

# THE CONSERVATIVES UNDER DAVID CAMERON

Built to Last?

Edited by

Simon Lee and Matt Beech



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# Foreword

*Peter Osborne*

From the collapse of the Major government in the mid 1990s till the Brownite putsch which did for Tony Blair in the early summer of 2007 Britain remained in important respects a one party state. The official Tory opposition was reduced to peripheral status, while the Liberal Democrats failed to rise to the historical opportunity with which they were presented. As a result, political rivalry was suppressed.

Conflict did show itself, however, in two primary ways. One was the rise of political movements from outside the Westminster establishment, such as the UK Independence Party, the British National Party and the anti-war coalition. All of these were able to exploit the monolithic structure of public discourse that established itself for a decade after 1997.

The second manifestation of conflict was the emergence of an extraordinary level of feuding inside the governing party itself. From 2001 onwards this became increasingly menacing as the suppression of public argument on issues such as foreign policy, immigration and the economy led to convulsions inside New Labour. Most of these disputes were fought out in secret, and normally publicly denied. Eventually, however, they erupted in the short-lived New Labour civil war of the autumn of 2006. Tony Blair was obliged to surrender to the threat of mass ministerial resignations, which had been orchestrated by allies of his rival Gordon Brown, and duly promised to resign. He reluctantly fulfilled this pledge in June 2007.

New Labour has never fully recovered from this catastrophic toppling of a successful party leader. Tony Blair's successor Gordon Brown was greeted with a sharp rise in the opinion polls, as John Major was after the fall of Margaret Thatcher in 1990. But Brown was now ruling a divided party. There have been attempts to establish unity, above all through the return of Peter Mandelson in the 2008 reshuffle. However the Blairite faction never felt any abiding allegiance to Gordon Brown, any more than supporters of ex-premier Margaret Thatcher did towards John Major. Tony Blair's supporters have never forgiven Gordon Brown for what they believe to be his role in first poisoning, and then destroying, a Labour government.

These deadly divisions inside New Labour threw a lifeline to the apparently defunct Conservative Party. Today, for the first time since 1992, a Conservative leader stands a strong chance of becoming Prime Minister. It has become of first rate importance to understand who David Cameron is, what he stands for, and what he would do in office.

The first thing to note is that David Cameron marks a reversion to a type of Tory leader widely assumed to have become extinct. His socio-economic status is comparable to the leaders who governed Britain in the Conservative ascendancy during the immediate post-war period: Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan and Sir Alex Douglas-Home. Educated at Eton and the son of a stockbroker, he comes from the landed upper-middle class. It was assumed after the defeat of Sir Alex Douglas-Home in the general election of 1964 that such a figure could never again become the prime minister. Indeed, David Cameron is the first Tory leader since Sir Alex even to have been educated at a public school.

In short, the emergence of Cameron as Tory leader and future prime minister represents the re-emergence of the former British governing elite into mainstream public life (a phenomenon observable in other areas, for example the appointment of Radley-educated Andrew Strauss as England cricket captain). This promotion to a front-line political role would have been unthinkable only a generation ago. In 1990 the foreign secretary Douglas Hurd's Old Etonian and landed background was held against him when he battled to succeed Margaret Thatcher. Hurd was reduced to making the thoroughly misleading claim that he was the son of a 'tenant farmer', and eventually retired from the contest comparing the Conservative Party of the late 20th century to 'some demented Marxist sect'. David Cameron cannot be understood until it is grasped that he will be the first prime minister who was born to rule in half a century.

However, it is misleading to attach too much significance to Cameron's Establishment credentials. It is also important to understand that he has built his career as a core member of the so-called 'modernising' movement. These modernisers are a cross party phenomenon. This means they are hostile to core structures of ideology or belief, and therefore tend to join parties mainly for pragmatic reasons of career advancement. They form a metropolitan clique, and are collectively highly skilled users of political technology: focus groups, state of the art psephological methods, voter targeting, consumer advertising etc. These modernisers are especially fluent and confident at using the media. Modernisers will always tend to manipulate voters rather than directly articulate mainstream concerns. They are political insiders who typically find themselves at odds with the mass of the party membership. Their rise



as a factor in British mainstream politics was anticipated in Richard Katz and Peter Mair's brilliant essay: 'Changing Models of Party Organisation and Party Democracy: the Emergence of a Cartel Party', written in 1995. Though the idea of British modernisation was invented on the left, they represent a collective attempt to restore elite dominance after the post-war collapse of the British governing class.

