

# The lasting achievement of Thatcherism as a political project is that Britain now has three political parties of the right, instead of one

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*Throughout the twentieth century the Conservative party dominated British politics as an integrated party of the right. Yet since late 1992, the Tories have increasingly struggled to attract the support of a third of voters at elections or in opinion polls. **Patrick Dunleavy** argues that because of the divisiveness of Thatcherism, the right wing electorate in Britain is now permanently fragmented between three parties – the Conservatives, the UK Independence Party, and now the rump of the Liberal Democrats, clearly aligned behind austerity policies. However, the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system always punishes such divisions severely. Ironically the most enduring legacy of Thatcherism's attempted 'revolution' may be the long-run hegemony of the centre-left.*



The British Tory party has existed for more than three hundred years, and for much of that time has been a vote-winning and ideology-integrating machine of unparalleled efficacy. Like the US Republicans, the roots of its success lay in pragmatically and flexibly husbanding all right-of-centre voters into an integrated bloc at the ballot box, ruthlessly exploiting the tendency of first-past-the-post elections to crush divided oppositions.

Across all the general elections in Great Britain between 1900 and 1997 the Conservatives were usually the dominant bloc, with a mean vote of 44 per cent. With left-of-centre and centrist voters divided between Labour and the Liberals (later Liberal Democrats) this was enough to ensure that the Tories were in government four fifths of the time in the twentieth century. Margaret Thatcher similarly 'won' three general elections in a row with essentially standard Tory performances of 42 per cent, chiefly because of the fragmentation of her opposition, with internal Labour crises and the break-away presence of the Social Democrats boosting Liberal support.

Yet the most enduring political legacy of Thatcherism was to destroy the delicate internal balancing mechanisms of the Conservative party. By developing radical policies informed by neo-liberal ideas, and implementing them in a fashion that was deliberately confrontational, socially disruptive and divisive, this political project sowed the seeds of long-run cleavages that have since grown and multiplied. Some key roots of these conflicts might be traced to the PM's personality traits, magnified in office, as [Tim Bale](#) and [Francoise Boucek](#) have argued in different ways on this blog. Gratuitously, without need, she alienated her leading colleagues and eviscerated Cabinet government, so that very soon ministers did everything they could to hide issues and policies from Number 10's view, and to settle issues amongst themselves. Where they could not, as with issues like football hooliganism or the poll tax, Thatcher's interventions sometimes contributed directly to enormous policy fiascos. But Thatcherism was never the creation of Margaret Thatcher alone, but rather of a whole set of powerful right-wing and principally finance market interests that achieved hegemony during her time in office.

The main focus of conflicts, however, was on European policy. Large-scale industrial and commercial business wanted then and still wants now a Britain at the heart of a huge European market of 500 million people. Yet the finance industry was more ambiguous and because of her nationalism Thatcher displayed mixed attitudes, signing the Single European Act, campaigning in the 1983 general election against Labour's pledge to withdraw, but later feuding with her Foreign Secretary and Chancellor for years on end over her nationalist rhetoric and her overt contempt for EU processes and integration.

