Abstract

A key feature of David Cameron’s electoral appeal is his carefully cultivated image as a ‘family man’. He has repeatedly stressed the importance of the family to his political views, and stated his desire to see a future Conservative government reward marriage through the tax system.

At the same time, Cameron has presented himself as a modernising leader, keen to demonstrate that he and his party are in touch with contemporary society. Central to his effort to detoxify the Conservative brand has been an emphasis on social liberalism. The potential conflict between these two objectives reflects the division in the party between social liberals and social conservatives, which has become increasingly apparent over the past decade. This paper considers this through an examination of the evolution of party policy on marriage and gay rights, and questions whether Cameron has successfully developed a novel Conservative stance which overcomes these internal disagreements.
Introduction

Just as I felt that the party was beginning to relax over the European issue it decided to have an explosive internal row about something else.


A widely accepted and often repeated belief, both amongst Conservatives and many of their critics, is that on the issue of the economy the Conservatives have been victorious in the ‘battle of ideas’. The case for the free market over statist socialist planning has been comprehensively demonstrated, they argue, by the failure of Keynesianism and the success of Thatcher’s economic revolution, a success vindicated at the polls by four Conservative election victories and the emergence of New Labour. Whilst enjoying the taste of this triumph, some Conservatives actually see it as the root cause of their electoral problems. They are the victims of their own success: by forcing Labour to accept their agenda, they have created a new consensus and neutralised one of the most compelling reasons for voting Conservative. Indeed, after the collapse of the Conservatives’ reputation for economic competence after ‘Black Wednesday’ in September 1992, Labour were able to argue that they are the party best able to manage the economy, and polls have until recently demonstrated that the public believe this to be the case.1 Shortly after becoming party leader, David Cameron acknowledged this problem, claiming:

We knew how to rescue Britain from Old Labour. We knew how to win the battle of ideas with Old Labour. We did not know how to deal with our own victory in that battle of ideas. That victory left us with an identity crisis. Having defined ourselves for many years as the anti-socialist Party, how were we to define ourselves once full-blooded socialism had disappeared from the political landscape? (Cameron, 2006).

The consequence of this difficulty, Cameron argued, was that ‘as Labour moved towards the centre ground, the Conservative Party moved to the right. Instead of focusing on the areas where we now agreed with Labour on our aims… we ended up focusing on those areas where we didn’t agree’. The Conservatives in opposition therefore emphasised

1 In March 2008, ICM found that the Conservatives (40 percent) led Labour (32 percent) as the best party on the economy (The Guardian, 2008).
taxation, immigration, and Europe as areas of policy difference from Labour, but this left them lacking a clear message on the ‘common ground’ of British politics, namely Blair’s agenda of ‘social justice and economic efficiency’ (Cameron, 2006).

Cameron claims that under his leadership the Conservatives ‘have at last come to terms with our own victory in the battle of ideas’, presenting the opportunity to combine this triumph and the preservation of its fruits with ‘the resolution of the social problems which were left unresolved at the end of our time in government’ and which Labour has also failed to cure (Cameron, 2006). To this end, Cameron has spoken of the need to mend Britain’s ‘broken society’, citing problems such as poverty, drug abuse, debt, family breakdown and educational failure (Jones, 2007). This paper will explore the extent to which this agenda of social rather than economic reform now offers fertile terrain for a Conservative electoral revival. It will examine party policy and rhetoric on social and moral issues since 1997, particularly gay rights and family policy. It will consider whether the key dividing line within the Conservative Party is no longer between Eurosceptics and Europhiles, but between social liberals and traditionalists. How this division has informed the strategies of Hague, Duncan Smith, and Howard and the debate over modernisation will be explored. The paper will end with an assessment of Cameron’s claim that the Conservatives have come to terms with this dilemma, and evaluate whether his efforts to appear socially liberal whilst also emphasising the centrality of family policy constitute a distinctively Conservative answer to it.

**Mods and Rockers: Conservative divisions over social and moral issues**

In an effort to map the ideological composition of contemporary conservatism and explain ideological discord within the Conservative Party a number of different typologies have been developed. These have highlighted divisions between ‘wets’ and ‘dries’ on economic policy and conflict between Europhiles and Eurosceptics (Heppell & Hill, 2005). For Heppell and Hill, Europe and economic policy are ‘the two most significant ideological policy divides’ (2005: 347). However, Heppell’s (2002) model also mapped the ‘social, sexual and moral policy divide’, distinguishing social liberals
from social conservatives to create a three-dimensional typology (2002: 312). Social and moral issues have long been of concern to Conservatives, and form a distinctive aspect of conservatism. The notion that positioning on such issues is an important divide for Conservatives is an increasingly prevalent one, linked to the need to develop a post-Thatcherite agenda. Such issues have also come to form a more central feature of Conservative identity as self-identification as the anti-socialist party (as Cameron highlights above) has diminished. At the same time, Conservative ideology has failed to establish the degree of hegemony enjoyed in the economic arena. As Pilbeam notes, ‘modern Conservatism has signally failed to close down contestation over moral issues in the same way that it has done over others’. Whilst the traditional Left has been defeated ‘on the battleground of economics, Conservatives continue to face an array of opponents, such as feminists and gay rights activists, fiercely challenging them in the moral arena’ (Pilbeam, 2005: 158-9).

For the Conservative MP John Hayes, ‘the most important challenges we face are not economic, they are social and cultural’. Future economic success, he argues, is dependent upon the nourishment of ‘the social capital upon which a successful marriage between civil society and free enterprise depends’ (Hayes, 2002: 71). Consequently, Conservatives need to redefine their mission:

> For too long politicians have assumed that good economics equals good politics; they have behaved as though standard of living and quality of life are synonymous. The view that endless material advance is the utopia to which all policy should be directed has dominated political debate for fifty or so years. This is a reductionist view of politics that ignores all those components necessary to a balanced quality of life that do not relate to economic well being. (Hayes, 2002: 68).

