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Introduction: the Conservative Party and electoral failure

Introduction

The arrival of David Cameron in Downing Street in May 2010 marked a critical moment in Conservative Party politics. Although under his leadership the Conservatives had failed to secure an overall Commons majority, Cameron had successfully brought to an end the longest period of opposition in his party's history since the infamous 1922 Carlton Club meeting. For all political parties, power is of vital importance; as the events of 1922 demonstrated it is the Conservative Party's *raison d'être*. Consequently by succeeding where William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard failed, in developing an effective opposition strategy and entering Number 10, David Cameron had fulfilled the most elemental criteria against which the party judges its leaders: he was a winner.

This book is concerned with the actions, perceptions and strategies of the Conservative Party elite leadership in opposition, between 1997 and 2010. At the heart of this research lies a simply stated question. Why did it take the Conservative Party so long to recover power? After landslide defeat in 1997, why was it so slow to adapt, reposition itself and rebuild its support? This becomes all the more puzzling when the adaptive record of the party is considered. It is the most successful electoral organisation in democratic European history, having governed (either independently or in coalition) for 91 of the 111 years of the 'long Conservative century' between 1886 and 1997 (Seldon and Snowdon, 2001: 27). Such was its dominance the party became known, and regarded itself, as 'the natural party of government'. Yet, having suffered a crushing defeat in 1997, the Conservatives made little discernible progress in 2001 (and on some measures retreated further) and managed only a marginal advance in 2005. After three leaders and eight years of opposition, the Conservatives still returned fewer MPs than Labour at their nadir in 1983. Further to this, 1997–2010 is particularly unusual when compared to the other lengthy spells of opposition the party endured in the twentieth century. After the 1906 Liberal landslide the Conservatives were out of office for nearly a decade, but had recovered sufficiently to restore parity with the Liberals in the two general elections of 1910 (Coetzee, 2005: 103–6). Similarly after Labour's landslide victory in 1945, the Conservatives recovered to cut the government majority to just five in 1950, and returned to office in 1951.

The 1997 defeat followed eighteen years of Conservative government – an unprecedented period of electoral success built on Thatcherite statecraft. This book argues that an appreciation of the ideological legacy of Thatcherism is important for understanding the party in the years of opposition that followed: paradoxically, this legacy is an important part of the explanation of the failure of Conservative statecraft that ensued. As such, this book argues that ideology played a central role in framing and shaping the strategic debates that took place in the party in the 1997–2010 period, and that we therefore need to take sufficient account of this in our analysis. This chapter develops this argument through an overview of previous work on Conservative politics, suggesting that the historical literature underplayed the role of ideology, whilst Marxist-inspired political analysis structurally favoured it, risking the exclusion of agency from our understanding of events. By bringing these two traditions together we can offer a more refined account which avoids privileging structure or agency in our explanations. The book argues that this is important, as context can both enable and constrain political action, so to better understand the process of political change we need to focus on the dialectical relationship between actors and their environment.

An important part of the explanation of Conservative electoral failure in this period was the revitalisation of the Labour Party under Tony Blair's leadership. By repositioning his party and changing its image Blair redrew the political map, leaving it barely recognisable compared to that of the 1980s. As one of the key architects of New Labour argued, 'without Labour as a demonic enemy, conservatism lacks bearing and purpose' (Gould, 1999: xii). However, whilst these external factors were undoubtedly important, they are not the focus of this book, which is concerned primarily with the internal dynamics of Conservative politics during this time.

The choice of research emphasis therefore inevitably influences the explanation that results from it. Research into internal party organisation and dynamics will point to the effect these have on party performance. Studies of New Labour will consider how it impacted upon the political landscape. This is unsurprising (it would be odd if it were not the case), but is worth highlighting. Nor need this be problematic, as long as it is clear where the focus of each particular study lies, and if we recognise that each necessarily represents a partial and to some extent value-laden interpretation. No explanation can hope to account for every possible variable to the exact degree. Indeed, the value of different research projects is often situated in the particular angle or emphasis that they take.

The focus of this book is the leadership of the Conservative Party between 1997 and 2010, and how the key strategic actors (namely the successive leaders of the party and other senior politicians) understood, and sought to address, the party's electoral failure. Through documentary analysis and elite interviews, it looks to expose competing interpretations of this problem, and explain how these were translated into party strategy. As previously noted, a key premise of this research is

that the legacy of Thatcherite conservatism constituted an important aspect of this process. By exploring several notable sites of ideological dispute for Conservatives (Europe, national identity, moral issues and economic policy) the book seeks to uncover how party leaders were both ideologically influenced, and how they sought to manage competing ideological pressures. As such, this research is concerned in large part with internal party dynamics: it considers how party strategy was devised and implemented, and whether (and why) sub-optimal electoral strategies were pursued. External, contextual factors – most obviously the electorate – are of course important, but the focus is not on these independently, but on how the key strategic actors interpreted and understood them, and sought to orientate strategy towards them.

