

# How did the Conservatives change?

## *The Conservatives Since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change*

Tim Bale

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Reviewed by Robert Saunders

How do parties change? It is almost a truism that parties stand or fall on their capacity for reinvention, and politicians now routinely campaign on platforms of 'hope' and 'change'. For much of the twentieth century, the supreme practitioner of political adaptation was the British Conservative Party. Ted Heath memorably promised to 'change the course and the history of this nation', while Margaret Thatcher vowed to 'change the heart and soul' of the people. Running for the leadership in 2007, David Cameron urged his supporters to 'change to win'. To be electable, he warned, the party must 'change its language, change its approach, start with a blank sheet of paper'.

Yet the nature, scope and drivers of party change remain under-theorised, an insight that forms the basis of Tim Bale's new book. As in his previous study, *The Conservative Party From Thatcher to Cameron*, Bale operates in the terrain between history and politics, testing models drawn from political science against thickly descriptive historical examples. This refreshingly interdisciplinary approach has established him as one of the leading scholars of modern Conservatism, whose work can be read with profit by general readers and scholars from both disciplines.

Bookended by the landslide defeats of 1945 and 1997, each chapter covers a single period of government or opposition (1945-51; 1951-64; 1964-70; 1970-74; 1974-79; 1979-97). For each case-study, Bale assesses the extent of change in three areas: the public face of the party; its internal organisation; and the policies it sought to enact. These are tested against three main 'drivers' of change: election defeat; the role of the leader; and the existence of a 'dominant faction'; supplemented by such 'additional drivers' as think tanks, interest groups or the pressure of events.

The first of his indicators proved most resistant to change. Candidates, MPs and ministers remained largely white, male and middle class, drawn disproportionately from Oxford, Cambridge and the public schools. Constituency parties proved deaf to the charms of working class and ethnic minority candidates, in the belief that 'working-class candidates' were 'inadequate in ... campaigns and often of doubtful use in parliament'. Safe seats, in particular, 'expect to be represented by people of distinction' (pp. 89-90). Leaders rarely involved themselves in such matters, even when they were from atypical backgrounds themselves. Thatcher was notoriously indifferent to the prospects of Tory women, while John Major did little to promote candidates in his own, non-university image.

The party machine received more sustained attention, though it was not always the Rolls Royce operation its opponents believed. At its best, it was a formidable campaigning and fundraising machine: in 1950, for example, it secured up to 90 per cent of postal votes for the Conservatives, securing eleven seats from Labour and denying Attlee the majority



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that might have carried him through a full parliamentary term. Skilful fundraising allowed the party to outspend Labour at every national election until 1994, paying for publicity, market research and field operations on a scale beyond Labour's wildest dreams. In the 'pre-campaign' before the 1959 election, the Conservatives exceeded Labour's publicity budget by more than four to one, and in the summer of that year it was briefly the biggest advertiser in the UK. By the 1970 election – a contest Labour had been widely expected to win – the Conservatives were employing nearly three times as many agents as Labour on double the salaries.

Yet few leaders showed much interest in party organisation, meaning that improvements 'were rarely institutionalised, even when they were seen to be successful' (p. 91). Churchill did not set foot in Central Office in his fifteen years as party leader, while Macmillan failed to recognise in 1960 the General Director he had appointed three years earlier. Cecil Parkinson, who became Party Chairman in 1981, later confessed that he had struggled to find the party's offices on his first day at work. The results were rather haphazard. An internal report described the party's election broadcasts in 1964 as 'makeshift, ramshackle and absolute agony' (p. 116), while the campaign in February 1974 was a shambles. The *Campaign Guide* was sent out as a bundle of photocopied sheets, unbound and without an index; other literature arrived late or not at all, while phone calls went unanswered and unreturned.

The leadership was much more engaged in policy change, though it was not always the most authoritative leaders who did most to drive reform. Churchill, 'a man for whom ... almost anyone would have done almost anything', was 'an absentee king' who spent more time on his memoirs than on the business of opposition (p. 304). Thatcher, by contrast, emerges as the most dynamic driver of policy change, but the biggest shifts came in the early years of opposition when her leadership was most vulnerable.