These sentiments have been echoed by Cameron’s calls for politicians to focus ‘not just on GDP, but on GWB – General Well-Being’ and his claim that: ‘It's time we admitted that there’s more to life than money’ (2006b). For Hayes, the reluctance of most politicians to address such issues can be explained by the fact that they have ‘awkward associations with values and morals’, so ‘it became convenient for politicians to retreat to the safer ground of managing the public purse and advocacy of ever greater material
consumption’ (2002: 68). In the case of the Conservatives this reluctance can partly be explained by the ill-fated ‘Back to Basics’ campaign of 1993-94. This effort to re-launch John Major’s government sought to divert attention to social issues after the economic debacle of withdrawal from the ERM, but quickly unravelled in the face of allegations of sleaze and immoral behaviour on the part of Conservative MPs. This left a scar on the party’s collective psyche, but an increasing number of Conservatives are now stressing the importance of reengaging with social and moral issues. For Gary Streeter MP, this represents a necessary if daunting task, on a scale ‘similar to the economic battles that faced the incoming Conservative government of 1979’ (2002: 4). A future Conservative government, he suggests, would face numerous challenges such as public service reform, terrorism, and relations with the EU, but ‘none will be greater than the social challenges of drugs, rising crime, alienation and intergenerational poverty’ (Streeter, 2002: 3). David Willetts MP has similarly argued that Conservative politics should be about more than economics, and a vibrant civil society is a central component of his ‘civic conservatism’ (1994). He argues that ‘what really matters most of all to Conservatives is everything in between the individual and the state’. For him, ‘how we sustain and support that rich social architecture… is the real challenge for politics today’ (Willetts, 2002: 58). Likewise Oliver Letwin MP (2003) has called for Conservatives to foster a ‘neighbourly society’ in which social duties and obligations have the same importance and recognition as the pursuit of material gain.

For Pilbeam (2003) it is a profound mistake to see Conservative politics as merely about economics. He points to the lack of confidence amongst Conservatives that cultural and moral concerns are being sufficiently addressed by intermediate institutions such as families, churches, and schools: ‘There is thus good reason for them to concern themselves with the condition of the wider social fabric, even to the extent of questioning its neglect by conservatives of the past’ (2003: 87). Some, such as the commentator Peter Hitchens (1999) have gone as far to suggest that the Thatcher governments were complicit in this national moral decline, despite Thatcher’s professed desire to re-instil ‘Victorian values’. In contrast to Shirley Letwin (1992), who championed the moral strength of Thatcherism for its emphasis on the ‘vigorous virtues’, Hitchens argues that
the neo-liberal policies of the Thatcher years, whilst not the cause of permissiveness, did nothing to counter it and most likely worsened it, by neglecting the social and moral agenda. The common portrayal of the right as being largely concerned with economic liberalism is thus partly the fault of Conservative politicians, but for Pilbeam it is also a caricature which it has been in the interests of the Left to maintain: ‘this distortion clearly serves ideological purposes’, as it leaves social issues as the preserve of the Left (2003: 87).

Whilst Conservatives appear increasingly keen to re-associate themselves with social and moral issues, how to do so has been the cause of disagreement between social liberals and social conservatives, as the typologies of conservatism illustrate (Heppell, 2002). In 1998 The Times argued that the key dividing line in the Conservative Party is no longer over Europe or between Left and Right, but that: ‘the real division is between liberals and reactionaries, modernisers and traditionalists, those armed primarily with principle and those whose first instinct is to take shelter in institutions’. Furthermore, for the Conservatives to regain power, the ‘liberals must first win the battle of ideas within their party’ (The Times, 1998). The leader went on:

The more important argument the Conservative Party still needs to have is between those sensitive to changing times and those inclined to nostalgia. It is a battle, we believe, between Tory Mods and Rockers. In the Sixties the former were those comfortable with change, the latter those who followed old fads. It is the difference between those with a gaze fixed on new horizons and those either blinkered or still dreaming.

Regardless of their personal preferences, electoral necessity demanded that Conservatives recognise the changing society in which they had to operate. ‘Wise Conservatives deal with the world as it is, not as it should be or once was. They respect the changing landscape and are sensitive to its contours’. The Conservatives could demonstrate this pragmatic attitude ‘by showing a liberal face to the electorate and extending an emancipating hand to all voters’, and by taking ‘government out of the boardroom and the bedroom’, contrasting themselves with an interventionist statist Labour Party (The Times, 1998).
Streeter, by contrast, does not see embracing social liberalism as the way onto this territory for Conservatives, or as a prerequisite for electoral success. For him, the agenda for helping the vulnerable ‘is not about extending laissez-faire doctrines throughout society’, but about representing ‘the small platoons’ against big business as well as against big government. As such, ‘Conservatives must not stand for social liberalism, but social justice’ (2002: 9). He also argued that the distinction between mods and rockers is no longer as useful for understanding the contemporary Conservative Party as it was when it was first applied by *The Times*, suggesting that ‘the boundaries have become much more fluid’ (Streeter Interview). Whilst acknowledging the existence of a ‘spectrum’ of views on social and moral issues, Streeter argued that a liberal position is not a prerequisite for modernisation. He explained:

I think it was more true then, but it wasn’t just about being socially liberal or conservative. I am quite socially conservative, but I knew that the party had to modernise and that we had to be dramatically radical and different otherwise we would never win again. I certainly fell into that camp which was why I supported Portillo in the 2001 leadership election. I just wanted us to be modernised, and Portillo was a class act, although I wouldn’t have voted with him on a number of moral issues. (Streeter Interview).

Nonetheless, positioning on the social and moral dimension has been the source of significant disagreement within the party, interlaced with the broader strategic question of how to broaden the Conservatives’ appeal. This debate reflects the ideological legacy of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party, which has continued to frame party positioning since 1997. For Heppell, ‘Thatcherism constituted a self-conscious ideological strategy to redefine the Conservatives as a party of economic liberalism, national independence and moral authoritarianism’ (2002: 302, original emphasises). Whilst the doctrines of economic liberalism and national independence (at least in terms of Euroscepticism) now appear to be firmly embedded in the party, moral authoritarianism does not have the same grip. It has, however, been a significant feature of the debate over gay rights and family policy since 1997.
Hague: Bandwagon politics?