This approach locates the research within a body of academic work which has documented the history and strategy of the Conservative Party. However, as this chapter explains, this existing literature struggles to provide a satisfying answer to the puzzle of how such a successful electoral organisation, feted for its adaptive capacity, apparently lost its traditional strengths. In part, this is because there is not much of it. With the exception of the various sustained analyses of Thatcherism (perhaps in a reflection of the ideological leanings that preponderate in the academy) academic attention has historically tended towards Labour rather than the Conservatives. This propensity was understandably amplified in the 1990s by the rise of New Labour and the commensurate collapse of the Conservative Party as a governing force, although this academic trend has been somewhat rebalanced by the upswing in interest prompted by the election of David Cameron. This difficulty is compounded because for many years the primary task of students of the Conservative Party, whether working in a historical or political science tradition, was to explain its enduring success. Studies that did consider its periodic spells of opposition were, in the main, preoccupied with demonstrating how these were used to refresh Conservative ideas and organisation in preparation once again for government (for example, Ball and Seldon, 2005; Seldon and Snowdon, 2001).

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on the Conservative Party, with particular emphasis on how it has understood, and sought to account for, its electoral success and failure. It is grouped into two broad categories: a historical tradition which has emphasised the role of pragmatic elite leadership, and a Marxist-inspired analytical tradition which has emphasised the institutionalised sources of Conservative power. This characterisation is something of an academic conceit for, as we shall see, there is substantial crossover between these two clusters. However, it is useful as a means to highlight both the strengths and limitations of the literature with regard to understanding contemporary Conservative politics. Following this, the emerging body of work on the Conservatives under Cameron is considered. The remainder of the chapter then outlines the analytical approach utilised and the structure of the rest of the book.

The historical tradition

As Addison notes, despite the Conservative Party's status as the oldest surviving political party in Britain, for much of the twentieth century it was a neglected area of historical study: it was, quite simply, 'out of fashion' (1999: 289). This began to change in the 1970s when a number of historians, led by Robert Blake, subjected the Conservatives to serious academic study. There now exists a distinguished scholarly tradition, which has recorded Conservative Party history, with definitive works by Robert Blake (1970, 1998) and John Ramsden (1995, 1996, 1998) at the forefront. Substantial contributions have also been made by Stuart Ball (1998), John Charmley (1996), Alan Clark (1998), Andrew Davies (1996), Brendan Evans and Andrew Taylor (1996), Anthony Seldon (1996), and Seldon and Ball (1994). This chapter identifies important themes in this tradition which also which recur in studies of the contemporary era.[1]

Emblematic of this body of work is the title of Davies' *We, The Nation: The Conservative Party and the Pursuit of Power* (1996). The recurring theme is a fascination with the political success of the Conservative Party: its quest for power, and its aptitude for modifying itself in pursuit of that objective. As Addison comments, the Conservatives 'have long been renowned for their ability to adapt to new conditions while retaining something of their old identity' (1999: 289). This capacity for reform and reinvention is viewed with awe, not least because it has often revealed itself in unpropitious circumstances. In a typical account, for example that by Seldon and Snowdon, this takes on a cyclical character: after a lengthy period of government (they point to those that ended in 1905, 1945 and 1964) and facing an increasingly hostile climate, the party would be propelled into opposition. Once there, however, the Conservatives typically installed a new leader, renewed their popular appeal, and the party's 'organisation, membership, morale and funding all recovered'. At the heart of this was adaptability: 'the party's reconciliation to political, economic and social change often helped its return to power' (Seldon and Snowdon, 2001: 27).

Flexibility in the face of change was thus trumpeted as the key to Conservative electoral success, derived in substantial part from the party's willingness to change its leadership (Clark, 1998: 491). As the title of Ramsden's (1998) single-volume history would have it, the Conservatives had *An Appetite for Power*. In this respect loyalty to the party and the resultant public unity was their 'secret weapon', the periodic absence of which led to defeat. Allegiance to the leadership was not unconditional, however, and on occasion was withheld from unsuccessful leaders. Reflecting on his own time at the helm Iain Duncan Smith wryly observed that: 'It's still the secret weapon of the Conservative Party, the trouble is it's just got so very secret, nobody can find it anymore!' (private interview, 2006). Conservative leaders embody the party and its course, and failure is not treated kindly. As John Bercow comments, the Conservative Party 'wants and expects to be led' (private interview, 2008).

Allied to this proclivity was the widespread idea, popular amongst Conservatives themselves, that theirs was a non-ideological party. Ramsden typifies Conservative history when he argues that where the party faced a choice between power and doctrinal goals, it generally favoured power (cited in Addison, 1999: 296). A weakness of Ramsden's work, Addison argues, is that the role of ideology 'deserves more systematic treatment' than he provides (1999: 295). However, in most Conservative history ideology only plays a secondary role and, where it is acknowledged, it is subservient to adaptability. From this perspective, conservatism, if it is indeed an 'ideology', must itself be flexible. The primary function of ideology is as a tool, often used in opposition, to refresh and revive the Conservatives' appeal. For Barnes (1994) the fact that the Conservatives, unlike their opponents, were 'non-ideological' was the source of their adaptable nature and consequent success.