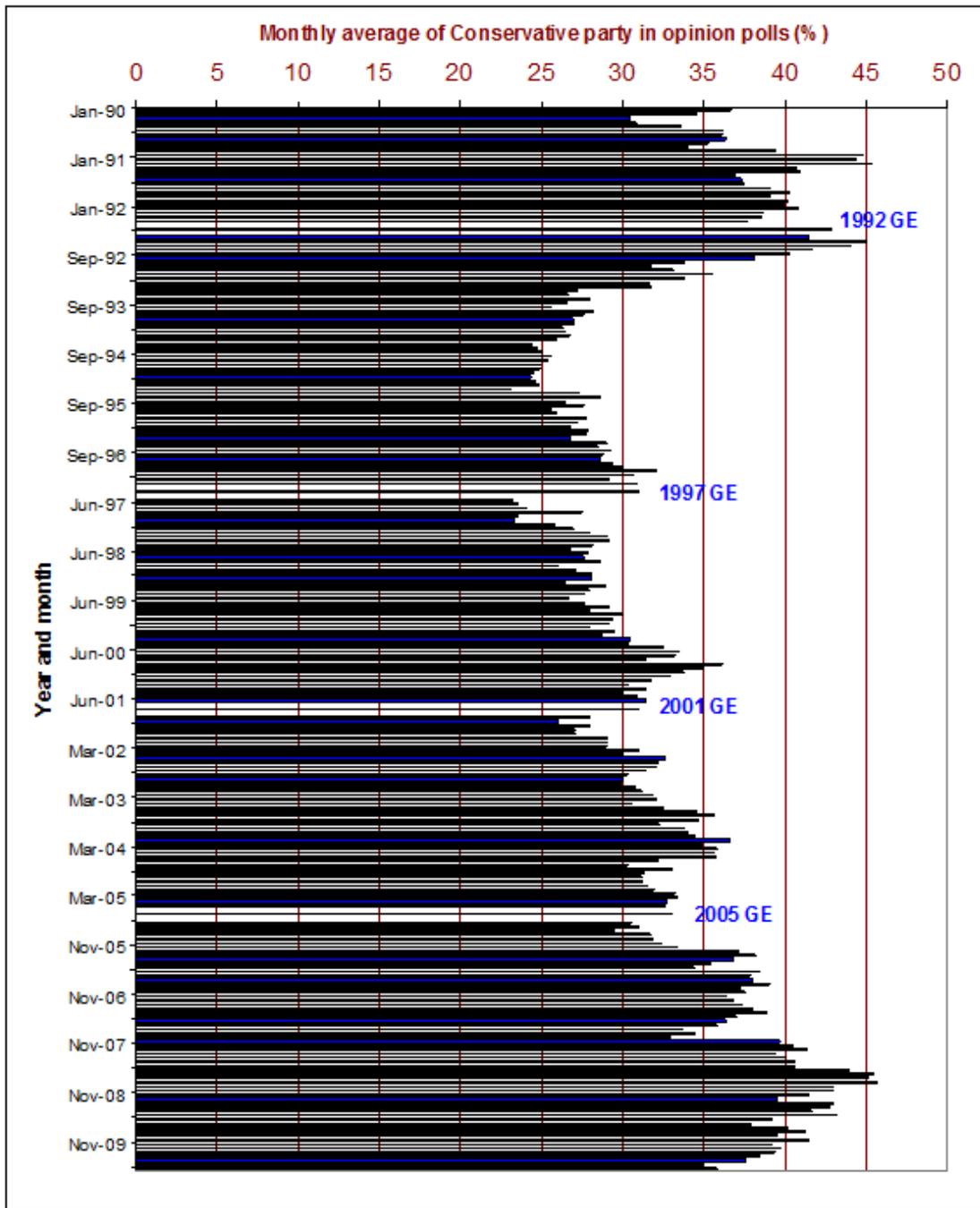
The second focus was Thatcherism's progressively more hard-line stance on implementing neo-liberal policies, with the enormous bonus of North Sea oil funding only a tripling of unemployment, so that the UK now has no equivalent

of the state investment fund built up by the Norwegians in the same period. Increasingly too, the abrasiveness of neo-liberal ideologues made the Conservatives appear as the 'nasty party', at first leaving inner cities to rot unaided, later impoverishing the welfare-dependent, and presiding apparently unconcerned over nationwide waves of riots in 1981, 1985 and 1990.

Thatcher's fall from power over the poll tax and Europe exacerbated the lasting tensions that the wider Thatcherism project had already created. For Tory neo-liberals and Euro-sceptics a potent 'stab in the back' myth was created, in which a failure of nerve by cowardly Westminster elites unwilling to sustain the true faith brought about her downfall. For the Tory right the historical lesson drawn was the need for an increasingly virulent anti-Europeanism and a recommitment to anti-statism – welfare cuts, privatization and 'light touch' non-regulation in financial markets. These policies could not fit easily with the historical integrative role of the Conservative party, as the feuding under the Major government demonstrated.

Something dramatic happened to the Conservatives' pulling power in elections in the aftermath of Thatcherism, as my first Chart demonstrates. Beginning immediately after 'Black Wednesday' in autumn 1992, Tory support fell to just above 25 per cent in mid 1994, recovering only slightly under successive leaders competing against Tony Blair. After more than a decade of Tory failure, in the European elections in 2004 and 2008, two alternative parties of the right, UKIP (UK Independence Party) and the BNP (British National Party) took a quarter of the vote between them, with the Conservatives hard-pushed to achieve even 30 per cent support. A year after 2004, the Tories racked up a terrible 32 per cent in the 2005 general election. And two years after 2008, despite Gordon Brown's pushing down of the Labour vote, the Conservatives polled a disappointing 36 per cent. This time the swing of the pendulum failed to gift them a Commons majority and the party had to enter a coalition for the first time in fifty years.