*There are millions of people in this country who are white, Anglo-Saxon and bigoted, and they need to be represented.*


During his leadership campaign and in the early part of his tenure William Hague was keen to present himself as embodying a fresh face for conservatism. This involved presenting himself and his party as at ease with modern British society, including its non-traditional and multicultural aspects. Another element of this strategy was a more liberal approach and softer tone on sexual and moral issues such as gay rights. In this respect, Hague could point to his own record as having voted to equalise the age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual acts at 16. As leader he also sent a message of support to a Gay Pride event and publicly rebuked members of the ‘old guard’ such as Norman Tebbit who criticised his stance on homosexual rights and multiculturalism (Jones, 1997). In his first conference speech as leader, Hague spoke of his desire to lead ‘a new, united, inclusive, democratic, de-centralised, and open party’. He spoke of his desire to articulate ‘an open conservatism, that is tolerant, that believes freedom is about much more than economics, that believes freedom doesn’t stop at the shop counter’ and argued that Conservatives are ‘caring’. Compassion, he argued ‘is not an bolt-on extra to conservatism’ but is ‘at its very core’ (Hague, 1997).

However, this socially inclusive and liberal-minded conservatism, even if it reflected Hague’s own personal preferences, was short-lived. The most obvious reason for this is that it did not reflect the opinion of the majority of Conservative MPs, and Hague failed to convince them to alter their approach. For example in the 1998 vote on reducing the age of consent for gay sex to 16, only sixteen Conservative MPs voted in favour of equalisation (Dorey, 2003: 134). Although this vote was passed by the Commons, it was subsequently defeated by the votes of Conservative hereditary peers in the Lords, after a campaign led by the Conservative Baroness Young (Waites, 2001: 496). The government reintroduced a similar measure during the next parliamentary session and it was again
defeated in the House of Lords. Sexual equality was finally achieved in November 2000, but only after the government had invoked the Parliament Act to overrule the House of Lords (Waites, 2001: 497).

Hague had avoided the appearance of party disunity over the age of consent by allowing a free vote on what he described as ‘a matter of conscience’ (Brogan, 2000). This liberal approach was abandoned, however, on the issue of Section 28. This clause in the Local Government Act (1988) was introduced by the Thatcher administration to forbid councils from promoting homosexuality or promoting its acceptability as a family relationship (Durham, 2005: 98). The Conservatives imposed a three-line whip against the government’s proposal to abolish Section 28, and successfully prevented repeal in the House of Lords. Once again this Conservative victory was only possible with the votes of hereditary peers (Waites, 2001: 498), but on this occasion the government was unable to invoke the Parliament Act (which only covers legislation initiated in the Commons) as the Bill had initially been introduced in the House of Lords (Dorey, 2003: 135).

The retention of Section 28 was just one element in a panoply of populist positions adopted by Hague throughout 1999 and 2000, on issues such as asylum, Europe, and the Tony Martin case (Walters, 2001: 64). For Waites, these kind of issues were deliberately linked together by the Conservatives in an effort to define the party under Hague, and ‘may be interpreted as including partially-coded appeals to certain racist and homophobic elements of the electorate, presenting Conservatives as defendants of the imagined British nation beloved of traditionalists, in contrast to the modernising multiculturalist Blairites’ (Waites, 2001: 503). The language of fear and ‘threats’ was echoed in the party’s 2001 election manifesto, which pledged to retain Section 28 and argued that ‘the common sense wisdom of the mainstream majority, on crime, or on taxes, or the family, or on Europe, is under threat as never before’ (Conservative Party, 2001: 2).

Hague’s hard line on Section 28 led to the defections to Labour of MP Shaun Woodward, who had been sacked from the frontbench for refusing to support it; and Ivan Massow, the prominent Conservative businessman who had sought the party’s nomination as
candidate for Mayor of London. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Massow lambasted the ‘skinhead conservatism that has marked the “tabloidification” of the Conservatives [and] highlighted the cancer eating away at the very lungs of the party’. He claimed that on issues of race and sex Hague had been manipulated against his own wishes by the party membership: ‘the core members, the Baroness Youngs and loony right-wingers, who actually do the dirty work of door-to-door campaigning for their party… These are the people who, although literally dying out, set the tone of the party by their sheer dedication to “the cause”… Theirs is the politics of the taxi driver’. The prospect of a Hague premiership, he claimed, was ‘a nightmare’ (Massow, 2000).

Popular appeal, as Waites suggests, was undoubtedly a factor in the Conservative leadership’s decision to oppose the repeal of Section 28 during Labour’s first term. Party pressures, as Massow argues, were also a factor, although the picture he presents of a leader powerless to resist the wider membership is overdone. Historically the Conservative Party leadership has been seen as relatively autonomous (Bulpitt, 1986), and to the extent that this autonomy waned in the 1980s and 1990s this was largely in relation to dissenting backbench MPs (Kavanagh, 1998: 39-42). The wider membership did for the first time gain a role in selecting the party leader as a result of Hague’s *Fresh Future* reform, but this package can be seen as an effective centralisation of power, legitimised by plebiscite (Kelly, 2003: 82-106). A more telling factor on Hague’s decision was opinion within his own shadow cabinet and parliamentary party, illustrated by the free votes on the age of consent. The position on Section 28 can also be seen as part of a wider move towards a more traditionally Conservative stance on family life and marriage, which quickly encroached upon Hague’s early flirtation with a socially liberal agenda. By the time the government began its legislative attempts to repeal Section 28 in 1999 the Conservatives’ traditional stance on family values was firmly embedded. Indeed, the first hints of this agenda were contained in Hague’s 1997 conference speech, when he declared that: ‘I personally believe that it is best for children to be brought up in a traditional family. That means their mother and their father in their home’. In this speech, he attempted to combine a pro-family stance with a liberal agenda. He noted that Conservatives should show ‘understanding and tolerance of people making their own
decisions about how they lead their lives’, whilst also claiming ‘that doesn’t alter our unshakeable belief in the enduring value of traditional family life’ (Hague, 1997).