The difficulty for contemporary work in this tradition is in explaining prolonged Conservative electoral failure. As it measures leadership against the criteria of electoral success, the conclusion has to be that from the mid 1990s until the election as leader of David Cameron, the party was condemned by devastatingly poor leadership. In this respect, the Major premiership has been lambasted by a number of Conservatives who have compared it unfavourably with Thatcher's (Ridley, 1992; Tebbit, 2005). The agency-centred analysis of the historical tradition means that Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard must also be blameworthy. For example, for Collings and Seldon, Hague's leadership represented the 'most futile period in Opposition in the last one hundred years. It was an utterly bleak period that could have been largely avoided with a steadier hand and a clearer strategic direction' (2001: 624). If anything, the party's efforts between 2001 and 2005 were, given the more favourable circumstances of Labour's waning popularity, even less impressive. Having conceded that Hague had 'little room for manoeuvre', Seldon and Snowdon grant no such allowance to his successors:

> The finger of blame can be pointed far more clearly at Duncan Smith, and above all Howard. Had Duncan Smith stuck to his centrist beliefs, and had the personality to impose his will on the party, real progress would have been made. But the real culprit is Howard, who managed to be so tactically and strategically inept. Blair and New Labour were no longer the forces in 2003–5 they had been. Howard's singular achievement was to let them off the hook, and hand them victory. (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c: 741)

Howard's contribution to Conservative Party fortunes may yet be reassessed by historians, given that it was the precursor to the return to office under Cameron. However, a more general problem for such agency-focused historical analyses is that the mechanism previously utilised to ensure Conservative success, namely the willingness to eject ineffective leaders, was in regular use between 1997 and 2005. In a little over eight years the party changed its leader on four occasions, but its general election performance remained historically poor. Only under Cameron was

a substantial upward and sustained shift in the opinion polls recorded, and even this took time to achieve: only from autumn 2008 were the Conservatives consistently ahead in most opinion polls (Green, 2010: 672). This approach also risks overlooking the fact that in certain respects and against some measures Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard were successful: Hague in reforming the party organisation and reducing internal tensions over Europe, Duncan Smith in renewing policy, and Howard in uniting the party.

In 2005, Seldon argued that 'considering the poor choices the party has made since 1997, it must now muster the courage to elect the leader with the best chance of winning the next election' (Seldon, 2005). This raises the obvious questions of why the party failed to do so in 1997, 2001 and 2003, and why doing so should require courage, rather than commonsense or self-interest. This book argues that an important part of the answer was the influence of ideology. From a political analyst's perspective, Heppell has persuasively demonstrated that ideology has been a key determinant of voting behaviour in elections to the Conservative leadership (Heppell, 2008; Heppell and Hill, 2008). Consequently for Heppell the contrast between 2005 and the preceding leadership elections was clear – with the election of Cameron 'the era of ideology was ending and Conservatives were re-engaging with the merits of pragmatism in the pursuit of power' (Heppell, 2008: 193).

However, for agency-centred historiographers, the ideational dimension is less easily accommodated. One way out of this difficulty is to claim, as the late Ian Gilmour did, that since Thatcher the Conservative Party has not really been Conservative (or indeed small-c conservative) at all, but has fallen victim to alien dogma (Chapter 2). Mark Garnett's contemporary history sits broadly within this perspective. Garnett's work represents a valuable contribution in no small part because of its sensitivity to and appreciation of the role of political ideas, and in this respect draws inspiration from the 'ideological turn' witnessed in relation to studies of the Conservative Party in the 1980s. However, whilst he does not go as far to claim that pre-Thatcher the Conservatives were un-ideological, he does imply that there was something particularly virulent and pernicious about the neo-liberalism which took hold in the party in the 1970s and 1980s (Garnett, 2003, 2004; Denham and Garnett, 2001, 2002; Gilmour and Garnett, 1997).

The move towards greater consideration of Conservative ideology was a response to the limitations of the historical tradition in accounting for the rise and nature of Thatcherism. In Turner's view, the result has been two sets of literature running in parallel – one emphasising the structural and societal changes that drove the emergence of the New Right in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and an agency-focused historical interpretation. The latter 'concentrates on the disappointment felt in the party and in the electorate at the ineptitude of Labour government and the failure of Heath's Conservative Party to win elections, to oppose effectively after it had lost them, or to tackle the non-parliamentary resistance of the over mighty trade unions' (Turner, 1999: 286). In other words, this literature explains the

emergence of Thatcher and her policy programme by reference to Heath's ineffective (or even incompetent) leadership, rather than as part of a broader ideological or political shift. For observers in the historical tradition, these events were essentially contingent and agency-driven. However, the upsurge in interest from political analysts in Thatcherism prompted a search for a more encompassing interpretation, as discussed below.

