy combined with recounting of events in particular policy areas does manage to provide both a consideration of the ideological state of the nation and a fairly full analysis of where the Conservatives, and the coalition more generally, sit on particular policy issues. And there is also some study of the practical issues of coalition, in how they are coping with the 'coalitions' of actors with often distinct ideas' inside both parties. Such difficulties are particularly seen in the chapters on immigration and European policy, where there are both intra and inter party tensions.

Occasionally the book feels like a snapshot in time. The reflections on the years leading up to the Coalition Government and the analysis of the first year in office are a useful reminder of that period. However, one is conscious that in various cases events have moved on. Philip Norton's essay on coalition coherence misses the turmoil of more recent months. The book also lacks a

study of one of the most significant policy areas, that of Andrew Lansley's NHS reforms. Yet it still stands up to fair scrutiny; from what we know of the NHS story, Kevin Theakston's analysis of Cameron as Prime Minister as occasionally "relaxed", "laid-back" or "hands-off" and his "tendency, when faced with serious opposition, to move back and rethink", rings somewhat true.

Fuller judgements on the party's progress, particularly through the editors' central lens of "statecraft", will depend on what happens in the next few years up to the next (2015?) election. But the fact that it is too early to tell does not mean it is not valuable to provide this initial analysis, particularly at a time when so much of the political commentariat seems ever more focused on predicting what will happen to the coalition.

Whether on the uncertain future of the party, or shifts in the wider ideological paradigm and role of the state, the book is a reminder that much is in flux in British politics. Yet it still provides a useful anchor – both for conceptual political theory and for practical policy analysis. As Byrne, Foster and Kerr remind us, "Cameron's leadership of the Conservative party has already contributed what is likely to be significant new twists to ongoing debates about the role, size and purpose of the state in the UK". And as we see in Gamble's study, though there have been further developments in both the state of the economy and economic policy since the time of writing, "the forms on which [economic policy] will eventually be judged have become clear". The same may be true of the government.

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