Post Brexit and Post-Covid: Reflections on the Contemporary Conservative Party

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Abstract
This article analyses the changing character of the contemporary Conservative Party. It argues that the period since the Brexit referendum has seen the creation of a new politics in which voter alignments have shifted, and that the experience of the Covid pandemic has created a new agenda of issues facing government. Taken together, these developments constitute formidable challenges to the Conservative Party as it seeks to maintain its electoral support and its ability to manage the politics of power.

Keywords: Conservative Party, Brexit, Covid-19, leadership, ideology, electorate

ONE OF THE most impressive features of Andrew Gamble’s work has been his ability to identify and analyse large themes that affect the wider context of political development, as well as to interpret the political strategies employed by political leaders at a more local level. Thus, his writing has addressed such transnational issues as the end of prosperity and the end of the welfare state, as well as systemic dilemmas more specific to the United Kingdom such as the problem of national decline and the tension between its orientation towards the United States and Europe in its foreign policy stance. Two of his works, perhaps still the best known, have explored in depth the character of the British Conservative Party, charting and exploring the reasons for its continuing political successes, notwithstanding perhaps, the distance between his own political outlook and that of the Conservative Party. Very recently, he has made shrewd contributions to the analysis of the transformations of British political patterns which have occurred as a result of Brexit, and raised important questions about the implication of the new politics for the future of the Conservative Party. Here I want to revisit aspects of Andrew Gamble’s writing about the Conservative Party and to highlight some of the paradoxes and contradictions in its current position under Boris Johnson’s leadership. Gamble’s two classic works on British conservatism were published at turning points in the evolution of the Conservative Party. The Conservative Nation was published in 1974, the year in which Edward Heath’s government—which in many ways represented the end of the post-war consensus—collapsed. The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism was published in 1988, a year after Margaret Thatcher’s third election victory had apparently entrenched a new politics. The Thatcherite approach embodied in the ideas and policies of the new right was itself, as Gamble emphasised, a response to changes in the global economy. The radical shift of ideology and doctrine which occurred in the British Conservative Party drew on intellectual movements which had an impact beyond the United Kingdom. Both books offered an interpretation of the different ways the Conservative Party had adapted to transformations in the context in which it sought power—

1A. Gamble, The Conservative Nation, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974; A. Gamble, The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism, London, Macmillan, 1988.

2A. Gamble, ‘The realignment of British politics in the wake of Brexit’, The Political Quarterly, vol. 90, S2, 2019, pp. 177–186.
adaptations which had been made both to its leadership and leadership style, to its policies and programmes, and to its electoral appeal, in the all-important effort to maintain itself in power.

The publication of The Free Economy and the Strong State, while it noted the dominance of Thatcherism, occurred at a time when Thatcher’s position in the Conservative Party had peaked. The subsequent two decades saw the internal divisions over the United Kingdom’s relationship with the European Union within the Party escalate into a debilitating civil war and Conservative ascendency replaced by a rejuvenated Labour Party under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. In that period the Conservatives struggled to maintain unity and adjust to opposition after 1997 and, although David Cameron was able to take the party back into government in 2010, that return to power was as part of a coalition. Its room for manoeuvre was severely limited both by the need to cope with the effects of global recession and the continuing intra-party dissent. The general election of 2015 did give Cameron a small majority, but far from stopping the Party ‘banging on’ about the issue of European Union membership, the decision to call a referendum eventually caused Cameron’s resignation; and it ushered in an unprecedented period of turbulence until Cameron’s successor, Theresa May, was forced to resign and the Party decisively moved towards embracing a new identity under Boris Johnson.