Hague outlined his vision of family life further in January 1998, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation. In this speech he developed the thesis (echoed by Hayes and Streeter above) that a key factor in the Conservatives’ 1997 defeat was that they appeared solely interested in economics, and that to counter this (false) image the party should once again ‘dare to speak on the family’ (Hague, 1998b). Reflecting arguments made elsewhere by Willetts (1992; 1994; & 1996), he sought to defend the free market agenda of Thatcherism against the charge that it undermines family life and is ‘at loggerheads with true conservatism’ (Hague, 1998b). He again noted that Conservatives should not be judgemental about people’s sexuality, and welcomed (without commenting on the very small minority of his MPs who had actually voted to equalise the age of consent) what he described as ‘our more tolerant attitude towards homosexuals’ (Hague, 1998b). However, he also stated that ‘tolerance is not the same as indifference’ and put a practical and moral case in favour of marriage. Economic liberalism should not be extended into social libertarianism as:

Libertarianism easily descends into a refusal to recognise that social policy means more than simply being a referee in a match fought between opposing ways of living. We know that some of those ways of living are better for children than others. We know that some have social consequences, the cost of which are borne by the rest of us. No Government can be neutral in those circumstances, and certainly not a Conservative Government. (Hague, 1998b).

The aim of government policy should therefore be ‘to encourage permanent commitment between parents’, and to that end, recognise marriage as ‘the best means of doing that’ (Hague, 1998b). One way the state could do this is through the tax system. In this regard, Hague suggested the previous Conservative government had failed to do enough support traditional families (Dorey, 2003: 135). They had been wrong, he suggested, to begin the phasing out of the married couple’s tax allowance ‘without at least replacing it with an allowance focused on married families with children’ (Hague, 1998b). This had rightly damaged the party’s credibility on the issue, and had caused the electorate to overlook ‘one of the very best ideas’ in the party’s 1997 manifesto – namely the proposal for
transferable personal allowances for married couples (which would primarily have benefitted couples with only one breadwinner). Hague thus sought to restore this credibility, and present the Conservatives once again as a pro-family party. The Conservatives under Hague made a clear case in favour of the ‘traditional’ family, and opposition to the repeal of Section 28 was a consistent element of this. As Dorey notes, ‘greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles and sexual relationships did not mean moral neutrality or indifference’ (2003: 136).

These themes were reiterated by Hague in his party conference speech later that year, when he argued that ‘strong and stable family life is the cornerstone of a healthy society’ and pledged to ‘develop policies on welfare reform which strengthen family responsibility and support for the institution of marriage’ (Hague, 1998a). The flagship policy adopted on the family was a commitment to introduce a new married couples’ tax allowance, replacing that which had been finally abolished in the April 2000 budget. This would, the manifesto claimed, be worth £1000 a year to married couples. In addition, Child Tax Credit for families with a child under 5 would be increased by £200 a year, and those with children under 11 and not using all or part of their personal tax allowance would be able to transfer it to their working spouse (Conservative Party, 2001: 3-4).

Hague’s approach to social, moral, and sexual politics was a consistent part of the core vote strategy he adopted from the October 1998 conference onwards, initially under the ‘British Way’ label, and later as the ‘Common Sense Revolution’ (Hayton, 2008: 85-91). As Nadler argues, his populist line on Section 28 demonstrated that ‘he had effectively abandoned his earlier attempts to reposition the party’ (2000: 284). This strategy was premised on the belief expressed that substantial numbers of Conservative voters were ‘out there’ waiting to be persuaded back to the fold by more strident policies. Hague’s promises of tax cuts for families, support for marriage, retention of Section 28, a crackdown on ‘bogus’ asylum seekers, calls for tougher sentences for paedophiles, and his suggestion of a change in the law to protect homeowners defending their property (in response to the Tony Martin case) were designed to chime with this forgotten ‘silent majority’ and encourage them back to the polling station. Nadler claims that for Hague
this phase was ‘about more than shoring up his core vote’ – it flowed from ‘his own convictions’, reflected his ‘gut instincts’ and in this sense represents the authentic voice of William Hague (Nadler, 2000: 288). One problem with it, however, was that it appeared inauthentic, contradicting his earlier attempts to paint himself as liberal-minded and socially inclusive. Hague thus found himself the target of criticism from both modernisers and traditionalists in his own party.

Interviewed by Michael Portillo in 2008, William Hague acknowledged his own preference for the core vote issues he adopted, and defended his approach as derived from practical necessity:

We had to be able to blow the trumpet, we had to show that the Conservative Party did stand for certain things, and we had to have some things on which to fight an election, as simple as that. And also I suppose I was going with some of my own instincts on those subjects. So there was undoubtedly tension in the senior reaches of the Shadow Cabinet, but I think once you arrive at an election you have to fight with the tools that you have got.

I think in retrospect you [Portillo] were right in many of the things you said at the time, that we had to stop talking about other things to get any attention for certain subjects, but the huge risk at that time, stopping talking about those things – the traditional subjects – was that the Conservatives would have gone even further down. The 2001 result could have been worse, even worse, than it was. (Hague, interview in Portillo, 2008).

Hague’s strategy was post-Thatcherite in that it sought to address the perception (which was an inaccurate interpretation of the Thatcher years in his view) that the Conservatives were not interested in society, and were merely concerned with economics. This would be a dominant concern of the party in the years that followed his departure as leader, as illustrated by Streeter, Letwin, Hayes, Willetts, and Cameron above. In this respect, Hague was engaged with ‘one of the most important imperatives of post-Thatcher conservatism’, namely the attempt to balance the Thatcherite legacy with the construction of a Conservative politics that ‘could escape the allegations of harshness and economic monomania’ that had dogged Thatcherism (Durham, 2001: 471). The form that this took however, illustrated the enduring hold of the traditional values promoted by Thatcher on the Conservative Party. For Waite’s, ‘Thatcherism signalled the resilience of homophobia on the political right’ (2001: 502), and Hague’s stance on Section 28 was consistent with
this. His prescriptive stance on marriage and the desirability of ‘traditional’ families was in harmony with the socially authoritarian aspects of New Right thinking, and parallels can be drawn with the ‘compassionate conservatism’ of George W. Bush (Ashbee, 2003: 43-6). In this sense Hague’s offering at the 2001 election – of economic liberalism, vigorous nationalism, and traditional social values – was not post- Thatcherite at all. For Portillo, this agenda was ‘arguably to the right of Margaret Thatcher’ (2008). As Hague acknowledges above, the Conservatives needed some sort of message, and lacking a coherent new narrative they comforted themselves with rehashed old themes.

