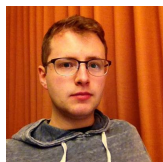


“All that is solid...”: the destructive tendencies of the Conservative Party



Is there a winning future for the Conservatives? [Tom Barker](#) and [Conor Farrington](#) outline the party's recent history and find that it has often demonstrated a careless approach to institutions and objectives it has otherwise claimed to champion. For there to be a winning future, the Conservatives must seek to genuinely rebuild, rather than merely pay lip-service to, a One Nation party.

Not since 1987 has the Conservative Party enjoyed a landslide victory. Despite clinging on to power and winning its largest share of the vote since 1983, the realities of the British electoral system and the yawning chasm between initial expectations and eventual outcome mean that the general election of 2017 was nothing less than a humiliating disaster for the Party. That it was a humiliating disaster of the Party's own making only compounds its woe.

In this respect, the election resembled David Cameron's defeat in the EU referendum just over a year ago, although Theresa May, unlike Cameron, has made an effort to cling on to power. While Cameron argued in April [that the referendum had drained the poison from British politics](#), thereby recasting himself as a martyr to national harmony, this result should be understood first and foremost as a grave political miscalculation that has precipitated a period of great uncertainty and unease. Far from being 'strong and stable', the Tory party risks earning itself a reputation for political recklessness potentially every bit as damaging as the label of economic incompetence which has dogged Labour for years.

Indeed, a review of the Conservatives' record in the post-war era—during which they have more often been in government than not—reveals a careless and sometimes destructive approach to institutions, relationships, and objectives that the Party itself has claimed to champion. On the economic scorecard, the most recent glaring policy failure has been the inability to deal with the budget deficit. In 2010, the new Chancellor George Osborne stated that his aim was to eliminate the deficit within five years. Two years since that initial deadline has passed, the Conservatives' current pledge is to balance the books by the middle of next decade, having presided over an [increase in the national debt](#) from £1.03 trillion in 2010 to £1.73 trillion in March of this year.

Whether or not deficit reduction at the expense of spending on public services and infrastructure was ever justified is something of a moot point. Since 2010 the public have been repeatedly told by Conservative politicians that deficit elimination and, ultimately, debt reduction are essential to the UK's economic health and credibility, yet now these goals are being kicked into the long grass in the face of Brexit uncertainty. The guiding light of the 2010-15 Coalition government has been extinguished by the very people who helped light the torch.



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Of course, it can be argued, quite convincingly, that the demotion of deficit reduction represents a reassertion of good old Conservative pragmatism in the face of changed circumstances. State-shrinking zealotry only occupies one tier in the dense Tory layer-cake of ideas and traditions, and it was arguably only a matter of time before Osborne's stark ideological agenda clashed with new demands and alternative ways of thinking. One of the fundamental tensions at the heart of Conservatism is that between the promotion of free market capitalism and the defence of traditional institutions and ways of life. Capitalism's tendency to dissolve established social norms and relationships was best captured by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...'. If the Thatcher and Major governments were criticised for taking privatisation too far, Cameron pushed market forces into areas they shied away from—succeeding in selling off the Royal Mail but being beaten back at the edges of the national forests.

While referring specifically to the effects of capitalism on society, Marx's phrase also aptly describes the evaporation of some of the Conservative's key geopolitical commitments over the course of the post-war era. As Sir William Harcourt, Liberal leader from 1896-8, put it: 'The Conservatives, mark my word, never yet took up a cause without betraying it in the end.' One of the greatest ironies of British politics is the fact that the Conservative Party, despite a marked attachment to British prestige and global eminence, ended up overseeing British decline over much of the twentieth century and indeed to the present day.

This is not to say that the Conservatives are wholly responsible for decline, nor to deny that other parties have their own catalogue of failures, but now does seem like an appropriate time to draw attention to the peculiarly destructive nature of the Conservative Party, which has failed in so many respects *on its own terms*.