The 2019 election in which Johnson won the first sizeable Conservative majority since 1987, the subsequent by-election and local election successes in 2021, and the disarray of Labour even under new leadership, seem to suggest that the Conservative Party has re-established itself in a position of dominance. Certainly, it could be argued that the current period is a pivotal one for the character of British politics, altering the underlying divisions and alignments of British political life and requiring new political strategies for the Conservative Party to maintain its support. Two key factors, I suggest, are reshaping the political landscape in which the Conservatives must compete for and manage power. The first, unsurprisingly, is Brexit and the referendum of 2016 which saw the United Kingdom vote to leave the EU. As Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford have argued, Brexit should not be seen so much as a one-time event, but a response to divisions and antagonism which have been long in the making. By the same token, its impact on British political life will continue into the future, even though the Conservative Party’s immediate state of civil warfare may have been largely resolved by the exit from the EU. The effect of Brexit—not just on the Conservative Party, but on the political system as a whole—will doubtless absorb academic commentators for many years to come. What I suggest here, however, is that the second factor—the Covid pandemic—will also have a major effect on the Conservative Party’s priorities, reshaping its attitude to the role of the state and public spending, as well as offering an opportunity to project itself in a way which emphasises its concern for the nation as a whole and its superior ability to deliver public policy goals. I return to these issues and their challenge for Conservative strategy later in the article. First, however, I want to revisit briefly Gamble’s earlier works on the Conservative Party in order to draw out some points of continuing importance in order to understanding the Party’s ability to adapt to a changing context.

The Conservative Nation

On re-reading Andrew Gamble’s The Conservative Nation, one is struck both by how relevant many of his insights in that book remain but also by how much the Conservative Party itself has changed since it was first published. It is not of course surprising that the Conservative Party should have changed over the past fifty years. After all, the pragmatic ability to adjust to changing circumstances has frequently been seen as its secret weapon in its bid to achieve electoral success and retain power. What is perhaps more surprising is the extent to which aspects of Conservative Party statecraft have become more difficult as a result of many of those changes. Early in the book, Gamble writes that since the politics of power ‘has always come first for Conservatives, the politics of support is generally interpreted in terms of its requirements. This

3M. Sobolewska and R. Ford, Brexiland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.
accounts for many well attested features of the party, especially the emphasis on strong leadership, the rare emergence of factions and the lack of a coherent doctrine and philosophy.\textsuperscript{4} Yet, each of these three features has been contested in recent scholarship and in practice. Take the feature of strong leadership. Looking at leaders since Harold Macmillan, one is struck by how far the authority of the leadership not merely looks fragile in retrospect, but how—even at the time of that leadership—it often looked far from strong. Macmillan declined very quickly from the ‘Supermac’ of the 1959 election, to the symbol of an out-dated elite which had lost touch with contemporary society and was hobbled by scandal. In a July 1963 House of Commons debate on the Profumo scandal, Nigel Birch’s bitter quotation from Robert Browning’s poem ‘The Lost Leader’ questioned Harold Macmillan’s competence and judgment, underlining the sense of many Conservative MPs that it was time for Macmillan to leave the leadership, because it would ‘never be bright confident morning again’. Sir Alec Douglas-Home, though regarded fondly in many sections of the party, could not stamp his authority on British politics. Edward Heath had to endure an unhappy period as Leader of the Opposition after 1965, and for his period as premier, experienced both an unusually challenging set of policy problems and a long-running battle with Enoch Powell over the direction of the Party—and indeed, the character of Conservatism.\textsuperscript{5} Margaret Thatcher, while enjoying enormous authority for a period of her premiership, was very conscious of her vulnerability both as Leader of the Opposition and then after 1988 in power as her ascendency waned. After Thatcher, both Major and May were subject to extraordinary internal party difficulties: Major took the unprecedented step of standing for re-election as leader in order to try to reassert his authority over the Party, while May was forced to resign when she proved unable to reconcile the Conservative factions warring over the terms of EU withdrawal. The three leaders who followed Major—without the benefit of the premiership—resigned the leadership when they either lost an election (as William Hague did in 2001 and Michael Howard did in 2005) or lost the confidence of the Party in Parliament, as Iain Duncan Smith did in 2003. David Cameron is perhaps a more ambiguous case of leadership authority and I return to that case later.

Part of the explanation for the weaknesses of successive leaders after Thatcher has been the changes in the character of the Conservative Party in terms of its ideology and the emergence of organised factions, many of them built around the issue of Europe, which became from the Thatcher period onwards a major source of ideological discord. To the extent that party management has been seen as an essential component of Conservative success, the task of leadership appears to have become increasingly more difficult.