A final consequence of Hague’s strategy may have been to increase division within the party on the social, sexual and moral policy divide, and to highlight the emerging rupture between mods and rockers. His initial dalliance with social liberalism gave credence to the modernising view that embracing societal change was essential for Conservative electoral revival, and his abandonment of it provided the modernisers with ammunition with which to attack his leadership. Redwood notes that before the Hague years, social liberalism ‘was not a cause of a great deal of tension within the party’ (2004: 144). By the time of the October 2000 conference, the degree of polarisation between the two camps was clear, embodied by the modernising Shadow Chancellor, Michael Portillo, and the traditionalist Shadow Home Secretary, Ann Widdecombe. Widdecombe used her speech to announce a ‘zero tolerance’ policy on drugs, which delighted conference delegates but was rapidly condemned by police, drug charities and human rights groups (BBC News, 2000). Portillo, by contrast, distanced himself from traditional Conservative themes, declaring: ‘We are for people whatever their sexual orientation’ and arguing that difference should not merely be tolerated, but respected. It was not, contra Widdecombe, the role of the state to promote certain lifestyle choices. Why, he asked, ‘should people respect us if we withhold respect from them?’ (Portillo, 2000). At the end of Hague’s tenure social, sexual and moral issues were arguably the most potent cause of internal party discord, and would play a key role in the battle to succeed him as leader.
Duncan Smith: the rocker who modernised?

Two factors were pivotal in Duncan Smith’s election as leader of the Conservative Party. The first was that he was not Michael Portillo, the second that he was not Kenneth Clarke. In the final ballot of party members, Clarke was comprehensively defeated because of his pro-European views (Redwood, 2004: 152). In the parliamentary contest, Duncan Smith was able to beat Portillo into third place (by one vote) because of unease amongst a substantial number of Conservative MPs about both Portillo personally and his plans to remodel the party. As he commented: ‘too many MPs disliked me, and/or my uncompromising agenda for modernisation. One offered me his vote if I’d water down my plans for change. I refused, and lost by one vote’ (Portillo, 2008).

The modernising agenda Portillo promoted had become intertwined with his own personality and life since losing his Enfield Southgate seat at the 1997 general election. Shortly before re-entering Parliament at the Kensington and Chelsea by-election in November 1999, Portillo admitted to having had gay experiences in his youth (Jones, 1999). He later described this admission as a ‘big mistake’ for his standing in the party, and it resurfaced in the leadership campaign (Portillo, 2008). The debate between mods and rockers did not end there, however, as the victorious Duncan Smith attempted to change the policy focus of the party towards public services and social justice.

Duncan Smith soon found himself in the unfortunate and somewhat curious position of being attacked by both modernisers and traditionalists, having failed to please either camp. His first shadow cabinet demonstrated a clear Eurosceptic bias (BBC News, 2001) – he even included his co-conspirator in the Maastricht rebellion, Bill Cash – but his efforts to downplay the European issue were seen by Redwood (2004: 153) as a victory for the modernisers. Duncan Smith’s move away from ‘core vote’ issues such as Europe and immigration did not, however, insulate him from criticism from ‘the mods’, including disgruntled Portillo supporters who sought to undermine his leadership.
Disagreement turned to warfare in November 2002, over the ostensibly minor issue of the passage of the government’s Adoption and Children Bill. The House of Lords had amended the legislation to the effect that only married couples could adopt children, and the government sought to repeal these revisions in the Commons to allow unmarried and same-sex couples the same rights. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, this was relatively uncontroversial (Dorey, 2004: 376). For the Conservatives however, it went to the heart of the debate over the status of marriage that had featured heavily during the Hague years. Should they take a liberal view and accept these different forms of family life, or continue to advocate their preferred traditional model for raising children? The easiest way out of this difficulty for Duncan Smith would have been to allow a free vote, but he instead chose to impose a three-line whip against the changes. The result was a public split and a leadership crisis that was ‘almost entirely self-inflicted and eminently avoidable’ (Cowley & Stuart, 2004a: 357). Thirty-five Conservatives absented themselves from the Commons, and eight MPs defied the whip and voted against the party line. These eight included ex-leadership challengers Clarke and Portillo; four former Shadow Cabinet members (David Curry, Andrew Lansley, Andrew Mackay and Francis Maude); and most damagingly, John Bercow, who resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in order to rebel (Cowley & Stuart, 2004a: 357).

Duncan Smith interpreted this rebellion as a conspiracy designed to destabilise his leadership. The next day he made a statement on the steps of Conservative Central Office calling for the party to ‘unite or die’. In it, he claimed that he had ‘begun to reconnect the Conservative Party with the views and attitudes of contemporary Britain’. Equally, he asserted that he was leading the party with unity in mind, ‘respecting those who would like me to move faster and those who feel threatened by our moving at all’. However:

Over the last few weeks a small group of my parliamentary colleagues have decided consciously to undermine my leadership. For a few, last night’s vote was not about adoption but an attempt to challenge my mandate to lead this party. We cannot go on in this fashion. We have to pull together or we will hang apart. (Duncan Smith, 2002).

This marked a turning point both for Duncan Smith’s leadership and for party management of sexual/moral political issues. In terms of issue management, the lesson
for the Conservatives was clear: the party was divided, and free votes on ‘conscience’ issues offered the most effective means to prevent them from attracting media interest and becoming public displays of disunity. Duncan Smith adopted this tactic when, in March 2003, the government once again brought forward legislation to repeal Section 28, and it has also been used by Cameron and Howard (see below).

