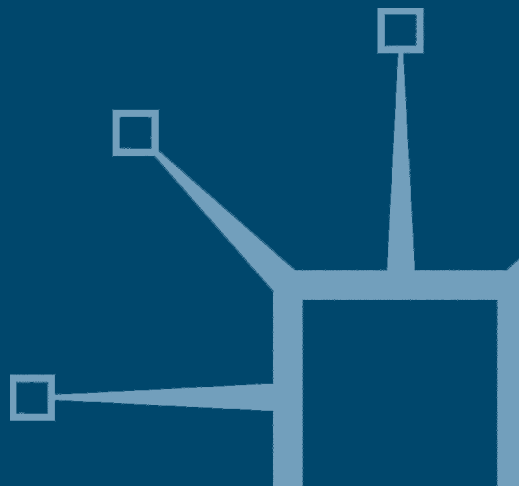


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The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945

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Kevin Hickson



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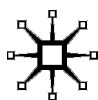
The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945

Edited by

Kevin Hickson

*School of Politics and Communication Studies,
University of Liverpool*

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Kevin Hickson

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Life of Enoch Powell (1998) and *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England* (2000).

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Bruce Pilbeam completed his PhD on contemporary conservative political thought at the University of Sheffield and has recently been appointed as lecturer in politics at London Metropolitan University. He has published a number of articles in journals and his book *Conservatism in Crisis? Anglo-American Conservative Ideology after the Cold War* was published in 2003.

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British Politics and the Question of European Integration edited with David Baker (1998).

Andrew Taylor has recently been appointed Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield. He has written extensively on the trades unions both in a British and comparative context and also on the history and politics of the Conservative Party. His relevant publications include *From Salisbury to Major: Continuity and Change in Conservative Politics* with Brendan Evans (1996).

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Introduction

Kevin Hickson

The Conservative Party is often seen as a party concerned with power, one that is prepared to adapt to changing times and changing electoral demands in a pragmatic, if not ruthless, way. It is usually regarded as having done this successfully, at least in the twentieth century when the Party was in power for much of the time. There would seem to be little scope for ideology in such a political party. The need for a book devoted to the political thought of the Conservative Party would therefore seem a little odd even to some who are more versed in the politics of the Conservative Party. Indeed, many Conservative politicians have argued that they are non-ideological and see this as something that is desirable in politics. Ideology is something to be left to opponents and is something to be critical of therefore.

For this reason the political thought of the Conservative Party has been little studied. This is certainly the case with the pre-Thatcherite Conservative Party, which is often said to have been non-ideological. However, Thatcherism is said to have brought ideology into the Conservative Party and there are many more studies of the New Right. With the decline of the Conservative Party's electoral position since 1997 there has again been little academic attention on the Party in opposition. Attention has naturally focused more on New Labour.

However, the Conservative Party does contain several ideological perspectives and competing views on things such as the constitution, Europe and the wider role of Britain in the world, economic policy, welfare and social morality. The thought of the Conservative Party is therefore something to be studied. This also raises interesting discussions as to whether there is a 'true' Conservative tradition and whether there is a core value that unites all Conservatives.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic and social thought of the Conservative Party since 1945. In

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so doing it seeks to provide fresh perspectives. It allows for a comparison of the main ideological positions within the Conservative Party and a discussion of how these positions approached a range of political issues that have been present in Britain since 1945. A particular feature of the book is that it allows for a discussion of the intellectual development of the Party from differing perspectives and with a wide range of academic interests and specialisms.

Ultimately the book offers no one single interpretation of or argument about Conservatism. Instead, the reader is encouraged to reflect on the different arguments made in the book and to reach their own opinion. This is one key advantage of an edited volume such as this.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into three parts. The first analyses the four broad ideological positions within the Party since 1945: traditional Toryism, New Right, centre and 'One Nation'. The aim of these chapters is to outline the key aspects and the main thinkers and politicians associated with these perspectives, then to offer an evaluation of the broad position. Arthur Aughey seeks to analyse the nature of traditional Toryism. The core idea he argues is for a minimal state, in which people will be 'let alone' and which will preserve individual freedom within traditional social structures. This idea is underpinned by attitudes towards human character and British (or essentially English) national identity. However, there is also a fatalistic element within traditional Toryism, which stresses that the traditional way of doing things is about to be lost forever, if not already.

