

If the Conservatives are now committed to a philosophy of inequality, they are no longer conservatives

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Recent [revelations](#) about David Cameron's personal finances have chimed with wider debates about wealth inequality. The episode has not only raised questions about the way in which disparities of income are legitimated, but it has also led some [to suggest](#) that Britain's social elite is engaged in the 'veiled pursuit of the interests of one class against another'. But for commentators to see – and for Conservatives to treat – the defence of inequality as a core conservative commitment is to misunderstand the character of conservative ideology, argues [Dean Blackburn](#).



In their efforts to identify the essential feature of conservative belief, some writers have seized upon the concept of inequality. In contrast to their progressive opponents, conservatives, they argue, are committed to preserving disparities of wealth and status. Not only do they challenge the belief that equality is obtainable, but they also advocate an economic system that requires substantial disparities of income. At one level, these descriptions possess some value. After all, conservatism is an ideology that has consistently sought to expose the deficiencies of socialist egalitarianism. But to suggest that the defence of inequality is a core conservative commitment that defines conservatism's objectives is to misunderstand the character of this ideology.

Here, it is necessary to draw attention to a distinguishing feature of conservatives' thought, namely their views regarding human reason. Unlike rationalists, who believe that it is possible to obtain a full understanding of the social world, conservatives are epistemological pessimists. That is, they are sensitive to the limitations of reason, and they prefer to regard the past, rather than abstract reasoning, as the most adequate guide to appropriate future action. [Michael Oakeshott thus wrote](#) that to be conservative was to 'prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant'.



This feature of conservative ideology has important consequences for its adherents' broader thought. Most importantly, it prevents them from identifying particular arrangements or concepts as being of universal value. For

the conservative, the task of politics is to preserve those institutions or practices that are conducive to organic change. Identifying an ideal society on the basis of abstract reason is, [they argue](#), both futile and destructive. Regarding inequality as a desirable objective is therefore inimical to conservative reasoning, for making such a commitment requires the individual to acknowledge that a particular method for organising society is universally desirable. The conservative might suggest, on the basis of past experience, that some degree of inequality is unavoidable, but it cannot be an objective to be obtained.

It is also possible for conservatives to endorse egalitarian activity if it can be demonstrated that it will protect those bonds of responsibility that are conducive to social harmony. Such circumstances arose in the 1940s, when many leading Conservatives came to endorse the redistributive principles of the post-war welfare state. Having observed the social conflict that had been provoked by the economic difficulties of the inter-war period, these figures came to believe that some levelling of incomes, combined with the establishment of universalist welfare provision, was both desirable and necessary. So when the report that provided the framework for the post-war welfare state was debated in the House of Commons, [Quintin Hogg remarked](#) that its redistributive aspirations constituted 'its very great value'.

Since the 1970s, the 'middle way' tradition of Conservatism that Hogg and other post-war Conservatives forged [has been in retreat](#). Thatcher, with her preference for monetarist economics, challenged its basic assumptions, and subsequent leaders have followed her in regarding inequality as a source of economic dynamism. That is not to say that Conservatives have entirely abandoned the language of equality. But when they have awarded this concept a non-pejorative meaning, they have defined it in very parochial terms. Cameron, for instance, endorses [a meritocratic conception of the term](#), whereby an equal society is deemed to be one in which all individuals have the opportunity to be unequal. And other leading figures within the party have challenged the idea that unequal outcomes are a source of social instability. It is no coincidence, then, that the party has expressed little concern for the increasing [concentration of private capital ownership and alarming disparities of income](#).

If the above attitudes are emerging from a neo-liberal belief that inequality is a prerequisite of the good society, then they are inimical to conservative principles. A conservative would not only be suspicious of the notion of an 'ideal society' that can be deduced from abstract doctrine, but they would also be concerned with preserving the social harmony that can be a barrier to harmful change. Political parties are rarely perfect vehicles for the ideologies that they claim to represent. But it may be that the Conservative party is now so detached from its own parent ideology that it has become a vehicle for an economic doctrine that is incompatible with even its most basic beliefs.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Political Studies*.

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