The ‘gay adoption’ episode exposed both Duncan Smith’s ineptitude as a party leader and the problematic context he faced. The party was clearly divided, and a modernising leader would have faced similar (or perhaps even more acute) difficulties in terms of keeping the party together. However, the incident also exposed Duncan Smith’s personal failings and the barely-muffled murmurs of discontent with his leadership became thunderous. One Conservative MP claimed that a desire to oust Duncan Smith played a significant role in the rebellion, on an issue that would not normally have been expected to stir such emotions (Anonymous Interview). Another commented that the parliamentary party was ‘a seething mass of discontent… People were gathering in corridors saying “we can’t go on like this, this guy hasn’t got it”.’ (Anonymous Interview).

The fact that Duncan Smith even felt the need to make an extraordinary appeal to the party barely a year into his leadership illustrated the perilous nature of his position, and it was strongly rumoured that he was on the brink of resignation (Hoggart, 2002; Brogan & Helm, 2002). The normally sympathetic Daily Telegraph described it as ‘the most desperate day in the history of the Conservative Party’ (Young, 2002). Kenneth Clarke attacked the party leader’s handling of the ‘entirely self-induced’ crisis (Jones et al., 2002), and within days a YouGov/Telegraph opinion poll revealed that 52 percent of Conservative voters thought that the election of Duncan Smith had been a mistake. Moreover, 81 percent of supporters and 75 percent of party members thought he had mishandled the adoption issue by failing to allow MPs a free vote (Helm and Sylvester, 2002).

The issue of adoption by unmarried and same-sex couples was an ideal tool for the modernisers to use in order to attack Duncan Smith’s leadership. They were able to argue
not only that it should be subject to a free vote; but that the position taken by the leadership only served to highlight how ‘out of touch’ with contemporary society the party had become. Garnett and Lynch (2003: 14) observe that the modernisers may well have exaggerated the electoral salience of the party’s stance on sexual questions, but the wider impact on the party’s (poor) public image, exacerbated by the revolt over the three-line whip is harder to quantify. Duncan Smith’s firm line on adoption also went against other moves apparently aimed at softening the party’s image after the failure of Hague’s core-vote approach and the 2001 election. In early 2002, for example, Oliver Letwin signalled that the Conservatives were willing to shift their position to give more legal rights to gay couples. He called for homosexual partners to be given certain property rights similar to those enjoyed by spouses, but stopped short of embracing either civil partnerships or adoption rights. Letwin claimed that whilst he wanted to devise practical measures to help gay couples, he did not want to do anything to undermine the sanctity of marriage, commenting: ‘We don't want to create a pale imitation of marriage, but we do recognise that there are real grievances’ (BBC News, 2002). This reflects the general theme of Duncan Smith’s leadership, namely his effort to steer a middle-course which reflected some of the concerns of the modernisers, without disavowing his own (ill-disguised) traditionalist leanings.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from his handling of Section 28. Keen to avoid a repeat of the rebellion over adoption, Duncan Smith and his party Chairman, David Davis, devised a compromise whereby Conservative MPs were ordered to vote for a Conservative amendment to replace rather than abolish the Clause (The Guardian, 2003). An amendment to retain Section 28 was also tabled by the traditionalists Edward Leigh and Ann Widdecombe. On a free vote, 71 Conservatives supported this amendment (including IDS and Michael Howard) whilst just 23 voted against (BBC News, 2003; Durham, 2005: 99). On this occasion the Clause was finally scrapped.

This pattern was repeated under Duncan Smith’s successor, Michael Howard. Howard sought to restore party discipline and the image of public unity. His strategy reveals an effort to downplay party divisions on a number of controversial social, sexual and moral
questions by allowing free votes. Notably, he opted for free votes on the Civil Partnership Bill, which gave gay couples entering into a civil partnership the same rights as married couples; on the Gender Recognition Bill, which gave transsexuals legal recognition and the right to marry in their adopted sex (Cowley and Stuart, 2004b: 1-2). One effect of the free votes was that many Conservative MPs did not vote at all, but those that did vote revealed the depth of the split on such issues in the party. On the Gender Recognition Bill, a total of 36 Conservative MPs voted in favour of either Second or Third Reading (or both) and a total of 44 Conservative MPs voted against either Second or Third Reading (or both). Combining the votes on the Second and Third Readings of the Civil Partnership Bill reveals ‘similarly stark splits’, with a total of 74 voting in favour on at least one occasion, and 49 opposing it at least once (Cowley & Stuart, 2004b: 2-3).

Howard’s relatively brief tenure as leader of the Conservative Party can therefore be regarded as period of better party management tactics on the social, sexual and moral policy cleavage, but it was still characterised by significant internal division on such questions. Howard also lacked a clear strategy to improve the image of the party by moderating positions on such issues: whilst morality/individual behaviour has remained a low salience issue in terms of having a direct impact on how people vote,² such issues may affect a party’s image. Quinn argues that the major problem the Conservatives have faced in opposition since 1997 is not that they have been too right-wing in their policy positions, but that they have suffered from a severe image problem. In short, the Conservatives were seen as ‘angry, stuck in the past, and socially intolerant’. Electoral revival, therefore, requires them to revitalise their image rather than reinvent their policy programme. ‘Shifting to the centre ground’ can thus be achieved by ‘softening the Conservatives’ image, toning down their language, and appearing more socially inclusive, rather than [by] the wholesale sale abandonment of policies that were not particularly different from those of Labour’ (Quinn, 2008: 179). Under Howard, the party gave the impression that it was reluctantly conceding to social change, rather than welcoming and adapting to it enthusiastically.

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² Since 1997, morality/individual behaviour has never been regarded as one of the most important issues facing the country by more than 10 percent of the electorate. It has averaged 4.6 percent (MORI 2008a).
The next section considers whether David Cameron has finally solved this problem through a new approach to the Conservative politics of the family. Cameron is considered in this way as it appears that he may be forging a distinctive position on the social, sexual and moral policy divide. This perspective may therefore offer us an additional lens through which to view the 1997-2005 period. Further, if Cameron has been able to resolve this question, it will mark an important conclusion to the ideological differences highlighted by this case study, and indicate strategic learning from past mistakes by the party leadership.

