

Cameron's "Progressive Conservatism" is largely cosmetic and without substance

Simon Griffiths argues that Cameron is not part of the 'Progressive Conservatism' tradition of Disraeli or Macmillan. His account of progressive Conservatism is closer to Thatcher, as his government's priorities exhibit.



In 2009 David Cameron announced that the "underlying philosophy" of his government would be **Progressive Conservatism**. The oxymoronic term is an intriguing one. What did Cameron mean by it? For most commentators, to be progressive is to be on the left of politics. Was Cameron dragging the Conservatives to the centre, seeking to reclaim ground that had been taken by New Labour? In this article, I argue that, despite appearances, Cameron's Progressive Conservative project is firmly on the right of British politics.

Cameron's call for Progressive Conservatism needs to be understood in the context of a crisis that was threatening to destroy the party. He was elected as leader in 2005, after the party's third consecutive election loss. The Conservative Party had dominated British politics for much of the twentieth century. It had suffered severe electoral losses during this time – in 1906, in 1945, in 1966 and in 1974 – but it had always bounced back, either narrowly losing the next general election or winning it outright. Between 1922 and 1997 every Conservative leader had also been Prime Minister. By the time Cameron was elected leader in 2005, his three predecessors had all failed to lead the party back into office. The Conservatives had become, as one critic put it, "contaminated". Theresa May, now Home Secretary, described them as the "nasty party". It was associated with scandal and economic incompetence, and riven with divisions over Europe.

Cameron was elected as leader promising change. He argued that the party "has got to look and feel and talk and sound like a completely different organisation". Over the next few months he set about rebranding the Conservatives. He apologised for the party's early introduction of the Poll Tax in Scotland, its failure to impose sanctions on apartheid South Africa and for rail privatisation. He was pictured sledging with huskies on a Norwegian glacier to promote a greener, more caring image. It is in the context of this crisis for the party that Cameron's claim to be a progressive was made.

What does Progressive Conservatism mean? I argue that in the Conservative Party the idea already had a fairly precise meaning by the time Cameron revived it. The great nineteenth century Conservative, Benjamin Disraeli, had argued that we must always remember that Britain is "a progressive country". Progressivism for Disraeli had meant using the state to help the poorest in society. During the 1870s Disraeli oversaw the introduction of a series of laws on education, public health and the protection of workers.

Disraeli's progressive views were continued by the Primrose League, which attracted large numbers of working class voters to the Conservatives before the First World War. The League's handbook opened with a call for a "democratic and progressive Conservatism". Half a century later another Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, declared that "the important thing is to keep the Conservative Party on progressive lines." This progressive tradition became known as One Nation Conservatism. In short, these progressives argued that there was an important role for the state in promoting social ends. It was this strand in the Conservative Party that proved a thorn in the side of Margaret Thatcher during her early years in office.

Where does Cameron's Progressive Conservatism fit in all this? For some commentators, Cameron was dragging the Conservative Party back to a form of One Nation Conservatism. Back in 2006 the Telegraph would write that Cameron is "heir to Disraeli as a One Nation Tory". Cameron argued that he was a Progressive Conservative because he wanted "progressive ends delivered through conservative means".

His progressive ends, or goals, included helping people out of poverty, equality of opportunity, and a greener and safer country. As Cameron himself admitted, these are goals likely to be shared across parties. Cameron did not set out how important each of these goals is in relation to the others. Would he, for example, spend money on the renewal of Trident, the armed forces and police in an effort to increase safety or would he focus on helping people out of poverty? How progressive Cameron's government is depends on these choices. It is only now that Cameron's priorities are beginning to emerge.

Cameron is more interesting when it comes to discussing the Conservative means he would use to reach these goals. Broadly speaking he sets out two approaches. First, he would decentralise responsibility and power and strengthen the institutions of "civil society", in which he included the voluntary sector and, in particular, the family. One thing to note is that Cameron's Conservatism involves what the eighteenth century Conservative philosopher, Edmund Burke, described as the 'small platoons' of family and civil society, not the state, to achieve its goals. Second, Cameron argued that he would focus on economic growth and living within our means.

At times Cameron's analysis of the economic crisis reads like it was written in the late-1970s. The problem, he implies, is a corpulent state that is crushing civil society and squeezing out entrepreneurship. There is no discussion of how the small platoons could have prevented the economic crisis, or the role that the state has in supporting a vibrant civil society. The Conservative means which Cameron uses are closer to the right of the Conservative Party, associated in particular with the governments of Margaret Thatcher, than to the One Nation tradition set out above. Thatcher's "rolling back the frontiers of the state" begins to look very similar to Cameron's "rolling forward society".

When Cameron used the phrase Progressive Conservatism for many commentators it implied that he was rediscovering the One Nation strand in his party's history. This was a line of Conservative thought that argued that the state had a substantial role to play in helping those at the bottom of society. Cameron, I argue, is not part of this tradition. His account of Progressive Conservatism is closer to Thatcher than Disraeli or Macmillan. It is sceptical about the role of the state and believes that civil society is crucial in providing welfare. Cameron's Progressive Conservatism is part of a rebranding of the Conservative Party – an evocation of a more centrist tradition. Yet it is largely cosmetic: of little more substantial significance than a photo with huskies on a Norwegian glacier. Cameron's Progressive Conservatism is firmly on the right of British politics.

This is the sixth in a series of posts by contributors to the recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#). The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Political Studies Association or the University of Hull.

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