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Andrew Gamble on the Conservative Party

Introduction

Anna Killick and Deborah Mabbett

The idea for this special issue came from a discussion among the PQ editors about the current state of the Conservative Party. While riding high in the polls and enjoying a large majority in Parliament, the Party has recently been through a massive upheaval. Under Johnson's leadership, efforts to find compromises on how to leave the EU were abandoned, and key members of the Remainer tendency expelled. While the special conditions of the pandemic made it hard to judge the government's underlying orientation, little importance seems to be attached to upholding Conservative norms about support for business, fiscal restraint and sound economic management. We sought out Andrew Gamble, who has provided, from a left perspective, an unmatched depth of insight into the Party over the decades; his first book, *The Conservative Nation*, was published in 1974, before Thatcher came to power, and his latest collection of essays includes an analysis of the significance of Brexit for conservatism.¹ We asked contributors to this special issue to assess the Conservative party with reference to Gamble's work, and convened a workshop where Gamble responded to their contributions.

In this introduction, we highlight the two dominant themes in the special issue: why the Conservative party has been so successful, and what it stands for. On the ingredients of success, Gamble's account in *The Conservative Nation* emphasised its flexibility and pragmatism, but also identified core Conservative values and strategies for gaining and holding on to power. Gamble structured his analysis of these strategies around the tension between the 'politics of support' and the 'politics of power'. These deceptively simple terms sum up central problems in politics. Managing the politics of support means constructing a programme that will win an electoral majority. But a party that is likely to form a government must think about the realities of power: will it be able to implement enough of its electioneering programme when in office, while managing the hard choices that events throw up for governments? Furthermore, a strategic government will seek to create a positive feedback loop, using the politics of power to bring about social and economic changes that consolidate its support.

Contributors to this special issue draw freely on this framework to illustrate a range of issues. Richard Vinen uses it to motivate a vivid characterisation of Enoch Powell, arguing that he was better able to mobilise electoral support than Edward Heath but singularly uninterested in the politics of power. This sets the stage for Vinen to argue that the politics of support has gained ascendancy in the contemporary party, not least because of the impact of another political outsider, Nigel Farage. Gillian Peele takes up Gamble's claim that 'the politics of power has always come first for Conservatives' meaning that the conditions for effective and flexible government are prioritised. These include a devotion to unity behind the leader and the avoidance of factionalism. Yet the strong leadership so valued in principle has hardly been sustained in practice, with the striking exception of Thatcher in her early years in power, while factionalism has been evident in recent years in the emergence of various 'research groups'.

For Richard Hayton, the politics of power takes the lead: the point is to use the resources of office to achieve hegemony, forcing the opposition to engage on the government's terms, while implementing policies that recast the economic and electoral landscape in ways which will consolidate the position of the governing party. Thatcherism was successful at this for a long time,

¹ Gamble, A, 'After Brexit' in *After Brexit and other essays*, Bristol University Press 2021.

but then came unstuck, leaving the party in the doldrums for an extended period. The present government exhibits some of the same boldness as Thatcher in setting the agenda, but arguably less of the pragmatism and realism that made Thatcherism successful as a political project.

Philip Norton highlights how the Conservative politics of support is based on being the party of the 'nation', cultivated against the class politics of Labour. Sustaining a cross-class basis of 'national' appeal used to mean being the party of Empire and Union. Now, Norton argues, unionist support in Northern Ireland and Scotland has been lost, to be replaced with reliance on an English base. Does the lack of a unified understanding of Britishness matter? Contributors to this collection are ambivalent. While the government's dissembling over the Northern Ireland Protocol must count as a serious failure to manage the exercise of power, it seems to be having little effect on the Conservatives' electoral support.

Conservative talents for reconciling the politics of power and the politics of support would come to naught without the aid of a political constitution which the party has proved ideally adapted to. To maintain the two-party system which serves it so well under current electoral arrangements, the Party has had to be a broad coalition. It has also had to ensure that no party can get established to its right. David Willetts argues that these two goals proved partly compatible in the 2019 election: UKIP was killed off and at the same time the working class presence in the coalition was revived. However, he echoes a long-standing theme in Gamble's work, stemming even from the Thatcherite period, of speculation that the Conservatives would experience decline long term because of the aging of their support base. Willetts' verdict on the contemporary condition of Conservative support is cautionary. Wealthier southern Remainers may prove hard to retain, and the age profile of the party's support is (still) worrying for strategists with a time horizon of more than a decade.