**Cameron: The family man**

*I am unashamedly pro-family. For me it comes absolutely first.*

David Cameron (quoted in Grice, 2007).

David Cameron has repeatedly sought to emphasise his credentials as a ‘family man’. He has put the family at the heart of his policy agenda and his public image, and has stated on a number of occasions that his family is more important to him than his political ambitions (Sky News, 2006). In some key respects, Cameron’s policy on the family represents a clear continuation of the direction set by Iain Duncan Smith, who he appointed as Chairman of his Social Justice Policy Group. Cameron has frequently claimed that his priority as Prime Minister would be to ‘mend Britain’s broken society’ (Jones, 2007), and has argued that strengthening families is central to this. Yet in contrast to Duncan Smith, Cameron has also sought to portray himself as a social liberal, at ease with contemporary British society. The central message of his leadership campaign was that the party must ‘change to win’ (Cameron, 2005). He has described himself as a ‘liberal Conservative’, has deliberately gone ‘out of his way to strike a very different note about asylum seekers’, and has given strong support to civil partnerships for same-sex couples (Rawnsley, 2005). This liberal element of Cameron’s approach conforms to Quinn’s strategy of changing party image by moving closer to groups not traditionally
part of the Conservative support base. The question for Cameron is whether this socially liberal image can be successfully balanced (or maintained) with a strong family policy.

Cameron gave a speech entitled ‘Stronger Families’ to Relate, the family counselling service, in June 2008. In it, he echoed William Hague’s comments a decade earlier, when he noted that ‘for too long, politicians here have been afraid of getting into this territory, for fear of looking old-fashioned or preachy’ (Cameron, 2008). His message that he wished to see marriage once again as a ‘positive social norm’ was one that could have appeared in a speech by any of his three predecessors as leader of the opposition. The family, he observed, is the ‘best institution’ for raising children, and (again echoing policy under Hague) reiterated his commitment to delivering a tax break for married couples, a pledge he first made during his leadership campaign.

Yes, I do think it’s wrong that our benefits system gives couples with children more money if they live apart – and we will bring an end to the couple penalty. And yes, I do think it's wrong that we're the only country in the western world that doesn't properly recognise marriage in the tax system – and I will ensure that we do. So we will change tax and benefits to make them more family-friendly. (Cameron, 2008).

He also made clear, however, that any tax cuts for married couples would also apply equally to people in civil partnerships. This represents a significant shift in the Conservatives’ attitude towards homosexuality, and fits with Cameron’s efforts to rebrand the party as more socially inclusive and tolerant. To this end, the Conservatives have also actively recruited gay prospective parliamentary candidates and given them priority in winnable seats (Woolf, 2006). The party has also signed an agreement with Stonewall (the gay rights pressure group) to become part of its ‘Diversity Champions’ programme of gay friendly employers (Grimston, 2006).

In essence, however, Cameron’s position remains fundamentally Conservative and consistent with that of his predecessors, in that he regards marriage as the best model of family life and believes that the state should recognise and promote it in some way. For some modernisers this is the cause of unease. Tim Yeo MP, for example, questions the fairness of weighting the tax system in favour of marriage, and warning that
discriminating against many families with single or unmarried parents ‘would be seen as wrong’ and would thus backfire on the Conservatives (Tory Diary, 2006). A report for the Centre for Policy Studies found that this apprehension amongst Conservative MPs was widespread, as many saw the electoral risk of being perceived as ‘victimising single mothers’. This timidity, the report’s author cautioned, meant that ‘there is a serious danger that, in this area at least, the “modernising” of the party’s image… could simply be a cover for political cowardice and a retreat from what elected politicians personally believe to be right for the well-being of society’ (Daley, 2006: 3).

However, as his recent speech to Relate demonstrates, Cameron has not been timid on this issue and has stuck consistently to his pledge to recognise marriage in the tax system, although he has still to reveal the details of how this will be implemented. As under Iain Duncan Smith, supporting marriage has been explicitly linked by Cameron to the issue of social justice and his stated aim to renew the societal fabric. Commenting on the publication of the Social Justice Policy Group’s report *Breakthrough Britain* (SJPG, 2007), Cameron said: ‘I welcome this report’s emphasis on the family, and on marriage, as the basis for the social progress we all want to see’ adding that: ‘If we can get the family right, we can fix our broken society’ (Conservatives.com, 2007). The report itself argues, in effect, that unmarried couples are damaging society, as ‘the ongoing rise in family breakdown affecting young children has been driven by the dissolution of cohabiting partnerships’, the majority of which ‘are less stable than marriage’ (SJPG, 2007: 3). Family breakdown is correlated with crime, drug abuse, educational failure and anti-social behaviour. The state should therefore ‘create a positive policy bias in support of marriage’ and end the ‘downgrading’ of marriage in official discourse which fails to recognise the ‘marked discrepancies in the stability of married and cohabiting couples’ (SJPG, 2007: 5-6).

For Toynbee, this represents a return to traditionalist, socially authoritarian conservatism designed to appease the *Daily Mail*. She argues that: ‘His marriage policy is their victory, boxing him into their own moral agenda without any idea yet how it can be done, at what cost – and with what collateral damage’. It is ‘reactionary mood music’ that risks
alienating supporters attracted to the fold by Cameron’s ostensibly liberal outlook (Toynbee, 2007). To portray Cameron as having sold out to the traditionalists is a little strong, however, as it represents only one element of his strategy. The question is more one of whether he can successfully balance potentially competing objectives. Cameron’s focus on the family is part of a much broader modernisation strategy. This not only involves modifying the party’s stance on moral and sexual issues such as gay rights and civil partnerships, but goes beyond this to a much broader transformation of the party’s image. To the irritation of traditionalists this has involved attempts to change the public face of the party through priority selection of female, gay, and ethnic minority candidates, but it has also encompassed a major push on issues not traditionally associated with the Conservatives such as the environment. For example, Cameron’s focus on the issue of climate change has been a major feature of his message that ‘there’s more to life than money’ and his ‘General Well Being’ agenda (Cameron, 2006b). Central to Cameron’s policy modernisation has been ‘an explicitly avowed departure from Thatcherism’ on the grounds that however vital it was to solving the problems of the 1970s and 1980s, it is no longer the most appropriate tool for addressing contemporary challenges (Dorey, 2007: 142). For Dorey, this has been signalled in two ways: through a return to the centre ground via the assertion of a ‘new mode of Conservatism’ which is plural, tolerant and compassionate, and ‘by openly disavowing particular policy stances adopted by the Thatcher Governments during the 1980s and acknowledging that these were, at least with the benefit of hindsight, unnecessary or unwise’ (2007: 142-3).