The political and economic thought of the New Right is analysed by Norman Barry. Barry argues that the New Right is inherently a conservative doctrine, which shares ideas with key conservative philosophers. The emphasis here is more on efficiency and freedom and the need to reverse the post-war drift to state intervention. Barry argues that the Conservative Governments after 1979 held to New Right ideology but that there are also several contemporary problems that can be resolved by the application of New Right ideas.

The chapters on the centre by Mark Garnett and the 'One Nation' tradition by David Seawright show the fluidity of Conservative thought. The centre contains both a pragmatic, party loyalist tradition imbued with a public service ethos and also an ideological element that seeks to find unity by connecting ideas often associated with the left and the right of the Party. Seawright's main focus is on the One Nation dining group.

He analyses the extent to which the ideas of this group accurately reflect the ideas of Disraeli. The group contained both more interventionist and free market ideas and so he argues the position should not be seen as a 'left-wing' position, although there were strong links between some in the 'Nation' with more clearly defined progressive groups such as Pressure for Economic and Social Toryism and Tory Reform.

The second part deals with a number of cross-cutting themes and issues. Philip Norton discusses the constitution, saying why Conservatives see it as important and also how they respond to constitutional change. Norton raises the question of how Conservatives should deal with the constitutional reform agenda of New Labour when they return to power. The constitutional question is also important in relation to the Conservatives' approach to Europe, discussed by Andrew Geddes. This often hinges on the constitutional principle of sovereignty. Some see sovereignty as something that can be 'pooled' meaning that closer integration is desirable. However, others see sovereignty as an 'absolute' meaning that closer integration should be avoided or even that Britain should seek to withdraw itself from various elements of the EU (or withdraw from the EU completely).

Europe is also an economic question. Some see free markets as desirable and identify more with the political economy of the United States. Attitudes to the economy are addressed by Andrew Taylor, who sees economic attitudes as a tension between order and chaos, identifies a range of opinions on the economy since 1945 and discusses how these competing positions impact on current policies. He says that there is now little debate on economic policy, as there is an essentially free market consensus. Instead, debate is limited to social questions. This theme is developed by Bruce Pilbeam who examines the potential for conflict between those of a more conservative or a more liberal stance on issues of social morality. Pilbeam identifies a range of issues over which these tensions have been played out in the past and examines the extent to which the Conservative Party has become more socially liberal.

Although many of these themes and issues suggest conflict within the Conservative Party, Kevin Hickson asks if a common principle can be found which unites Conservatives. He argues that such a unifying principle can be found with the idea of 'inequality'. Conservatives oppose the idea of 'equality', which they see as an ideological construct of the left, but also defend the notion of inequality positively, albeit for different reasons and to different extents.

The final part consists of personal commentaries written by those often associated with the position they seek to defend. Each argues that

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their position can best be used to restore the electoral fortunes of the Conservative Party. Simon Heffer argues that there is widespread support for traditional Toryism, based on defence of the constitution, English nationalism and traditional social morality. John Redwood argues that the idea of 'popular capitalism' and the emphasis on individual freedom by the New Right was popular in the 1980s and is still relevant and popular today. Francis Maude argues that the Conservative Party should not seek to move to the left or the right but should defend its core principles, most notably the interrelated ideas of individual liberty and community. Damian Green also argues that a more compassionate conservatism should be developed and that Conservatives should adopt a more positive attitude to the state, seeing state intervention in social issues as desirable in cases where markets or voluntary action are insufficient.

By way of conclusion, Kevin Hickson argues there is still much to be debated within the Conservative Party over many areas of policy.