Thatcherism and the political–analytical tradition

The transformative effect of Thatcherism reached even into the realm of Conservative Party studies. Previously, Turner suggests, this field had suffered somewhat 'from an excess of "engagement" among its historians', who tended to be 'active sympathisers' if not actual party activists (1999: 276).[2] Thatcherism (itself a term first coined by the Left) instigated rigorous academic study of the party by some of its fiercest ideological antagonists. As the historical tradition had been concerned with accounting for long-term Conservative electoral success, analysts of Thatcherism sought to explain its capture of economic, political and ideological debate. Pioneering work by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (1983) employed Gramscian Marxism to characterise Thatcherism as a hegemonic project. This 'authoritarian populism', Hall argued, was a dangerous combination of 'the resonant themes of organic Toryism', such as the nation, authority and the family, with the 'aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism', primarily anti-statist competitive individualism (Hall, 1983: 29).

For Andrew Gamble, Thatcherism was an attempt to restore the conditions for Conservative hegemony. He argued that, as a political project, Thatcherism had three key objectives: the restoration of the Conservative Party to electoral dominance; the revival of 'market liberalism as the dominant public philosophy'; and the rejuvenation of state authority combined with a freeing-up of the market economy (Gamble, 1994a: 4). Jessop *et al.* (1988) also viewed Thatcherism as a hegemonic project: for them it was an attempt to 'reconstitute the electoral base' of the Conservative Party which was in long-term structural decline (1988: 86). They argued that Thatcher sought to reorder both the economy (in the interests of international capital) and ideological discourse to sustain such a shift.

Evans and Taylor highlighted the curious similarity of the critiques of Thatcherism offered by 'One Nation' Conservatives such as Gilmour (1992), and those from the Marxist-left such as Jessop, Gamble and Hall, who share the opinion that Thatcherism was a clear ideological 'project' which divided the nation. Such critiques, they argue, are 'underpinned by their main mistaken judgement, that Thatcherism was a dogmatic ideological project which represented a departure from the party's traditions' (Evans and Taylor, 1996: 230). A more accurate interpretation, they suggest, is to see Thatcherism as simply the latest episode in the history of a party that has long been ideologically conscious in its resistance to statism and socialism (1996: 240).

Evans and Taylor are right to stress the continuities of Thatcherism with Conservative Party history in terms of both its desire for electoral success, and its ideological unease with high levels of state intervention. However, it is possible to analyse Thatcherism as a 'project' whilst also recognising that it is part of a broadly defined Conservative tradition. There was a particularity to Thatcherism, as an interpretation of and response to the context of the late 1970s. The concern with that context, and the character of the response to it, are both derived from long-standing Conservative tradition. However, that response manifested itself as a more coherent and strategic political project than had previously been seen under a Conservative government. Gamble was therefore correct when he suggested that Thatcherism is best understood as a political project, the primary objective of which was the reversal of British national decline (1994a: 4).

These Marxist-inspired analyses share an interest (absent, as Turner noted, from much of the agency-focused historical literature) in locating Conservative electoral success in the wider social, economic and political context. Consequently, they tend to exhibit a greater theoretical self-awareness and reflectivity. Like the historical analyses, they seek to account for the party's adaptive capacity, but they focus less on internal party machinations and attempt to situate this in relation to society as a whole. In this way they are, broadly, much more structuralist than the historical tradition: party change is prompted mainly by external structural crises of the economy, state and society. Only through a consideration of these factors can the emergence and success of Thatcherism be understood.

We can therefore conceptualise various competing narratives of Thatcherism, each of which is embedded in a wider tradition. There is no essentialist account of Thatcherism: rather a variety of interpretations exist (Bevir and Rhodes, 1998: 97–111). However, we can identify a shift in the way the Conservative Party was studied in the light of Thatcherism, bringing political science concerns to bear on the historical tradition. It would be wrong also to dismiss this turn as merely 'structuralist' because many of these accounts consider agential factors and highlight the contingent nature of Thatcher's electoral success. The Gramscian leanings of some also provide a welcome sensitivity to the importance of ideas. However, the concern of this mode of analysis is largely with explaining how ideology is used to provoke, explain, or sustain wider socio-economic shifts. It is useful, therefore, to characterise the dominant turn of the literature on Thatcherism as one of movement towards more structurally inclined modes of explanation, in contrast to the agency-focused historical narratives that preceded them. In many ways this was a welcome corrective, but brought with it the tendency to underplay the vital role of strategic actors and leadership.

This concern prompted the most influential single contribution to the debate about Thatcherism, Jim Bulpitt's statecraft thesis. Bulpitt reasserted the importance of leadership strategy for understanding Conservative Party politics. His approach 'stresses the need to examine the activities of party leaders in terms of their

statecraft – namely the art of winning elections and, above all, achieving a necessary degree of governing competence in office' (1986: 19). Less emphasis is placed on the ideological particularity of Thatcherism: its distinctiveness lies in its statecraft (Bevir and Rhodes, 1998: 101–2). In short, Bulpitt viewed the historical concern of Conservative Party statecraft as the preservation of an autonomous, centralised government with sole control over issues of 'high politics' (1986: 21–2).