Whereas Cameron’s three predecessors had all, to varying degrees, experimented with elements of this approach, none were able to do so with his apparent conviction or authenticity, so tended to slip back onto more familiar territory when opinion poll ratings failed to improve (Dorey, 2007: 139). The fragility of Cameron’s project was briefly exposed in summer 2007, when Gordon Brown’s arrival in Downing Street substantially cut the Conservatives’ opinion poll lead. Cameron’s wide lead had ‘kept the diehards quiet for a while’ but as it faded away they began to argue more forcefully that his project was failing (Portillo, 2007). ‘Lamentably’, Portillo noted, ‘the signs are that Cameron is now caving in to Tory pressure’ (2007). Crucially for Cameron, Conservative fortunes
revived in the autumn, when Brown failed to call the general election and was hit by a series of negative headlines. The maintenance of this poll lead has been a key factor enabling Cameron to stick to a modernising agenda, and is a luxury that was not enjoyed by his predecessors.

Cameron has offered some reassurance to Conservative traditionalists with his strong message on the importance of the family. This aspect of his policy programme remains compatible with the fundamental tenants of Thatcherism, and has thus been the cause of some unease amongst the modernisers. Where he differs from his predecessors, however, is that to date, it appears that his broader programme of modernisation to change the Conservative Party’s image has allowed him to make marriage and the traditional family the centre of his social policy without appearing intolerant to other groups, and thus undermining the whole project. The risk remains for Cameron that as the details of a future Conservative government’s policy programme become clear, and the winners and losers of proposed tax reforms are calculated, voters may react against this and his modernising efforts will be undermined. This is the essence of Brown’s charge that Cameron is ‘all style and no substance’ and that in fundamental policy terms he is no different to his predecessors. The extent to which the electorate will study party policy is doubtful however, so Cameron’s success in changing the ‘mood music’ is likely to prevail. This affords him the opportunity to succeed where Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard failed, namely by satisfying his own party and core support with a Conservative approach in key policy areas such as the family, whilst also rebranding the party to reach out to a much wider constituency.

Conclusion

The most significant division in the Conservative Party is now along the social, sexual and moral policy divide. Cameron’s rebranding of the party as more tolerant and inclusive cannot disguise the fact that over the past decade on issues such as Section 28, civil partnerships and gay adoption the Conservatives have been deeply divided. Unlike in the economic sphere, the ideological ascendancy of Thatcherism is far from complete,
but socially authoritarian spokespeople for ‘Victorian values’ remain vocal on the party’s backbenches.

Over the past decade the debate between modernisers and traditionalists on social issues has also become inextricably intertwined with the wider question of how the party should seek to revive its electoral fortunes. A consensus quickly emerged in the party that a key factor in the electoral success of New Labour was the perception that Conservatives were disinterested in, and unable to offer solutions to, problems beyond the economic sphere. Conservatives did not agree, however, on how to address this problem. Should they seek to extend the economic liberalism of Thatcherism into the social sphere, or aim to ‘remoralise’ politics in a manner akin to American Republicans? (Ashbee, 2003).

Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all quickly abandoned initial tentative moves towards social liberalism when they failed to yield positive opinion poll results and came under fire from within the party. A renewed emphasis on the family did occur under Hague’s leadership, although along strictly traditionalist Conservative lines, involving an implicit (and occasionally explicit) criticism of the Thatcher and Major governments for failing to do enough to support marriage, particularly through the tax system. Combined with his hard-line on Section 28, this amounted to a populist appeal to the Conservative core vote. Under Duncan Smith, a significant broadening of the party’s agenda on social issues occurred, particularly in terms of his efforts to position the party as concerned with poverty, social exclusion and ‘championing the vulnerable’. If this strategy had been pursued for longer, it may have helped dispel the Conservatives’ image as selfish and socially exclusive. However, in some ways the socially conservative approach taken on these issues (for example the emphasis on marriage) may have actually reinforced public perception that the party was old-fashioned and stuck in the past, and risked alienating support amongst excluded groups such as single parents. Duncan Smith was also undermined by his tactical ineptitude, particularly his disastrous handling of Adoption and Children Bill. Howard’s policy of free votes saw the party attempt to downplay divisions on the social, sexual and moral policy divide, and although it did not solve them it was more successful in party management terms. Public disunity between mods and
rockers subsided, and the party went into the 2005 election with the vague pledge to ‘govern in the interests of everyone’, whether they be ‘black or white, young or old, straight or gay, rural or urban, rich or poor’ (Conservative Party, 2005: 1).

Cameron has enjoyed a more favourable context than his three predecessors for the successful pursuit of a modernisation strategy. Most of New Labour’s legislative programme for sexual equality was complete by the end of their second term, so he could reasonably argue that the Conservatives simply have to accept this new reality, as it would be very difficult to reverse it. Failure at three previous general elections also gave him more room for manoeuvre by undermining the argument that the party simply needs to do what it has been doing previously. Most fundamentally however, Cameron has benefitted from a much more propitious electoral context – firstly with the final years of the tired Blair premiership, and latterly with the extraordinary implosion of Brown’s. It has been these auspicious circumstances and the accompanying Conservative poll leads that have muted criticism from traditionalists and allowed Cameron to maintain his modernising course.
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