Part One

Positions

1

Traditional Toryism

Arthur Aughey

In May 1912, at the height of the Irish Home Rule crisis, the *Ballymoney Free Press* expressed in particular circumstances a universal truth of traditional Toryism. 'The statement of Unionist Ulster', it announced, 'is that it merely wants to be let alone.' Unfortunately, it continued, 'since Satan entered the Garden of Eden good people will not be let alone'.¹ The desire at the heart of traditional Toryism has been this same desire to be let alone in order to enjoy whatever vocation or customary pursuits may be freely chosen. It is explicit in Lord Hugh Cecil's preference for the known, which is safe, to the unknown, which is likely to be dangerous. 'Why not let it alone? Why be weary instead of at rest? Why rush into danger instead of staying in safety?'² It is implied in Lord Hailsham's celebrated passage where he argued, like most other conservative writers, that meddling in politics is very much a second order activity. For the Tory, life is elsewhere and, in a phrase that now conveys the assumptions of a lost world, the 'simplest among them prefer fox-hunting – the wisest, religion'. Indeed, for Hailsham the person who would put politics first 'is not fit to be called a civilised being'.³ There is an innocence, an authenticity, a piety in those non-political preferences and this attribution of value has consequences for conservatism itself. As the Third Marquess of Salisbury once argued, the Conservative Party is rather like a policeman. If there were no criminals around there would be no need for it, even though the existence of the Party was no guarantee of protection.⁴ Unfortunately, Conservatives will not be let alone, there will always be criminals around and the tranquil disposition is forever under threat. In recent history both interference and threat have been associated with the state since the modern state

has the potential to deprive good people of property, savings and now even fox hunting. Traditional Tories, then, inhabit a world that is both enchanted and disenchanting. Like the people of Ballymoney they possess a deep sense of what the good life is and this life can be enchantingly and sentimentally described in conservative literature, the sort of 'poetics of the civil life' at which Michael Oakeshott excelled.⁵ Commentators seduced by his description of Conservatism as a preference for the familiar to the unknown, 'the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss' often fail to note that Oakeshott thought this attitude inappropriate 'in respect of human conduct in general'.⁶ He, like the people of Ballymoney, also knew that the possession of that enchanted world can never be secure and its enjoyment can never be certain. Such is the Tory tragedy and the fall into politics involves a detestable, disenchanting, unsentimental but unavoidable fate.

The origin of traditional Toryism, then, is a dream of reconciliation – of order and liberty, of legitimacy and power, of justice and discipline. It is the origin but cannot be the conclusion since experience is not as the ideal would have it. The reconciliation is reconciliation within Conservative thought, not reconciliation in reality, and this creates a damnable conundrum. As Roger Scruton acknowledged, once the Conservative has fallen into politics 'he has set himself apart from things' and helped to 'instil the world with doubt' (Satan has entered the Garden of Eden). Having struggled to be articulate, the only recourse for the Conservative is to 'recommend silence'.⁷ This echoed Angus Maude's opinion that the part of Toryism 'that is not articulate is by far the best and most enduring' since most of the rest is meaningless sloganising.⁸ Unfortunately, silence, like being let alone, is no longer an option. Both aspects of the Tory condition – the enchanted and disenchanting – were captured by Lord Salisbury when, at the height of political success in 1897, he warned that 'the dangerous temptation of the hour is that we should consider rhapsody an adequate compensation for calculation'.⁹ The rhapsodic, enchanted ideal and the calculating, disenchanting politics are two sides of Conservative fate and the relationship between them has never been straightforward. On the one side, traditional Toryism has an elegiac tone which explains its appeal to intelligent, sensitive and romantic young people, something that Disraeli well understood. It appears to hold, like the Italian poet Leopardi, that to enjoy life, a state of despair is necessary.¹⁰ The temptation today is to dismiss this style of Toryism as a mere affectation, a sort of Young Fogeyism, especially now

that it has become detached from its aristocratic roots, though there are those who still defend it with style.¹¹ Moreover, its elegiac tone is thought to be a characteristic that makes it inappropriate for a modern politics that requires imagination, experiment and 'reflexivity'.¹² On the other side, traditional Toryism has a combative character. As A.J.P. Taylor once remarked of Salisbury: 'He fought for victory; he expected defeat.'¹³ The expectation of (long term) defeat did not mean the absence of (short and medium term) victories. Moreover, what constitutes victory, what constitutes defeat for Toryism has never been self-evident and so the struggle itself may be worth it. For those of a nostalgic frame of mind, the fall into politics is already proof of defeat. For those of a sanguine disposition there remains much to play for. This question of Tory fatalism requires further consideration.