The statecraft approach has much to commend it, and has been successfully applied by Buller (2000). It can be seen as an attempt to balance structure and agency, but has a number of limitations. It is somewhat imprecise, with a rather narrow conception of leadership motives, and has a tendency to underplay the important role of political ideas. This stems from Bulpitt's juxtaposition of statecraft against modes of analysis that favour either ideology or policy (1986: 19). Ideology effectively remains a means to an end and subservient to the statecraft imperative. Perhaps the most beneficial lesson we can take from considering the statecraft approach (aside from the importance of leadership itself) is that political leaders have multiple objectives against which to measure their achievements, but central to these is political success in terms of holding power.

Bulpitt's work is best appreciated as a valuable corrective to the tendency, prevalent at the time it was published, to emphasise the particularity and novelty of Thatcherism. This was not only a feature of some Marxist analyses but was common amongst Conservative critics who denounced the new creed as foreign to conservatism (Gilmour, 1992). It is within this debate about Thatcherism that statecraft is most useful. It also highlights the value of explicitly incorporating both conduct and context into our analysis, that the strategic–relational approach (SRA) utilised in this research brings to the fore. However, before the SRA is outlined, it is worth considering the academic work that has focused on the Conservative Party in opposition since 1997.

Contemporary analyses

The 1997–2005 period suffered a general neglect in Conservative Party studies.[3] With the fall of communism, Marxist political analysis waned. Aligned with a general decline of interest in the Conservatives following their ejection from office, the relatively sparse literature examining the party in the aftermath of the 1997 election defeat lent more heavily on the historical tradition. As discussed above, much of this is agential in its approach and the focus of its analysis was consequently on the inadequacy of Conservative Party leadership strategies, tactics and personnel. However, a more subtle reading suggests that there has been something of an amalgamation of the two streams of work identified above, and that a political–analytical hue can be identified in much of the contemporary work.

Seldon and Snowdon used their historical perspective to draw parallels between the Conservative predicament in 1997 and that faced by the party in the mid

nineteenth century, after the repeal of the Corn Laws (2005b: 244). Paradoxically, a period of immense electoral success (1979–97) saw the Conservative Party lose its hunger for power and its adaptability: 'the two keys' which accounted for its hegemony. In this respect, they argued that Mrs Thatcher is personally liable: whilst she achieved 'much of lasting benefit for Britain', she also damaged the party by making it 'more of a right-wing, ideological force than it had traditionally been' (2005b: 245). In their explanation of Conservative failure, Seldon and Snowdon seek to combine internal factors such as 'ill-considered' organisational reform (2005b: 251) and confused policy-making and marketing (2005b: 252–5, 262) with external factors such as Labour's reputation for competence and effective opposition from the Liberal Democrats (2005b: 256, 263). However, beyond a stinging critique of strategic decision-making by Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard, they struggle to link these together into a convincing explanation as to why such strategic errors were repeatedly made.

Both popular and academic interest in Conservative politics received a substantial boost from Cameron's election as leader in 2005, and the mini-boom in academic output that followed had as its primary focus the 'Cameron effect', namely the extent to which his leadership has transformed the party.[4] A valuable study by Dorey, Garnett and Denham (2011) covers the 1997–2010 period in its entirety, although their analysis of policy development and modernisation concentrates on the Cameron leadership.

As well as the academic studies, the Conservatives' troubles have been the subject of much journalistic comment. Bale (2010) has noted the importance of the media as an arena for party political activity: the modern media acts as a complex conduit of ideas and information between politicians, activists, journalists, voters and (at least occasionally) academics. Media reports are consequently a valuable resource drawn upon throughout this book, both to trace particular events and as a barometer of the party's success or failure in winning round journalistic and public opinion. Book-length studies by journalists such as Simon Walters (2001) and Peter Snowdon (2010) draw upon their insider access as part of the 'Westminster village' and blur the line between journalism and contemporary history. Perhaps inevitably such works focus on the personalities of those involved and the conflicts between them, which limits their analytical purchase and appreciation of wider contextual factors. They are nonetheless valuable resources precisely because they provide a detailed record of day-to-day political activity and behind-the-scenes disputes.

Perhaps the most comprehensively analysed aspect of Conservative Party politics over the past two decades has been the various leadership elections. As well as a range of journal articles (for example Alderman, 1998; Heppell and Hill, 2008a, 2009, 2010), two book-length studies on this topic have been published (Denham and O'Hara, 2008; Heppell, 2008a). As a review by Tim Bale noted, both of these volumes 'are in a long and fine tradition of writing on British politics that eschews self-styled scientific schemas for a more common-sense, historical approach' (2009:

365). Such a characterisation could be applied, not altogether unfairly, to nearly all the contemporary analyses mentioned in this section. However most, whilst not necessarily wearing their theoretical standpoint as a badge of honour, to a greater or lesser extent draw upon the political analytical tradition identified above. Whilst differences of degree of course remain, there has been an effective merging of these two academic currents in this field of study. This can be seen in the work of Bale himself: notably in his assessment of modernisation under Cameron (2008) and in his superb book-length study of the post-Thatcher era (2010).