#### **Chart 1: Tory poll performance, 1990 to 2010**

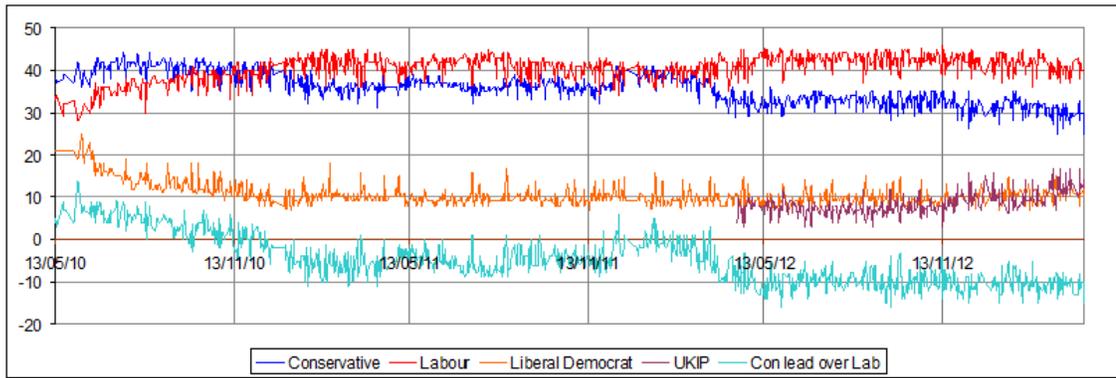


Source: Mark Pack

database: <http://bit.ly/11mzfWy>

The sustained performance of the Liberal Democrats contributed powerfully to the Tory stasis in the noughties. But Clegg’s entry into government in 2010 and endorsement of ill-fated austerity measures have now decisively stripped away all their left-of-centre supporters, as my second chart below shows. At first, the Liberal Democrats looked like the coalition patsy, taking the blame for a preponderantly Tory government. But their support has now clearly stabilized at a lower base around 11-12 per cent, and their survival in council elections suggests that they might yet edge up a few points in a future general election campaign, attracting ‘responsible’, small ‘c’ conservative voters through their recent efforts at differentiation. Yet their left-wing support has gone, Clegg’s constitutional reforms have all failed, and the Liberal Democrats are identified with austerity policies – thus clearly right-of-centre now in their core identity.

**Chart 2: The performance of British parties in the opinion polls since the 2010 general election**



Source: UK Polling

## Report

For UKIP the disappearance of the BNP through internal feuding after 2008, the reinstatement of the astute Nigel Farage as UKIP leader after his disastrous absence in 2010, and the supportive background of the Euro crisis, have all helped boost regular poll ratings to unprecedentedly sustained heights around 11-12 per cent (alongside local council election successes). Aided by Cameron's centrism and evident weakness as PM, the 'Farragists' have transformed UKIP into an authentic-looking heir to Thatcherism, appropriating especially its uninhibited nationalism, extreme market liberalism and unreasoned social conservatism in ways that take the party well beyond its old single-issue format.

The consequences of this two-way squeeze for Conservative support took time to become apparent, but they are now visible in Chart 2 above. As austerity policies have made recession worse, prolonging spending cuts possibly to 2020, Tory poll ratings have drifted down to just over 30 per cent, and more than a few polls now have rated the party at 28 or 29 per cent – fully 15 points below their twentieth century general election mean.

### The next general election

Thanks to vigorous Conservative opposition to the Alternative Vote in 2011, the split of the right-of-centre vote now threatens to pitch all parties of the right into the severe under-representation that any first-past-the-post electoral systems keeps waiting for divided parties. For UKIP, the possibility is that they may poll record votes at an election in 2014 or 2015, and yet win not a single Westminster seat. For the Liberal Democrats it is hard to see more than half at best of their current 57 MPs surviving.

And for the Conservatives, unless they can squeeze or partner with one of their rivals, just getting back to the 36 per cent support of 2010 will be tricky. So current crude forecasts (using unified national swing) posit a Labour majority of 90 to 110 seats. Of course, the government may hope for some improvement in the economy and float up a little in the polls by 2015. Yet if a Labour victory still eventuates, it will be clear that the lasting legacy of Thatcherism was to fragment the centre-right of British politics, in the process perhaps gifting Ed Miliband with a 1997-like landslide of MPs.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### About the author

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