Toryism and fate

Politics is about deliberation and a weighing up of the odds. It is disposed towards action either in the promotion of change or in resistance to change. Fatalism, therefore, would appear to be a disposition at odds with the political. A strictly fatalistic view is that any given situation can have only one outcome. This is one way of understanding Scruton's recommendation of silence and also one way of making sense of that innate Tory suspicion of what has recently been called the 'chattering classes', those who are always opening up things for pointless discussion. That sort of fatalism seems at first sight to be at odds with another characteristic commonly attributed to the Tory, a bloody-minded mentality of resistance. Resistance in every particular means that one's enemies exhaust themselves challenging the inessentials and so delays the final assault on the citadel. However, rhapsodic fatalism and calculating resistance can share a simple world-view. The surface may change but the currents are remorseless. Things will not change for the better, only for the worse and pessimism (the world is going to the dogs) is married to complete defiance (no surrender). Even the fatal certainty of defeat provides a barrier against complexity and political ambiguity. This is especially the case if you believe that your future is behind you. Why, as Lord Hugh Cecil might phrase it, get involved in schemes for one's own undoing? Why move when movement can only be in a hostile direction? Here is a view of the world that believes all schemes for political improvement to be futile and follows Schopenhauer in always qualifying the noun 'optimism' with the adjective 'unscrupulous'. 'No rose without a thorn. Yes, but many a thorn without a rose.'¹⁴ Of course, that mentality

– at least since J.S. Mill’s remark at the Conservative Party’s expense – has been associated with incorrigible Tory ignorance. Yet it should be stressed that this is not necessarily an unintelligent response to the world. Insofar as political wisdom emerges from what experience obliges one to believe, Tories often do perceive a world of decadence and decline. And yet, like the Conservative Party itself, they survive. So it is not necessarily the case that fatalism is without its political dividends since being able to endure in what appears to be a hostile world encourages a form of self-esteem. Unfortunately, fatalism also provides a ready excuse for political failure and political indolence (and the two may be related). It can be an enchanting rhapsody that excuses a lack of disenchanting calculation (nothing could be done).

This is not of merely historic relevance since every generation of Tories, especially following electoral defeat, experiences that fatalism in large or small measure. In the 1970s, Elie Kedourie feared that Tories had become gripped by an ‘iron Fate’ that locked them into surrender to the politics of state aggrandisement. Though the Party may continue as a ‘great’ institution, he wondered ‘what, under such conditions, Conservatives will come to understand by Conservatism’.¹⁵ The Party will survive as the party of government, in other words, but Toryism is likely to perish. Without self-understanding and a sense of political purpose, Conservative pragmatism is a demoralising and debilitating experience. Writing about the Party in 2004, after seven years of Opposition, one sympathetic journalist detected a collapse of Tory nerve and a tendency amongst some in the Party to turn defeat into defeatism.¹⁶ The Party may not survive as a party of government, in other words, and Toryism is still as likely to perish. In this case, what is the point in being Conservative at all?

While both sorts of fatalism have indeed their place in Tory history they have never been (at least for any length of time) the Party’s leading characteristics. ‘Stern and unbending Toryism’, according to Lord Blake, ‘has never paid dividends to the Conservative party, nor in practice when in office has the party ever taken that line’.¹⁷ Wisdom suggested that it was best not to provoke confrontations and to avoid dividing society unnecessarily. Here was a politics of modesty that was not averse to looking after Tory interests but often did so ‘by round-about ways’.¹⁸ What the Conservative Party has generally taken from a reading of its own history, sometimes erroneously, is an aversion from projects that seem to be ultimately self-defeating. (Of course, what some may take to be an example of a self-defeating course of action, for instance a policy of withdrawal from the European Union, may be seen by others as a principled alternative to the fatalistic acceptance of ‘inevitability’.)

Instead, the lesson has been that one must make the best of the hand which fate has dealt, and this disposition is sometimes known as Conservative realism.¹⁹ This game is not a game of political poker but a game of political tarot. It involves readings, interpretations, meanings and divinations in which fate may just possibly be made to bend some way to one's will. The trick is to make the best of things and the task of Conservative leadership is to encourage both Party and country to accept its reading of the cards. This political game, as R.A. Butler once put it, is the art of the possible, a dialogue between fatalism and possibility.