Bale's volume has set the standard as the key text charting the history of the Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron. By bringing a historical institutionalist perspective to a detailed ordered narrative Bale has produced an invaluable book which provides an unrivalled depth of coverage of the events under scrutiny. Through its different structure and approach this book complements Bale's work rather than acts as an alternative to it. Where Bale favours a chronological approach this book is thematic, centred on a number of key dilemmas in contemporary Conservative politics (this also differentiates this volume from that by Dorey, Garnett and Denham, 2011). This allows key ideas and issues to be considered across the period as a whole, aiding an appreciation of how key intellectual and ideological debates both inform and influence how politicians understand their locale and choose to act, and frame political debates more broadly.

Structure of the book

This research concentrates on the 1997–2010 period, for several reasons. Most obviously this encompasses the relevant period of Conservative opposition in its entirety, allowing leadership strategy to be examined from electoral defeat in May 1997 to regaining office in May 2010. The book considers how the party responded to defeat, and seeks to explain why it struggled to return to a position from which it could effectively challenge for power, and how it eventually did so. As such, a key task of the book is to contextualise and explain the emergence and nature of contemporary conservatism under the direction of David Cameron. It does this in two ways. Firstly, by tracing the debates over strategy amongst the party elite, and scrutinising the actions of the leadership, it situates Cameron and his 'modernising' approach in relation to that of his three immediate predecessors: Michael Howard, Iain Duncan Smith and William Hague. This holistic view aids the identification of strategic trends and conflicts, and an appreciation of the Conservatives' evolving response to New Labour's statecraft. In this respect the book also benefits from a series of interviews with leading Conservative politicians who were either involved directly in, or were closely associated with, the development of party strategy during this period. Secondly, the book highlights and considers in depth four particular dilemmas for contemporary conservatism, each chosen as they present Conservatives with a significant ideological challenge.

The structure of the book reflects these objectives. Chapter 2 provides contextual background to the study through an examination of the work of three key Conservative thinkers (John Gray, Ian Gilmour and David Willetts) that is used to consider the intellectual response of conservatism to the Thatcherite legacy. This ideological uncertainty over the direction of Conservative politics after Thatcher is an important frame of the debates in the party post-1997. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the electoral problem facing the Conservative Party in 1997.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the leadership strategies pursued by the Conservatives in two full terms of opposition, between 1997 and 2005. It analyses the Conservative reaction to a landslide defeat in 1997, and considers how the competing interpretations of defeat influenced the strategies pursued by the party leadership. This assessment includes an examination of electoral strategy across the period, particularly the two general election campaigns of 2001 and 2005. The chapter concludes that the strategies pursued by Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard were sub-optimal: they underachieved even within the inauspicious context that they faced. This forms the backdrop to both the discussion of Cameron later in the book, and the examination of efforts to reconstruct conservatism in relation to the key dilemmas of European integration (Chapter 4); national identity and the English question (Chapter 5); social liberalism versus social authoritarianism (Chapter 6); and the problems posed by a neo-liberal political economy (Chapter 7). These four case-study chapters explore in detail how the party leadership sought to manages these challenges, as well as considering what they suggest about the current state of Conservative politics. The concluding chapter (Chapter 8) draws together the findings of the research, and considers the implications in relation to the prospects for the Conservative-led coalition government.

The organisation of the book along these lines is also influenced by the theoretical standpoint that guided the research. As a broadly defined organising perspective, the book draws on the SRA, which highlights the way in which political actors make strategic choices informed by their interpretation of the context they face. The structure of the book consequently reflects this through the inclusion of contextual chapters before those which examine the strategy and actions of the leadership in greater detail. The way in which the SRA informed the research is outlined below.

Utilising the SRA in political analysis

The SRA highlights the dialectical nature of the interplay between structure and agency by concentrating on the interaction between the two in the 'real world' rather than in the realm of abstract theory that the two terms imply. To assist in this objective the SRA utilises the concepts of *strategic action*, which is that taken by conscious, reflective strategic actors, and the *strategically selective context* in which it is formulated and takes place (Hay, 2002a: 126–34). As such, the key contribution

of the SRA is to do away with the structure–agency dichotomy, and to shift our analysis instead into the field of strategy – that is, behaviour orientated towards context. It directs us to see the Conservative Party both as a strategic actor and as an institution, constraining and enabling actors within it. For example, the party provides the leader with institutionalised resources, such as a public platform, supporters and a campaigning organisation, but also acts as a constraint, as a leader must retain the confidence of their parliamentary colleagues and (to a lesser extent) party members. The SRA is, in a sense, a heuristic device for exploring how the Conservative Party uses strategy in pursuit of its goals, and how that strategy affects, and is affected by, the strategic context. By placing strategic leadership at the centre of our analysis, the SRA is well suited to this research, which focuses on the strategy of the Conservative Party as an organisation with the objective of gaining and holding political office, and on the role of leaders within it in directing party strategy.