One of the most useful frameworks for thinking about the role of the Conservative Party in British decline was created by one of the twentieth century's greatest conservatives, Winston Churchill. In 1948, he famously described the United Kingdom as standing 'at the point of junction' of 'three great circles' (or transnational relationships): 'the British Commonwealth and Empire', 'the English-speaking world', and 'United Europe'. For Churchill, Britain's unique world role derived in large part from its potential ability to unite these circles and maintain a position of great influence in each one, without becoming fully integrated into, or limited by, any of them. In *Between Europe and America: The Future of British Politics* (2003), Andrew Gamble adapted Churchill's model with the addition of a fourth circle, the British Union itself, which had been so taken for granted by Churchill and his audience in 1948 that it did not merit inclusion in his schema.

With regard to the circle of Empire, Conservative-dominated governments bowed to the inevitable in approving Irish Independence in 1922 and (against Churchill's bitter opposition) the Government of India Act 1935. Churchill led Britain to victory in World War Two, but at a catastrophic cost for Britain's world-role. Churchill's unpopular old-school conservatism ensured that Attlee's Labour government presided over Indian independence, but Anthony Eden sealed the fate of Britain's global aspirations at Suez, and much of the Empire was broken up under Harold Macmillan. Churchill stated in 1942 that he had not become prime minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire, but his Conservative successors ended up doing just that. Few today will shed tears for the passing of the Empire, but its demise, overseen to a significant extent by Conservative governments, marked the collapse of a major pillar of Conservative identity, a fact which is often underappreciated today.

While there have been undoubted low points, most obviously the Suez crisis, which cast Britain's new post-war subservience to the United States in sharp relief, Conservative governments and prime ministers have been largely successful in maintaining a strong and stable relationship with the US and other members of Churchill's 'English-speaking world'.

The same is not true when it comes to the circle of Europe, or 'United Europe' as Churchill presciently termed it. While Churchill was enthusiastic about European co-operation and integration after the War, he was also adamant that Britain would always choose the open sea over Europe, and under his leadership Britain stayed aloof from early negotiations in the 1950s that set up what would become the EU, thus losing power over its shape. Although Britain applied for membership under Macmillan, this was rejected; finally Britain joined under Edward Heath, splitting the Party and introducing momentous change into the traditional constitution that the Conservative Party had always sought to defend.

The post-1972 'Euro-British' constitution, as described by the late Anthony King, will now alter drastically in nature once again as Britain leaves the European Union. Overall, the picture is one of ineffective and finally destructive vacillation over Europe – destructive for Britain, that is; the EU is large enough to carry on without us.

While the War weakened the Empire and Britain's global role, it strengthened the Union. A sense of shared victory, the emerging welfare state, and the continuity represented by strong national institutions bound the constituent nations together. Soon, however, relative economic decline and the loss of the Empire together with political and economic shifts combined to undermine the post-war sense of shared identity and destiny.

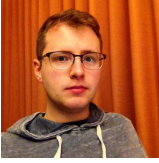
In particular, the Conservative Party's enthusiastic adoption of neoliberalism and the deindustrialisation that accompanied it greatly inflamed pro-independence views in Scotland, and the 2014 Independence Referendum (again authorised by Cameron) has not settled the issue. Brexit has added fuel to the fire, since Scotland is markedly more pro-EU than England and Wales, and although the SNP suffered a significant electoral setback in the 2017 general election it would be unwise to assume that a second referendum is impossible.

In addition, Theresa May's post-election deal with the Democratic Unionist Party has compromised the British government's commitment to impartiality stated in the Good Friday Agreement, threatening the hard-won (relative) stability enjoyed in Northern Ireland for much of the last two decades. All in all, the Conservative's reward for holding onto power could be to preside over the end of the Union, just as it presided over the end of the Empire.

One of the few glimmers of hope to emerge for the Conservatives on election night was the mini-revival for the Party in Scotland, spearheaded by Ruth Davidson. A young, down-to-earth gay woman, Davidson in many respects embodies the Tory modernisation process initiated by David Cameron. If there is to be a winning future for the Conservative and Unionist Party, it must surely look to figures like Davidson and seek to genuinely rebuild, rather than merely pay lip-service to, a One Nation party. Such a party would champion a patriotic yet liberal and outward-looking United Kingdom for the post-Brexit era; an entrepreneurial trading nation, yet generous-spirited and compassionate, which has fully internalised the fundamentals of the post-1945 welfare settlement.

Crucially, the Conservative Party must understand that in choosing to leave the EU, the British people have not chosen to accelerate an already discredited experiment in Randian state-dismantling. The time has come for constructive thinking.

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