Bale plays down the role of think tanks and pressure groups, as well as the influence of 'business' or 'the City'. Though the Conservatives undoubtedly saw themselves as the party of business, they had little faith in the policy prescriptions of its representatives. Thatcher did not meet with the CBI for nine months after becoming leader, and was frustrated by its enthusiasm for incomes policy and 'the whole corporatist paraphernalia' (p. 240). Nor did backbenchers or party workers exert more than marginal influence. Heath expressed a common view among the leadership, telling a backbencher that there were 'three sorts of people in this party: shits, bloody shits and fucking shits' (p. 165).

Such comments reinforce the perception of a 'magic circle' directing operations from above. Yet Bale finds 'dominant factions' to be neither as common nor as cohesive as is widely believed. Indeed, the clearest example of such a group emerges as John Major's team. 'Built not so much on ideology but on the shared conviction that the Tories had no realistic alternative but to keep calm and carry on, this group ran the party until it crashed to defeat in 1997' (pp. 285-6).

Fortunately for Major, such factions neither needed nor always benefited from the presence of a charismatic leader. The so-called 'Thatcherites', for example, were always less cohesive than popular myth suggested, and Thatcher's abrasive style acted as an increasingly centrifugal force. After 1945, as in later periods, 'Those who helped put their party back on track ... were an often amorphous bunch of people who were by no means always in complete agreement – the better known among them spending as much time jostling for position or in profitable employment as they did remaking conservatism or the Conservative Party' (pp. 46-7).

What conclusions can be drawn from all this? Bale does not propose a unifying model for party change; on the contrary, his account is consciously eclectic and multicausal. In



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this respect, it offers a valuable debunking of the extravagant claims made in more schematic studies. He rightly insists on the interdependence of his variables, in an 'inter-play of ideas, interests, institutions, and individuals' (p. 317). Nor is this the only strength of Bale's book. The chapter on 1974 to 1979 makes a substantial contribution to the literature on Thatcherism, showing how much policy work was done in opposition, how early the decisive changes took place, and how much of this was signalled to the public in opposition. The treatment of Northern Ireland is also a strength, not least in its refusal to isolate the subject from the normal process of policy. Bale pays full attention to the Conservatives' determination to engage in a battle of ideas with the left, and he is particularly good on the changing instruments through which these ideas were communicated to the public. He writes well on new media and the use of market research, especially the shift in the Thatcher era from targeting 'opinion formers' (like clergy, teachers and doctors) to a direct appeal to 'ordinary' people through tabloid newspapers and the middle-brow media.

Change was not, of course, always beneficent; nor was it always directed from within. One of the most striking phenomena of this period was the collapse of party membership, from a nominal muster roll of 2,805,032 members in 1953. This included a dynamic student movement and a vibrant Young Conservative wing; yet the story thereafter was of continuous decline, reaching catastrophic proportions in Scotland, Wales and the great cities. It would be interesting to know what Bale sees as driving this change, not least because of its salience to the first of his three indicators. For if the image of the party at Westminster altered little over this period, the face it presented in the constituencies became considerably greyer and more wrinkled. In the early 50s, one might go to the Conservative Club in the hope of picking up a husband; by the 1980s, one was more likely to be picking up one's granny.

This was part of a wider transformation, which eroded two pillars of previous Conservative success: its claim to represent the *nation*, rather than any single class within it; and its ability to tap into a network of social organisations that were not explicitly partisan. The shift from a national, ostensibly classless alliance that stood, in some sense, above 'party politics', to a professional outfit rooted in the South of England marked a major party change. Its drivers are still only dimly understood, though they were reflected in the party's own language. Churchill's manifesto in 1945 had not even mentioned the word 'Conservative', and the Scottish party campaigned as 'Unionists' until the mid-1960s. It was not until 1948 that candidates for borough elections routinely fought as 'Conservatives', rather than as 'ratepayers' or 'municipal' candidates. In this respect, the period after 1945 marked a 'coming out' process for a politics that dared not speak its name. That shift was as important to the rebranding of Conservatism as any number of new logos; and in its consequences, it was almost certainly more costly.

**Robert Saunders** is a Lecturer in History at Oxford University. He is the co-editor of *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).