

Cameron and Welfare: Questioning the liberal Conservatism project

Pete Redford questions David Cameron's commitment to socially liberal values. Despite his campaigning as a 'liberal Conservative', the prime minister has tacked noticeably to the right since becoming leader. His intention to restructure the welfare state underlines this point.



When David Cameron became Conservative leader in 2005 he focused on modernising the party, breaking from the past and shaking the label of the 'nasty party'. He declared himself a 'liberal Conservative', socially as well as economically liberal. Here I question the liberal conservative project in terms of social policy.

In opposition to Blair – Cameron the liberal Conservative

As the self proclaimed 'heir-to-Blair', Cameron set about decontaminating the Tory brand. In his first speech as party leader he declared that 'There is such a thing as society'. Liberal Conservatism was to be equated with the creation of a cohesive and tolerant society, an enabling state, a flourishing civil society, increased levels of individual responsibility and less inequality.

Cameron spoke of responsibility, championing a modern compassionate Conservatism. This social responsibility was to be the 'essence of liberal Conservatism'. Cameron's Conservatives were to role forward the frontiers society and even committed to Labour's spending plans. The new mission of Cameron's new modern Tory party was to repair Britain's broken society, not her economy, and protect key public services.

In opposition to Brown and the recession – Cameron on the traditional right

The infamous 'hug-a-hoodie' speech fed the image of the compassionate Conservative. However, by 2007 Cameron stated those were 'three words I never said' before going on to say that 'aggressive hoodies who threaten the rest of us must be punished'. This was the beginning of a shift back to the traditional right and the poll leads Cameron began to maintain from late 2007 only served to strengthen this shift.

The recession opened up an ideological chasm over the nature of the state. Cameron was still expressing support for the welfare state but this was based on a re-conception of the role of the state. In an attempt to create a distinction between themselves and Labour, they stressed the need for speedier reductions in the level of debt.

This reflected the tension within Conservative strategy and policy between a desire to pursue economic prudence and a concern not to be seen to be following a Thatcherite approach to dismantling key elements of welfare. However, it was clear that the party had drifted back to the right.

The election – re-enter compassionate Conservatism

Against many expectations Cameron used the recession to develop the theme of compassionate conservatism. Cameron attempted to convince the public that the Conservatives were in tune with the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged people declaring that it was the Tories that was most committed to tackling poverty and disadvantage. Consequently, the Conservatives were prepared to sustain a commitment to core aspects of the welfare state. Of course, these are the public services focused on all voters and not just the poor and they would all face significant cuts (except the NHS).

The 2010 General Election manifesto made clear the attack on poverty and inequality. The promotion of

equal opportunities, it stated, required 'a new approach: social responsibility not state control; the Big Society, not big government'. Progressive conservatism would fix the notion of 'broken Britain' with the 'Big Society'.

'Broken Britain' and the 'Big society' – the classic right wing moral panic and the 'progressive' solution

The sound bite 'Broken Britain' and the broader notion of a 'broken society' succeeded in entering wider and popular discourses about the social and moral state of contemporary Britain. Cameron has made the 'broken society' theme his own. In so doing, he has prepared the ground for reforming the welfare state, acquiring the potential to become a peg for almost any social policy reform. It is a very flexible notion, able to be deployed as an explanation for popular social ills.

Herein lays the classic Right Wing moral panic. In the hands of the Conservative Party there is a clear argument that the broken society has its roots in 'broken families' caught in a 'dependency culture'. The institution of the family and approaches to families become a key site for political and policy argument and a target for policy formation.

The idea of the 'big society' has been presented as a necessary response to the 'broken society', in order to try to reconcile the tension of reducing the size of the state and maintaining welfare. It was an attempt to develop a narrative to support their complex and contradictory economic/welfare policy. The Conservative case was that there was little choice but to cut public spending. However the public good and public services could be maintained through looking to non-state providers.

The 'Big Society' was meant as the liberal Conservative vehicle that would cure the ills of the broken society. The notion of broken Britain was in itself the latest embodiment of a long line of classic right-wing moral panics that have continued to distinguish between a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Cameron's social policy had become about achieving Conservative ends by so-called progressive and liberal means.

Cameron in Coalition – The Reactionary

The Coalition agreement promised changes would be made to the Jobseeker's Allowance and welfare to work systems. However, after announcing the details of the CSR many began to criticize the Coalition's social policy as nothing less than an ideologically motivated attack on the state. 'Austerity' became a byword for neo-liberalism, and the 'big society' was synonymous with shrinking the state. These reforms faced opposition from a public angry about the condition of the job market and wages. He has also faced criticism from the Liberal Democrats on the social liberal wing of the party who are traditionally supportive of the welfare state, and of course his own backbenches.

The 1922 committee criticised Cameron for not going far enough but the modernizers of the new [301 group](#) believe that it is only through staying on the middle ground that they will be able to gain an overall majority at the next election. Concessions have been made to all these groups in order to appease them and the coalition has become synonymous with U-turns. Cameron became a reactionary attached by a bungee cord to the traditional right, always being pulled back.

The Future

Cameron can't be blamed too much for being a reactionary. As leader of a party and PM in a coalition, his overriding function is conducting a balancing act to maintain stability. However, in recent weeks Cameron has announced the future of Conservative social policy which is clearly on the right and a complete restructuring of the welfare state. This shift completely undermines the liberal conservative project.

The proposed cuts (historically only half of those proposed are ever achieved) will mean that as a percentage of GDP the UK will spend less on public services than the US and the welfare state will be radically altered. Cameron's legacy will not be as a liberal Conservative, it will be as the PM who presided over the permanent rolling back of the state and a new welfare consensus. Cameron's social policy resembles that of Prime Minister on the traditional right rather than that of a liberal Conservative.

This is the eighth 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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