The SRA thus directs the focus of our analysis into a number of different arenas, towards which leadership strategy is orientated. Most notably these are the parliamentary party, the wider party (membership), the electorate and ideology. An appreciation of this multi-layered context is needed to understand Conservative Party strategy in the 1997–2010 period. Strategic decisions which may appear 'irrational' if measured against only a restricted contextual variable – for example, the pursuit of the median voter position – can be better understood when placed in this wider framework. Rather than trying to ascribe particular causal weighting to various factors, however, the SRA concentrates on the process of formulating, implementing and understanding strategy. Thus, later in the book the focus is on noteworthy dilemmas for the leadership, and traces strategy regarding these over time. In short, we should not see 'strategic success' as agential victory over structure, or strategic failure as agents being 'defeated' by structures. Apparent failure in one area might indicate the higher priority ascribed to other dimensions: for example at certain times, party unity may take precedence over developing an inclusive electoral appeal.

This is not to claim that previous work on the Conservative Party has ignored either the role of strategic actors or of the strategically selective context. As previously discussed, much of the literature closely examines the actions of leading figures in the party, and by doing so provides a detailed history. The research presented here is not a rejection of the elite-historian tradition, but by being theoretically reflective aims to build upon it. For example where agency-focused accounts do consider 'structure', it tends to be when it restricts what actors can do or inhibits their strategic objectives. What the SRA aims to do, however, by focusing on the structure–agency relationship, is to highlight how structure not only curtails action, but enables, shapes and is transformed by it. By considering this over a significant length of time, we also reveal the importance of path-dependency as the context is altered over time. Thus, we can see how the handling of an issue by one party leader

shapes how it is dealt with by their successors. The SRA thus helps us to *anticipate* how strategy might be shaped by context, assisting our effort to explain why something happened as it did, as well as how it happened.

The analytical work on Thatcherism, much of it derived from a Marxist tradition, highlighted the structured nature of Conservative hegemony. However, by stressing the institutionalised sources of electoral dominance, it risked presenting a somewhat static view of history insufficiently sensitive to historical contingency. For example, Gamble very usefully identifies the pillars of Conservative hegemony as 'state, union, property, and empire' (1995: 8), and the decline of each of these played a part in the Conservative Party's fall in the mid 1990s. However, explaining events since 1997 needs to go beyond this: whilst further electoral failure in 2001 and 2005 might be accounted for by the continuing absence of these pillars, revival under David Cameron cannot.[5] The context is changing and responsive, so even where it might appear inauspicious it is not fixed but is susceptible to strategic action. Outcomes are not predetermined, so even in difficult circumstances a range of strategic options present themselves. Again, this highlights the benefit of considering a lengthy spell of opposition. Faced with an unfavourable context in 1997, should the Conservatives have acted differently, for example by pursuing a more consistent effort to change party image over a two-term strategy, even if this risked (further) short-term unpopularity?

As the previous section explored, the SRA is useful for capturing the importance of ideology. That ideology has performed an important role in Conservative Party politics over the past thirty years is a widely recognised fact, most clearly illustrated by divisions over European integration, but also in shaping party strategy more generally. Disagreement over strategy not only betrays ideological disparities in terms of the direction in which different actors would *like* to see the party move, but also ideologically informed variation in terms of how the context (and competing strategic choices) is understood. This is illustrated by the surprisingly widespread view amongst Conservative politicians that a huge swathe of the electorate (often referred to as the 'forgotten' or 'silent' majority) would flock back to the party if only it were more vigorously right-wing.[6]

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning the 'performative dimension' of political action (Hay, 2009). The way that politicians publicly perform (particularly through the media) is a vital part of contemporary politics, a fact better appreciated by politicians than academic analysts. Here, the terminology of the SRA is particularly apt, as politicians are indeed actors on a public stage, even if their view of the audience (the electorate) is somewhat blurred or even erroneous. Politicians assume a variety of positions on the stage in an effort to address different parts of the audience, although they can never be absolutely sure that their messages will be transmitted in the way they would like. The period under examination here is a case in point: William Hague used his superlative performances at Prime Minister's Questions to rally his backbenchers and secure his position as leader at a time when

they had little else to cheer about. Iain Duncan Smith, by contrast, was armed with arguably a much better strategy for Conservative electoral revival, but as a relatively weak Commons and media performer was unable to convince his own colleagues, let alone the public, of the merit of his approach. In short, a good strategy, well suited for the strategically selective context is not enough: it needs to be executed effectively.