The free economy and the strong state

Ideology is itself a problematic theme for the Conservative Party. It has frequently been argued that Conservatives are naturally sceptical about ideology and doctrine and that practical politics, not ideology, should dominate party priorities. It is probably more accurate to argue that the Conservative Party has not generally emphasised its underlying philosophy, or been enthusiastic about debating political ideas in the abstract. This negativity towards stressing general political principles does not, however, mean that ideology has not been a significant factor in Conservative politics; and indeed, as Richard Hayton has argued, its role has often been underestimated.\textsuperscript{6} Party competition takes place against a background of public philosophy and ruling ideas, and a successful political party needs to have some common set of key values and principles and a persuasive narrative about how the nation’s problems are to be understood. To sell its message, a party must be able to offer an intellectually coherent justification of

\textsuperscript{4}Gamble, \textit{Conservative Nation}, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{5}On Heath’s leadership, see A. Roe-Crines and T. Heppell, eds., \textit{Policies and Politics Under Prime Minister Edward Heath}, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

\textsuperscript{6}See, for example, the discussion in R. Hayton, \textit{Reconstructing Conservatism: the Conservative Party in Opposition 1997–2010}, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012.
its policies and a vision of the future. With Margaret Thatcher’s advent to the leadership, ideological argument became a major weapon in the Conservative armoury. Margaret Thatcher’s period as leader of the Conservative Party was deeply divisive and deliberately so. Gamble comments on how, out of the normal run of Conservative leaders she was:

...her lack of political and intellectual sophistication invited ridicule. The Conservative political class had long despised conviction politics and those who practised it. They prided themselves on their intelligence, their flexibility and their pragmatism. Thatcher’s abrasive direct style swept all that away and threw the devotees of the Tory political arts into panic.7

Leaving aside for the moment who, precisely, the devotees of the Tory political arts were, Gamble nicely captures the combination of scepticism and condescension which Thatcher evoked among many in the Conservative Party. Ian Gilmour, William Whitelaw, Francis Pym and James Prior, among many others, regarded her politics as a dangerous departure from the norms of Tory statecraft. The evolution of Conservative politics under Thatcher in opposition and government, and its increasingly strident embrace of a new approach to the economy, to the role of unions, to social policy and to foreign policy, certainly destroyed the underpinnings of the consensus politics which had framed political debate since the postwar period. Instead, it emphasised monetarism and the restoration of the free market, the rollback of the state and the reduction of regulation. The radicalism increased with successive Thatcher administrations. Even if, as Gamble suggests, Thatcherism was not entirely coherent, the decade-long period of Thatcher’s premiership saw a surge of intellectual activity on the right of politics and the strong projection of a distinctive framework of ideas.

Thatcherism, although in many ways successful both in electoral terms and in reforming the country’s economic capacity, increasingly came to be seen as toxic for the Conservative Party brand and image. The successors in the leadership after 1990 were left to try to deal with that negative branding as the ‘nasty party’. Their efforts through different strategies were not immediately successful. Major’s attempts to inject responsive consumerism into public services was mildly successful, but after the 1992 victory, his ability to rebrand the party was severely constrained by the internal warfare over Europe and the tarnishing effect of sleaze.

The second legacy for the Conservative Party of Thatcherism was a reinforcement of the Party’s association with the southern and English parts on the United Kingdom. Obviously, the 2019 election and the Conservative smashing of the so-called ‘red wall’ puts an important question mark over the policies required to maintain support from these constituencies and whether it will be possible to satisfy the interests of the newer groups as well as those of traditional Conservative voters. But Thatcher’s style was widely perceived as a

7Gamble, The Free Economy, p. 85.
highly important factor in the growth of Scottish nationalism and as a persuasive recruiting agent for the SNP.

Thirdly, Mrs Thatcher herself increasingly expressed doubts about the direction of the EU and legitimised hostility to its policies, institutions and personnel. The scepticism about European integration stood in marked contrast to Heath’s underlying conviction that the nation state was dead. In external affairs, Thatcher exhibited a style of nationalism which, at that point, seemed to many out of tune with the realities of international politics, but to others, cut through much misleadingly unrealistic thinking and rhetoric.

