

The Conservative Party's Success and the 'One Nation' Tradition

Written by Kasia Gilewska

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KASIA GILEWSKA, FEB 27 2016

Are the Recent Successes of the Conservative Party Due to It Having Discovered Its 'One Nation' Tradition?

One Nation tradition is a pragmatic approach towards politics which combines a soft Burkean traditionalism[i] with the Feudal concept of *noblesse oblige*[ii] – the idea that the aristocracy (or speaking boldly: the rich) have a patrician obligation to improve the plight of the poor. The term itself was coined by a British Conservative politician – Benjamin Disraeli in his novels 'Coningsby' (1844) and 'Sybil, Or the Two Nations' (1845).[iii] In the latter, he addresses the rising problem of the formation of 'Two Nations' – the privileged and the dispossessed in British society and presents the need to form one 'organic society'[iv] in which social classes have got different obligations towards each other and by fulfilling them, people become united under the One Nation umbrella.[v] Disraeli was very much aware of the fact that the voting rights of the working class were growing at that time[vi], hence in order to reach a *modus vivendi*, he gave birth to a set of views which successfully turned 'Toryism into a bond between different social classes in the nation'[vii]. By implementing Disraeli's ideas, the Tories became the most electable political party in modern history. One Nation conservatism after being abandoned by the Thatcher-Major government in favour of unbridled individualism and Hayekian *laissez faire*[viii], rose like a phoenix from ashes from the moment David Cameron was elected as the party leader in December 2005[ix]. Mr Cameron influenced by *inter alia* Philip Blond's pamphlet 'The Rise of the Red Tories' (2009)[x], started implementing his ideas of 'Big Society'[xi] and was quickly proclaimed 'heir to Disraeli as a One Nation Tory'[xii]. The conservative recovery started. The 2010 general election (after which the Conservatives, without commanding a majority in the House of Commons, had no choice but to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats)[xiii] was only a prelude to the future successes both in the local[xiv] and general elections[xv] of 2015, after which the Tories formed the first majority conservative government since 1997. David Cameron described it as 'the sweetest victory of all'[xvi]. In this essay, I am going to examine if the recent successes of the Conservatives are due to it having discovered their One Nation tradition or some other factors which convinced the election pendulum to swing back to the Tories.

First and foremost, Mr Cameron's modernising agenda and the re-introduction of the concept of civic Conservatism marked a sharp break with Thatcherism which had left an imprint on the party's image under William Hague (1997-2001), Iain Duncan Smith (2001-2003) as well as Michael Howard (2003-2005).[xvii] The current Tory leader might have claimed that: 'At the next election, a whole generation of people will be voting who were born after Margaret Thatcher left office. So [...] I won't be the prisoner of an ideological past'[xviii] but the truth is that the majority of (especially potential Conservative) voters[xix] still do remember the times of the Community Charge, the so-called poll tax (which for example Mr Howard was closely associated with[xx]), Black Wednesday when the Conservatives lost their economic credibility[xxi] and most of all, the Tory 'sleaze' scandal under John Major[xxii]. Therefore, distancing the party from the past and implementing a non-ideological One Nation doctrine was crucial in achieving an electoral success. On various occasions, David Cameron insisted that 'there is such a thing as society, but it is not the same thing as the state'[xxiii] which is the best example of the repudiation of Thatcherism, *as the Lady who was not for turning* famously claimed that 'there is no such thing as society'[xxiv]. Mr Cameron's statement was also included in the introduction to the party's *Built to Last*[xxv] manifesto which presented their aims and values which 'we share as *one nation*'[xxvi]. Fervent individualism which characterised the previous Tory government was

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replaced by the revived idea of Burkean 'little platoons'^[xxxvii] and Cameron's vision of 'Big Society'. Thanks to the fact that the Tories stopped dancing with dogma and adopted a pragmatic One Nation approach, they detoxified its brand and stopped being viewed as, using Theresa May's words: 'the nasty party'^[xxviii]. Lord Ashcroft felicitously pointed out in his *'Smell the Coffee: A Wake-up Call for the Conservative Party'* that: 'The problem was not that millions of people in Britain thought that the Conservative party didn't like them, and didn't understand them; the problem was that they were right.'^[xxix] One Nation Toryism presented the party in a different (much better) light and made them likeable and electable.