The Labour cabinet minister Peter Mandelson is the godfather of British modernisation, which is why he is revered by political insiders from all parties. He put the idea into practice first as a senior aide to Neil Kinnock, then with the New Labour coalition he subsequently assembled under the apparent leadership of Tony Blair. At the core of the modernisation project is the very simple idea that it is possible to create at any rate an illusion of progress by repudiating core party supporters and ideological positions. It took many years for the Conservatives to copy this technique. Michael Portillo endeavoured to put it to work inside the Tory Party after the general election landslide of 2001, but was defeated by an unforeseen backwoods revolt under the eccentric captaincy of Iain Duncan Smith. David Cameron is the first outright moderniser to lead the Conservative Party, just as Tony Blair was the first outright moderniser to lead the Labour Party. This is what Cameron surely meant when, very early on in his leadership, he told a group of newspaper executives that he was the 'heir to Blair'. Many of Cameron's closest political friends, such as Benjamin Wegg-Prosser, the former Downing Street director of strategic communications, and the Downing Street press officer Tim Allan, come from the Blair inner circle. Allan gave private strategic advice to Tory modernisers during the 2005 election. Both men are likely to emerge as informal advisers to Cameron once in government. Cameron has far more in common with either of those two skilled Westminster operatives than with any of his backbenchers.

So Cameron embodies a contradiction. On the one hand the Tory leader is a throwback to political leadership by the traditional landed class. On the other hand he is an assiduous student of Peter Mandelson, the inventor of British political modernisation.

The twin identities will always struggle inside him. Insofar as he is a member of the British Establishment, the idea of duty, a concept that has partly been lost in recent decades, will come naturally to Cameron. He will seek to reclaim what the political philosopher David Marquand has fruitfully labelled the 'public domain'. Modernisers, in sharp contrast, do not really understand or admire this proposition. They have consistently been scornful of the traditional British governing methodology, and in particular deeply contemptuous of the ideals of service and fastidiousness

embodied in the traditional British public servant. Modernisation has determined (among other things) the capture of many areas of state activity by the businessmen through outright privatisation, the private finance initiative and the ubiquitous use of management consultants to address problems of public sector management. Bonuses, once a phenomenon confined to the City of London, have become a significant feature of civil service remuneration. Modernisers have uncritically accepted the neo-liberal economic settlement which has formed the base for economic policy-making from Thatcher to Gordon Brown. Cameron appears to accept almost all of these modernising insights, and will try to build on Blairite public service reforms in his first years in government.

Cameron the Establishment figure is an entirely different matter. He will be reverential of traditional institutions like the monarchy, parliament, the Anglican Church, the civil service, the trade unions and the armed forces. As Matt Beech observes in his essay, Cameron 'is rooted in institutions – institutions to which he ascribes value: Eton College; Oxford University; and the Conservative Party'. But Cameron the moderniser will be automatically scornful of all these institutions. The Establishment Cameron would aim to strengthen civil society: Cameron the moderniser would build up the strength of the centre and capture or destroy alternative power bases.

The Establishment Cameron and the modernising Cameron are therefore at war with one another. They represent rival aspects within his political and intellectual formation. Each identity will tend to provide a contradictory solution to any given problem. It is unlikely that this battle between the two sides of Cameron's personality will ever be resolved. How Cameron resolves this conflict will determine the nature of the government he leads. At this early stage of his political career – and from the narrow and frequently misleading vantage point of opposition – the following tentative observations can be made.

In terms of technique Cameron is a moderniser. This means that he is a consumer of the most advanced political technology. He devours the findings of focus groups and accepts the core modernising strategy of triangulation – the opportunistic adoption of political positions for situational advantage. His speeches are littered with short sentences and verbless grammatical formulations. This arid literary style, apparently clear but in reality designed to manipulate, is a hallmark of the modernisation movement and contrasts with the more thoughtful and homely style of discourse used during the period of Establishment rule.