Many of the contributors are in some way concerned with how much of the essence of the party still remains. Having succeeded in creating a new coalition of support, the Prime Minister has to manage the coalition of power that is the Cabinet. At first sight, it is packed with the Brexit faithful, but of course support for leaving the EU was based on divergent expectations about what comes next. Tim Bale outlines the multiple divisions within Cabinet: on international relations, public expenditure and economic policy. All are supposedly signed up to 'levelling up', but converting this into a coherent policy programme will stretch Conservative pragmatism and flexibility to its limits. It is already clear that the most powerful instruments for reaching the poorest people and areas - social security and local government funding - will not be used. Instead, the programme relies on a motley assortment of development initiatives and business tax breaks.

In economic policy, Thatcher overturned decades of a 'one nation' approach based on Keynesian demand management to shift the party in a 'neoliberal', deregulating direction. When writing 'The Decline of the Conservative Party'² in 1979, Gamble was sceptical that she would succeed. He assumed working class voters who had voted for her because they thought the economy was not working under Labour would become disillusioned when unemployment ensued, which was the inevitable outcome of her retrenchment in public spending and ending of subsidies. However, the rightward shift in economic policy continued, not just through the Conservative Party's three subsequent election victories, but also in the economic policies of the New Labour governments. Gamble did not label the Thatcherite economic approach a consistently 'neo' liberal one, because he thought the economic liberalism was often haphazard and not as ideologically driven as some believed. But many commentators have seen some form of neoliberalism as a dominant paradigm from the 1970s onwards. A key question is whether the 2016 Brexit victory marks an abandonment of economic neoliberalism. Johnson's current stance is finely balanced. Perhaps, in the Conservative

² Gamble, A, 'The decline of the Conservative Party', *Marxism Today*, November 1979.

'pragmatic' tradition, he seems to want to keep people guessing for as long as possible about whether the direction will be 'Global Britain' or 'Britain First'. For MacLeavy and Jones, however, Johnson is continuing with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not just resilient, it is 'shape-shifting'. In its later stages, neoliberalism has created uneven regional development and perversely undermines its own principles to encourage ethno-nationalism and produce Brexit. Johnson's rhetoric on 'levelling up' is unlikely to reduce regional inequalities, but will contribute to the continuance of neoliberalism in this new form.

Several authors in this collection argue that the post-referendum governments of May and Johnson have brought more of a disjuncture in the economic policies of the Conservative Party than MacLeavy and Jones suggest. It is no longer the party of either economic liberalism or sound fiscal policy. The politics of support has trumped the politics of power in Johnsonian conservatism, rendering the party effective in winning elections but rudderless in office. This combination is characteristic of populist parties, as their appeal to the public rests in large part on refusing to engage with the realities of exercising power, particularly on the economic front. However, labelling Johnson as populist may obscure more than it reveals. Johnson does not deny his membership of the elite and does not cast himself as the common man. The anti-establishment rhetoric that issues from 10 Downing St is highly targeted. The government's attacks on the BBC and the judiciary are attacks on contemporary trends in those institutions – on alleged 'wokeness' in the BBC and activism in the judiciary. Even the prorogation of Parliament could be framed as an assertion of traditional executive power rather than the constitution-defying action of a populist politician.

In this light, Tom Hoctor's suggestion that American neoconservatism might be the closest thing that the current government has to an ideology gains credence. Unlike neoliberalism, neoconservatism lacks an economic ideology beyond a vague commitment to 'free markets', which suits Johnson. But, also unlike neoliberalism, neoconservatism does provide an account of government: of how a political elite may gain and exercise power. Parts of Hoctor's summary are startlingly evocative of the present government's behaviour: notably its willingness to lie to the public and its rejection of established routines of accountability to Parliament. Tradition counts for little in neoconservatism; anything goes in the maintenance of authority and social cohesion, including the absence of legal protection for those deemed not to be part of the community. Andrew Gamble wrote about a Conservative Party that accepted boundaries to its political behaviour: the politics of support would be based around a broadly honest account of interests, and power exercised within the constraints of the rule of law and the constitution. Neoconservatism ignores these boundaries. There have been Conservative governments before that have acted illegally or corruptly, withheld information and promulgated fictions, but these have been recognised instances of boundary-crossing, rather than an integral part of the day-to-day operation of government. One does not have to view the past through rose-tinted lenses to see the contemporary Conservative Party as a different creature to its predecessors.