Conclusion

The fundamental purpose of political parties is to win elections and implement their agenda in office. In the twentieth century no party appeared to validate this more strikingly than the Conservatives, and scholars dedicated themselves to explaining this success. However, between 1997 and 2010 the party endured one of its longest spells in opposition, raising questions about the causes of failure and, rather more intriguingly, the slow pace of change to rectify it. In this respect the existing literature has some limitations. In particular, the agency-centred historical tradition leads to explanations based on the shortcomings of individual leaders, lacking sufficient appreciation of vital contextual factors. Conversely, whilst the political–analytical tradition has many strengths, its spotlight on explaining Conservative hegemony risks limiting its effectiveness in accounting for its subsequent collapse.

In short, this review suggested the need for a more nuanced theoretically informed approach, drawing on the strengths of both the historical and political science literature. Statecraft has much to commend it in this regard. Leadership is at the core of what any political party does, how it communicates with the electorate, how it interprets reality and how it defines its strategy. As the agency-focused nature of its historiography shows, this is particularly so in the case of the Conservative Party. As Taylor has noted, 'the importance of the leader and the style of leadership for the Conservative Party cannot, therefore, be underestimated' (2008: xiii). Statecraft is limited, however, by its focus on governing and the Thatcher era.

Since Bulpitt's (1986) article was published, a wider debate in political science over the nature and relationship of structure and agency has gathered apace. This has been an important element of the movement towards more theoretically informed political analysis. One more generalised theoretical approach that seeks to overcome the dualism of structure and agency is the SRA. Surprisingly, this is not an approach that has been explicitly applied to party politics, for which it is well suited. By directing the focus of analytical attention to strategic action it offers a potentially fruitful new avenue for studies in this field, and appears particularly apt in the case of the Conservative Party, where elite leadership has played a central role throughout the party's history. Applied with the notion of the strategically selective context, the SRA provides the framework for an analytical perspective which highlights the interplay between strategic action and the environment in

which it takes place, and the importance of how that environment is interpreted and understood by political actors.

Analysing Conservative defeat in the 2001 election, Norris and Lovenduski argued that politicians 'may fail to learn from electoral defeat due to selective perception' (2004: 85). Evidence they presented from the 2001 British Representation Study demonstrated that the Conservatives were further from the median voter than either Labour or the Liberal Democrats: an outcome which they attributed to a failure by Conservative politicians to accurately gauge public sentiment on key issues. This book argues that to understand and explain this persistent failure by Conservative politicians to reconstruct conservatism in an electorally appealing form after the 1992 election and locate it closer to prevailing policy moods it is necessary to take sufficient account of the ideological dimension. The ideological viewpoints of individual actors may help explain the selective perception identified by Norris and Lovenduski, while ideology also forms part of the context within which strategic decisions are made. By unpacking this process in relation to key areas of ideological contestation for Conservatives in the early twenty-first century, this book provides a nuanced understanding of the politics of opposition between 1997 and 2010 and provides a portrait of conservatism as the party entered into coalition and returned to office.
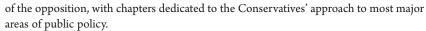
Notes

1 See Addison (1999) and Turner (1999) for reviews of much of this historical literature.
2 The Conservative peer Lord Blake being foremost among them (Turner, 1999: 276; Blake, 1970).
3 Some exceptions to this are the edited collection by Garnett and Lynch (2003) that provides the most comprehensive academic overview of the 1997–2001 period. Reviews of each parliament are also provided by chapters in the various general election series texts, for example Butler and Kavanagh (2002); Cooper (2001); and Cowley and Green (2005). Focusing on the Hague years, Kelly (2001) has analysed his ill-fated electoral strategy, and Harris (2005) provides a detailed examination of the politics of nationhood under his leadership. Hayton and Heppell (2010) offer one of the few sustained analyses of the Iain Duncan Smith era; while Dorey (2004) unpacks the Conservative policy agenda in the 2001–5 parliament. Taylor (2005) surveys the 1997–2005 period to expose the failure of the Conservatives to develop a coherent narrative under the leadership of Hague, Duncan Smith or Howard.
4 Key works in this respect include an assessment of Cameron and ideological and policy consensus with New Labour by Kerr (2007); electoral strategy and the pursuit of the 'centre ground' by Quinn (2008); and the constraints of the Thatcherite inheritance by Evans (2010). Policy positioning under Cameron has also been assessed, for example on the environment (Carter, 2009); the economy (Dorey, 2009); the constitution (Flinders, 2009) and family policy (Hayton, 2010b; Kirby, 2009). The edited collection by Lee and Beech (2009) provides a comprehensive analysis of Cameron's first three years as leader

of the opposition, with chapters dedicated to the Conservatives' approach to most major areas of public policy.

5 See Hay and Wincott (1998) for an analysis of the 'latent structuralism' (1998: 952) of historical institutionalism.

6 Just such a view was expressed by Lord Tebbit (private interview, 2007).