One historian has attempted to capture this Conservative dialogue in terms of what may be called the Lampedusan paradox.²⁰ Taken from Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, set in 1860, it recounts the process by which the Sicilian Prince of Salina accommodates himself to the new political regime. The paradox states: 'If you want things to stay the same things will have to change.' The aim of the Prince's generation is to survive and any 'palliative which may give us another hundred years of life is like eternity to us'. In this he proves successful although he is 'burdened with the truly onerous responsibility of bequeathing a once vital past to a future that seems to have no place for it'.²¹ What is envisaged is not a future of 'liberty, security, lighter taxes, ease, trade' (the enchantment of ideology) but a future of petty compromise, manipulation and manoeuvre in which decent values and old standards will be lost (the disenchantment of politics). It involves a process of settling for what today would be called gently managing decline. How could this not be when the modernising Piedmontese administration (for all the world the confident voice of New Labour), believes that Sicily 'is only now sighting the modern world, with so many wounds to heal, so many just desires to be granted?' That is the process which Fforde traces in Britain, a process in which 'Conservatives not only offend their more conservative associates but end up by changing themselves'.²² He argues that this process 'had a vampire effect: it drew out the true Tory blood'. Hence the irony that 'the Conservative Party came to be an integral part of the means by which Liberalism and Socialism progressed – it was a political carrier of previously resisted proposals'.²³ Academic research here repeats one of the enduring Tory complaints about Party policy, one that may be traced back at least as far as Disraeli – Tory men and Whig measures.

Lord Coleraine, for instance, thought the problem for the Conservative Party was never that it would prove too reactionary but that it would be carried too far along the road of change and would lose the capacity to make its distinctive contribution to national life. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century, he thought, all the Party had to offer 'was a

reformulation of the fashions of the day'.²⁴ With his delicate register of Tory sensibility, T.E. Uteley observed that most Conservative politicians have assumed that their opponents represent the future. 'Is it not the great merit of English Conservatism', he asked, 'that it comes to terms with reality and the great merit of the Tory party that it confines itself to the role of a midwife to history?' For Uteley, this represented 'a kind of sophisticated timidity', an attitude that led a politician to decide 'what he loves best and then consider how he can preside most elegantly and judiciously over its destruction, making that process as painless as possible, saving what he could from the wreckage'. Lampedusa could not have phrased it more elegantly. This policy had become the politics of controlled surrender, though such was Uteley's unflinching insight that he could also acknowledge how far this was from being a 'contemptible creed'. He accepted that its practical wisdom had often stood the party in good stead.²⁵ Concession, surrender and transformation are indeed the lot of intelligent Conservatism but that is only one side of the truth (even if a version of that one-sided truth informed Mrs Thatcher's successful, though possibly temporary, Tory renaissance). That fatal gift of Tory statesmanship is not the whole of the Party's inheritance for, as Fforde himself goes on to admit, much of 'the British "liberal tradition" is rooted in Conservatism and its political sense'.²⁶ The Lampedusan paradox would be of little interest if it only illuminated a process of change. By contrast, from the perspective of Tory opponents, the remarkable thing about British politics is the extent to which Conservative interests *have been* let alone. That has been the enduring complaint of radicals and they too have their own version of the paradox.

It was the traditionalism and Conservatism of British political culture that puzzled Marxist commentators and the reason appeared to lie in the sophisticated timidity of the Labour Party. Here, if traditional Tories cared to look, was the dividend from faithful subscription to the Lampedusan paradox. The Conservative Party had helped to fashion an opposition that believed if you wanted things to change things would also have to stay the same. The Labour Party, as one critic put it, became committed 'to the fundamental civic values of British political culture' which just happened to be Tory, a 'manifestation of the institutional integration characteristic of British society'.²⁷ Another was absolutely convinced that British political culture was one in which Conservatism 'swims like a fish in the sea'. The national culture 'is a Tory culture' and the Conservative Party is a '*necessary* embodiment of the central core of this Tory culture'. Moreover, 'there are some ways in which it exists more as this embodiment than it does as a political party'.²⁸ This was written

in the 1980s, not the 1880s, and it goes to show how many on the left accepted Tory myths as political truths. Of course to Tory activists, engaged in the disenchanting business of getting out the vote, much of this was academic nonsense. Few of them really felt comfortable with modern Britain and for one of them it was luck, rather than a dominant Tory culture, that made the Conservative Party the 'Great Survivor'. And like all good Tories he felt its luck would soon run out.²⁹