Furthermore, (un)fortunately, ideological identification is diminishing both in life and in politics these days. According to the 2010 British Election Studies survey, only around 11% of the electorate expressed very strong party identification (PI) attitude^[xxx]^[xxxii] and most of the voters based their behaviour on the parties' approach towards the 'valence' issues.^[xxxiii] Hence, in order to establish the political argument hegemony, the parties should tend to win the middle ground of British politics. As David Cameron pointed out at the Party's 2006 conference in Bournemouth, it is 'the ground on which political success is built. (...) Not the ideological wilderness, out on the fringes of debate, but the solid ground where people are.'^[xxxiiii] One Nation doctrine by assuming that 'all ideologies are wrong (...) [and] suspecting that the adaptation of an analogy would make them a party based on class'^[xxxv] sounds very attractive to the median voter. For that reason, the Conservative Party with their cross-class appeal and rediscovered strategy based on 'compromise and pragmatism'^[xxxvi] refused to adopt a strong stance on disputable 'position' issues – the so-called 'Tebbit trinity'^[xxxvii] which divide the electorate and instead, focused on social problems which trouble the majority of voters such as poverty, welfare, health, environment, quality of life^[xxxviii], same-sex relationships^[xxxix] etc.^[xl] The embodiment of this spirit can be found in the policy recommendations reports produced by Iain Duncan Smith's civic conservative think tank – Centre for Social Justice (CSJ): *Breakdown Britain*^[xli] and *Breakthrough Britain*^[xlii] from December 2006 and July 2007, respectively, as well as the Tory Reform Group which promotes the values of One Nation Conservatism^[xliii]. However, some Conservative politicians still thought that more needed to be done. Andrew Tyrie (the MP for Chichester and a member of One Nation Again) for example claimed that the Tories would not win the majority unless their 'appeal is not only to (...) [voters'] heads but to their hearts'^[xliv]. Taking these words to heart, the Conservative Party decided to go one step further with their One Nation agenda. David Cameron's coordinator of policy modernisation – Oliver Letwin announced that 'the focus of modern compassionate conservatism is on the most in need: the unemployed, the homeless, the disabled, the refugee, the orphan, the drug addict'^[xlv] and by the introduction of 'Hug a Hoodie' campaign, David Cameron was trying to convince the voters that 'we have to show a lot more love'^[xlvi] to the unprivileged. As the results of the last two general elections demonstrated, the electorate decided to show a lot more love to the Tories in return. The One Nation approach, which placed the party in the centre of the political spectrum, blossomed.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the new compassionate Conservatism agenda helped the Tories move away from the past and firmly placed their policies in the centre of British politics; thanks to that the party could count on a support of wider electorate and became more appealing to the median voter. However, there are many other short term factors which have significantly contributed to their recent success *inter alia*, the electorate's evaluations of the party leaders, the question of Scotland (in England: it meant the idea of their estrangement looming large on the horizon, in Scotland: the rise of the Scottish National Party), as well as the brilliant tactical Conservative campaign designed by Lynton Crosby.

First of all, one of the most important 'valence' issues these days is the electorate's evaluation of the party leaders. As it was observed both in the 2010 as well as 2015 general elections, it was a notable factor determining the electoral behaviour of the so-called 'floating voters'.^[xlvii] Both Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband did not manage to convince the general public that they would be able to serve as Prime Minister. Many reasons compounded this, such as a series of on-air slip-ups and gaffes. This includes Brown's 'bigoted woman' comment^[xlviii], Miliband admitting not to know the name of Labour's leader for Swindon but claiming Mr Grant was doing 'a good job' while in fact his party was definitely going to lose in that region^[xlix], and lastly, Miliband's infamous bacon sandwich moment^[l]. Additionally, neither Brown nor Milliband were TV people; Brown had a 'difficulty in smiling for the cameras'^[li] and Miliband was chastised for an uncomfortable manner of speaking. Naturally these instances shaped the over-all perception of the Labour Party and the press had a hay-day monopolising on such misfortunes. In 2015, what may be perceived as also decisive in choosing the future Prime Minister was the fact that Miliband was criticised