Finally, Thatcher’s politics left behind a somewhat different state, as well as a dangerous neglect of currents of social change. By this, I mean that the emphasis on market values and individualism, as well as on privatisation and decentralising government, fragmented governmental structures and weakened its responsive power and delivery capacity. The Thatcherite emphasis on individual responsibility also increasingly alienated those who took a much more sympathetic view of a range of social ills. The result was a political shift towards Blair’s repositioned and modernised Labour Party, which had emphasised its willingness to embrace much of the Conservatives’ approach to the economy, while at the same time signalling a responsiveness to the dynamics of an increasingly liberal and multicultural society.

The leaders after Major (William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard), who were all from the centre right of the party, struggled to reassert an electorally popular identity and to restore the Party’s competitive position. Hague’s period as leader was in some ways the most interesting as it saw a major effort to restructure the party organisation. Perhaps the exercise was over ambitious; but one of its results was a system of leadership election which has serious flaws and which the Party has chosen to by-pass on occasion. Neither Iain Duncan Smith nor Michael Howard had the time or inclination to address the issues of how to rethink radically the strategy of the Conservative Party or how to rebuild future electoral support for the party. Not until David Cameron’s election as leader in 2005 did the party embark on a sustained effort to modernise its appeal, its policies and its image.

Efforts to reform aspects of the selection process, especially changes designed to diversify the party’s parliamentary candidates, proved highly controversial.

The Cameron legacy

Although David Cameron’s reputation has suffered as a result both of his decision to hold the Brexit referendum and more recently as a result of his engagement in lobbying activities, he did help set in train a repositioning of the Party in policy and image. He was not the prime mover of the modernisation agenda, which arguably owed more to Francis Maude, Michael Gove and Theresa May than to him. Cameron did, however, embrace a modernising strategy and identified his leadership with shifting the Party’s agenda. This strategy was designed to allow the Conservative Party to move forward from Thatcherism and address a range of social and environmental issues, as well as to promote organisational reforms designed to make it more reflective of contemporary society and modify its previous white, male and stale image. Cameron had some success in securing greater diversity among Conservative candidates from 2010 onwards and the Cameron government of 2010–2015 became visibly more liberal in its approach to social issues, especially on the question of same sex marriage. The government of 2010–15 was, however, reliant on its Liberal Democrat coalition partners—both to secure passage of this legislation and to act as a cushion against the increasingly fractious backbench critics in Cameron’s own party. The loss of the 2016 referendum by Cameron and his resignation that followed underlined the extent to which the leadership had lost control of its supporters; and it reflected a major restructuring of political loyalties.

The Johnson dilemma

The Brexit referendum drew new fault lines in British politics, although it was also a vehicle through which a range of pre-existing social and political divisions were expressed.

8On Cameron’s modernisation process, see G. Peele and J. Francis, eds., David Cameron and Conservative Renewal: the Limits of Modernization?, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016.
The 2019 Johnson electoral victory was based on the Conservative ability to appeal to a new coalition of electoral support, superior organisation and money, some tactical support on the right and the advantage of facing an unpopular Labour leader in Jeremy Corbyn. Keeping to the script of ‘Get Brexit done’ worked, although delivering the implementation of Brexit and its impact are likely to continue to be problematic, posing major challenges to government.

In terms of the politics of support, however, the future direction of the Conservative Party is anything but clear—at least in terms of its electoral base. The targeting of a group of Leave-voting constituencies in the North and Midlands—the red wall—which had been traditionally Labour, carried the Conservatives to victory in 2019. However, the role of those constituencies in that victory has made it essential to find ways of ‘rewarding’ that support. The promise of ‘levelling up’ is one thing, but delivering it is likely to prove difficult and costly. There is also the major issue of how to regain support among key groups who appear to have deserted the Tories—especially younger voters and graduates. (Labour had a 43 point lead in the 18–24 age group in 2019, while the Conservatives enjoyed a 47 point lead among the over sixty-fives; Labour won 43 per cent of the graduate vote, while the Conservatives secured only 29 per cent of the graduate vote, according to Deborah Mattinson.) In terms of the politics of support, what is apparent is the need to devise strategies to hold on to new groups of supporters and to strengthen support among younger voters and graduates.