The acceptance of their respective sides of the Lampedusan paradox by Tories and by Socialists helps to explain the distinctive experience of right versus left in British politics in the last century, an experience very different from continental Europe's. No ruler, as Schopflin neatly puts it, is going to share power 'if he thinks that those who are to be newly assumed into power will use it to string him up from the nearest lamp-post'.³⁰ The conciliatory intelligence of Tory politics meant that power was ceded but it also meant that no one was lynched (in Great Britain at any rate, if not in Ireland). And while it is true that post-war academics and in-house historians reinterpreted the Conservative past to conform to 'mid-twentieth century assumptions about the purposes of politics' with which many traditionalists in the Party felt uneasy, this should not conceal the extent to which many things close to the hearts of traditionalists remained secure.³¹ Conciliation was not without the ability to resist effectively. It is possible to argue that it is Conservatism which has had a vampiric effect, drawing out the true Socialist blood from the Labour Party, making it a political carrier of previously resisted proposals, Whig men and Tory measures. In 1950, A.J.P. Taylor thought it rather amusing to suggest that 'We are all Tories nowadays'.³² Almost 50 years later Lord Blake observed that one is unlikely to say of British politics that 'we are all conservatives nowadays'. But, he thought, 'it would be true, all the same'.³³ Well, up to a point. If this were the result of accident as much as of design, it has had an ironic effect on the current popularity of the Party. Despite, or even because of, Conservative electoral successes between 1979 and 1997, Tory fatalists may today think of the Party like the stuffed carcass of the Prince of Salina's faithful hound and recall former glory in the throws of ultimate dissolution. What remained of Bendico was flung into a corner of the yard and during 'the flight down from the window its form recomposed itself for an instant; in the air there seemed to be dancing a quadruped with long whiskers, its right foreleg raised in imprecation. Then all found peace in a little heap of livid dust.' The enchantment of a glorious past exists with the disenchanting prospect of political futility.

New Labour has harvested, for the moment at least, the fruits of the so-called 'Conservative century' and one of the reasons, some feel, is that Tories have lost touch with the people. For the Tories to lose touch with the people is the condition that every great survivor fears. The Conservative Party has always prided itself on being the national party in both its geographical appeal and in its attraction to all classes. However, as one psephologist observed, the tendency now is for people to think of the Party as 'alien and somehow "other"'.³⁴ The question that every successful Party leader must ask is: who are the Tory people? This is not so much a sociological question as an imaginative one, not so much a psephological question as a conceptual one. It is about seeing, as it was claimed Disraeli once saw, angels in the block of marble. Upon the answer to that question depends the policies to be formulated and the platform to be constructed.

Toryism and the character of the people

Traditional Toryism assumed a distinctive form of popular appeal and an important aspect of it was a sort of snobbery that crossed class boundaries. This was, and in some cases remains, a fact of life for those many working class and lower middle-class conservatives who think it best to maintain distinctions of social rank.³⁵ In this case, the 'people' is not some abstract sociological category but the British people in their regional and social variety, their customary beliefs, particular affections and long-standing prejudices. The purpose of Conservative politics is to defend traditional allegiances since they are thought to be the source of identity and individuality. Toryism assumes it is more in tune with the common sense of the people than the rationalism of political radicals. This distinctive populism remains strong in contemporary Conservative politics since the Party lays claim to being the true defender of the people against petty tyrannies imposed by an unrepresentative metropolitan elite (the shorthand for these tyrannies today is 'political correctness'). This traditional argument follows a recognisable pattern. On the one hand, there is the destructive influence of universal, abstract thinking and 'the moment abstraction enters the mind of politicians, the blood and substance of the people they govern is sucked out, and they decline into ideological poster-people'. These 'eviscerated subjects' then become the subject of state manipulation, to be persuaded or cajoled 'into the plans of their rulers'.³⁶ Liberalism has been attacked for carrying within it the death of liberty and socialism, the death of independence. On the other hand, there is the partiality of such abstract thinking since