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for stabbing his own brother David in the back^[lii]. This was used against him during the political campaign before the general election in 2015. It was all reflected in the polls, for example: according to the All Guardian/ICM poll results, on the 22nd of June 2008, which was published almost a year after Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as Prime Minister, the Conservative lead over Labour reached its zenith – 20%.^[liii] In October 2014, YouGov published a poll in which Ed Miliband's popularity score hit all-time low.^[liv] Taking these poor results into consideration, it may even be argued that the electorate intention was not to vote for the Tories but against the Labour.

On the other hand, it is no coincidence that the name of the Tory leader has been already mentioned in this essay so frequently; David Cameron was a real asset to the regeneration of the Conservative Party. In the opinion polls leading to the general election of 2010, the voters described him as 'energetic', 'optimistic' and 'young' in comparison to Brown who was seen as 'struggling to cope', 'dour' and 'out-of-touch'.^[lv] In the YouGov and Sunday Times poll from June 2014, even 31% of those who disagreed with the policies of the Conservative Party still thought that David Cameron did look and sound like a possible Prime Minister.^[lvi] In comparison, 43% thought that Ed Miliband's policies were wrong and that he neither looked nor sounded like a future PM. In various popularity polls, Mr Cameron was always far ahead of his opponents^[lvii] and was clearly more popular than his party itself. 'The Cameron effect' had a significant impact on the undecided voters.

Nonetheless, what seemed to look like the key to the Conservative triumph and the final nail in the Labour's coffin was not only One Nation Toryism and the image of the party leaders but also the issue of Scotland that until 2015 had been the terrain of Labour domination. However, in the light of the Scottish independence referendum, the Scottish National Party under Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Salmond perfectly used the anti-Westminster mood and caused the collapse of Labour (which lost 40 Scottish seats^[lviii]) in Scotland. The question of the leadership is coming back like a boomerang when one compares Nicola Sturgeon's performance in the television debates against Miliband's.^[lix] At the same time, England (with some exceptions, mainly in the North-West) voted Tories^[lx] who seemed to offer stability in times of political disturbances and the possible split of 'the Family of Nations'^[lxi]. It is not without reason that after the election result had been announced, Charles Moore wrote in the Telegraph: 'I hope David Cameron, in his hour of triumph, can find time to write a thank-you letter to Nicola Sturgeon. She won him this election.'^[lxii]

All these factors were brilliantly wrapped up in the electoral campaign designed by the Australian election strategist – Lynton Crosby, named by the Tory MPs: 'The Wizard of Oz'.^[lxiii] Until the very end, the Conservative Party had been sending two clear messages: first of all, they reassured that the recovery was going in the right direction under One Nation agenda^[lxiv] and secondly, they played on the fear of the English and played their cards right by focusing on the potential threat of a Labour-SNP coalition and the unskilful Labour leader.^[lxv]

One Nation tradition unquestionably helped the Conservative Party break ties with the past and place itself in the centre of British politics where most of the voters are. However, there are myriad factors which undoubtedly contributed to their victory in the 2010 general election and to securing a 12-seat parliamentary majority in 2015. These include: the weak Labour Party led by unpopular leaders, positive feelings towards David Cameron among the voters. Additionally, during 2015 key contributors included: the current disillusionment mood in Scotland where Labour was decisively crushed and also, the campaign itself throughout which the Tories stay united and focused on delivering those key messages which they wanted people to remember. For that reason, One Nation tradition was but one of the main factors which enabled David Cameron to stay at 10 Downing Street for the next five years.

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*Written by: Kasia Gilewska
Written at: Lancaster University
Written for: David Denver
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