Reconciling the interests of the different groups in the new Conservative coalition is likely to present difficulties. Some of these difficulties have already emerged in the handling of housing and planning, where the interests of new Conservative-supporting groups are in liberalising planning laws and having more houses built for purchase at an affordable price—objectives which are likely to run counter to those of established Conservative voters in southern seats. And the levelling-up agenda itself may prove difficult to deliver, especially in the course of one Parliament.

The impact of Covid

It is, however, the Covid pandemic which seems likely to have the most immediate impact on the Conservative Party’s agenda and identity. Already, we know that the cost of providing a massive degree of economic support is huge, as is the damage to the economy done by the pandemic. The 2020–2021 budget deficit is likely to reach a massive £350–£400 billion—a peace time high, while the Institute for Government described the pandemic as the biggest shock to the economy for 300 years. The Conservative Party has presented itself as a government willing to use an extraordinary degree of state intervention to get the country through the crisis, but it also needs to inject an increasing amount of money into the NHS and the education sector as well as attempting to tackle the vexed question of social care. The sustained drive to develop and roll out the vaccine underlines the need for increased investment in science and research and development. A high degree of state investment is therefore required—not just for what (we hope) is the short term of the Covid pandemic, but for a much longer investment in infrastructure and public services. Combined with a levelling-up agenda, this is not an agenda in the Thatcherite mould. Nor is it easy to see how it can be paid for without—in the longer term—some major tax increases. There is also likely to be a renewed attempt to improve the delivery of policy and a retreat from the fragmented decentralised state.

There is a question mark over the leadership’s ability to maintain unified support within the Conservative Party. The rise in dissenting behaviour and factionalism in Parliament over the last fifty years has been well documented by Philip Norton, Philip Cowley and others. Backbenchers have become more

9D. Mattinson, Beyond the Red Wall: Why Labour Lost, How the Conservatives Won and What Will Happen Next?, London, Biteback Publishing, 2020.

10For an overview, see G. Tetlow and T. Pope, Brexit and Coronavirus: Economic Impacts and Policy Response, London, Institute for Government, 2020.
11See, for example, P. Norton, Conservative Dissidents: Dissent within the Parliamentary Conservative Party 1970–1974, London, Temple Smith, 1978 and P. Norton, Dissension in the House of Commons: Intra-party Dissent in the House of Commons Division Lobbies 1945–1974, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980. For later work on dissent, see especially works by Philip Cowley, including his Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting under Blair, London, Methuen, 2002.
assertive and in recent years have been able to use new forums such as the Backbench Business Committee. Two organisational groupings—the Covid Recovery Group (CRG) chaired by former chief whip Mark Harper, and the Northern Research Group (NRG) chaired by Jake Berry—have the potential to be disruptive of party unity and the leadership’s authority. Both groups appear to be modelled on the European Research Group (ERG) which earlier undermined Theresa May’s leadership and both the CRG and the NRG have over fifty supporters. However, the ideological reach of both groups is wider than that of the ERG. In both cases, the groups can also call upon the support and sympathy of former ministers and, in the case of the CRG, the chairman of the 1922 Committee Sir Graham Brady, and the former minister Steve Baker as deputy chair of the CRG. The agendas of the two groups seem, however, to point in rather different directions, with the CRG wanting greater transparency in relation to decision making about Covid policy, but also urging a more libertarian approach to easing restrictions. The NRG, by contrast, urges giving much more priority and substance to the levelling-up policies, emphasising the importance of keeping the promises made to the northern constituencies after 2019. There is already a sense that both groups have the potential to destabilise Johnson’s leadership and are willing to vote against government policy in Parliament.

There is also a sense that Johnson’s authority may be vulnerable as a result of his allegedly cautious decision-making style. Dominic Cummings’ onslaught in May 2021 on Johnson’s competence and that of his Cabinet in the handling of the Covid pandemic may not by itself prove lethal to Johnson’s leadership; but it could be extremely dangerous if later evidence of unresolved Cabinet division creates an impression of incompetence which is difficult to dislodge.

So, what we have here, in my opinion, is a uniquely challenging set of constraints—both national and international—facing the Conservative Party. Its capacity to manage the politics of support is vulnerable to the conflicting priorities of its voters and of factions within the parliamentary party which are increasingly self-confident and well organised. The politics of power is likely to be even harder to manage, because of the uniquely challenging character of the issues facing the government. Even if the threat from the Covid pandemic itself is successfully overcome and the government is not retrospectively blamed for the mistakes in its handling, it will cast a long shadow over the economy and the provision of key public services, especially health and social services and education.

**Concluding questions**

Is there a new ideological synthesis in the contemporary Conservative Party and, if so, how is this new approach to be described? Clearly, the reassertion of the United Kingdom’s independence as a result of Brexit is inevitably to a defining characteristic of the new Conservative identity. Yet, nationalism raises sensitive issues within the current context of the UK’s territorial politics. The Conservative government has to operate in a constitutional system which is very different from the one which faced Margaret Thatcher on entering office in 1979. Devolution to Scotland, Wales and the delicate Northern Ireland settlement have all changed the politics of power, limiting the freedom of manoeuvre of Westminster. More generally, the increased independence and assertiveness of the judiciary, and the operation of the Human Rights Act, have contributed to a new constitutional balance in which the powers of the executive are subject to greater challenge and control. However much some Conservatives would like to rewind the constitutional clock, these developments are not likely to be put into reverse. Scotland and Northern Ireland seem likely to require very careful management if the Conservative Party wishes to avoid presiding over the disintegration of the United Kingdom.

At the heart of Conservative philosophy under Margaret Thatcher was the idea of a liberalised economy and a state strengthened by the shedding of unnecessary intervention in the economy. The response to Covid and its aftermath looks much more like the strong state intervention associated with wartime and with one nation conservatism, rather than the neoliberalism or new right politics of the Thatcherite period. The emphasis on the spirit of social solidarity and community during the pandemic has reinforced that sense of a joint national effort to protect individuals against the disease and defend key institutions—especially the National Health Service.
Together with the political imperative of responding to the levelling-up agenda, the greater concern with social cohesion frames a new politics quite different from that of even a decade ago.

It is not clear how far the post-Brexit and post-Covid Conservative Party has developed the necessary arguments and language to enable it to shape future political debates, let alone dominate the terms of political discourse. By comparison with the period of the Thatcher governments, for example, this period of Conservative dominance has not seen an extensive resurgence of intellectual activity or ideological repositioning, although there are think tanks like Policy Exchange and Bright Blue which make diverse contributions to policy debate. There is no single body as influential as the free market Institute for Economic Affairs was in shaping the Thatcherite agenda; and, given the interventionist thrust of economic policy as a result of the pandemic, internal party debate about the proper approach to economic and fiscal matters is likely to be far more contentious than it was in the Thatcher years. There has been some attempt to engage with cultural issues, such as freedom of speech in universities and the controversies over removing memorials to individuals whose views or associations with slavery or imperialism are now deemed unacceptable. Such issues do not, however, greatly resonate with many voters whose concerns are focussed much more directly on the delivery of public services and practical innovation to cope with the unexpected crisis which emerged in the form of the pandemic.

The other factor cementing the diverse strands of opinion in the Conservative Party is Johnson’s leadership. At least for the moment, the Conservative Party has been lucky in that Johnson seems able to command greater confidence than his Labour opposite number, and that his personal popularity and authority remains high. Perhaps his leadership style is sufficiently flexible to enable him to manage the political headwinds during this strangely turbulent period, and to steer the Conservative Party towards the implementation of a new agenda and solidify the electoral support demonstrated in 2019 and again in 2021. It may, of course, be that the Conservative strength will disintegrate as the promises made in 2019 prove difficult to deliver and the problems of the economy and public services after Brexit and Covid become more apparent. What we can say with some certainty is that any continued Conservative dominance is likely to be very different from that of previous ones and will demand extensive leadership qualities and strategic skills, as well as the ability to communicate a refined political narrative to a diverse set of supporters.

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