Cameron has also repudiated the modest and unobtrusive leadership style of the British Establishment, which had been based on the ancient

ideal of gentlemanly conduct. This mode was challenged first by Margaret Thatcher, then repudiated wholesale by Tony Blair, Britain's first celebrity prime minister. Blair evolved an alternative mode, founded on knowingness, ostentation and the deliberate collapse of long-established dividing lines between public and private. Indeed Tony Blair's fusion of the two spheres represented what was in effect a return to pre-modern modes of political leadership in which the sovereign's entire life took place in full public view. It is likely that Cameron will pursue this methodology even more remorselessly and with yet greater success than Tony Blair. The Tory leader, even more than Tony Blair, has lived out his private life in public. This is why the death of his son Ivan, though a matter of intense private tragedy, was also an event of first rate political importance.

Certain consequences of this new type of politics have already become obvious: others are not yet so clear. David Cameron's wife Samantha, daughter of Sir Reggie Sheffield Bt, is destined to become an iconic national and international figure, eclipsing over time the mesmerising public presence even of Carla Bruni, wife of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The Camerons will become one of the most glamorous power couples in world politics.

Cool political utility lies behind this apparently transient and insubstantial modernising political methodology. A celebrity party leader is able to rise far above the constraints of conventional party machines or cabinet government. He can outshine political rivals by appealing over the heads of party and parliament and direct to the voter. This nakedly populist method sits uncomfortably with traditional governing structures. Once in office David Cameron is likely to find it irresistible.

But this not all there is to David Cameron. Born into the ruling class, educated at Eton and taught politics at Oxford University by the constitutional historian Vernon Bogdanor, Cameron has a surer grip of the theory of British government than any prime minister since Harold Wilson. Once elected Tory leader, he was quick to attack the centralised, top-down governing technique which Tony Blair introduced in 1997 and which has been sustained by Gordon Brown since the handover of power in 2007.

Cameron has frequently reasserted the primacy of cabinet government and supported certain measures (such as secret votes to elect chairmen of Commons select committees) which will strengthen the legislature against the executive. Right from the start Cameron has stressed the need to weaken the state and strengthen civil society. He has pledged to restore the independence of institutions and voluntary organisations which have

been captured by the government over the past two decades. He has also promised to devolve power from the centre to localities.

Meanwhile Cameron has strongly criticised the hyperactive model which has been one of the core features of the modernising system. Cameron has some of the attributes of a Tory in the tradition of Michael Oakeshott. That means that he does not believe in the ability of the state to pursue grand projects of social change and regeneration.

So Cameron is torn between two opposite systems: the modernising dogma and frenzied activity driven from the centre, and his inherited Tory scepticism about the range and functions of the state. So far Cameron's public statements, in particularly his strong defence of civil society and decentralisation, have been at war with his actions. He has led the Tory Party from the centre, refused to tolerate internal dissent, showed a brilliant feel for publicity, and completely overshadowed all but a handful of rival spokesmen at the top of the Conservative Party. Cameron does not merely welcome the modernising technology he has copied from New Labour, but also New Labour's neo-liberal analysis. The achievement of this brilliant volume of essays, the first really well-informed analysis of Tory policy at the end of the New Labour era, is to show that the incoming Tory leader would represent continuity more than change.

David Cameron does not challenge the core principle of British foreign policy under New Labour, i.e. allegiance at all costs to the United States of America. Nor is there any fresh analysis on defence. Indeed Cameron's early 2009 reshuffle left in place Liam Fox, best known for his impeccable connections with the now discredited neo-conservative faction which surrounded George W. Bush, as defence spokesman. It is admittedly the case that Cameron will enter Downing Street as a euro-sceptic. However pragmatism will almost certainly pull him towards the centre ground, just as force of circumstance obliged Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to betray their own pro-European rhetoric. Simon Griffith's essay shows how Cameron fully supports engaging the New Labour vision on public services.

The contributors to this volume reflect Cameron's own contradictions in their analysis of Tory policy towards the welfare state. Simon Lee rightly responds to the poetry and imaginative reach of Cameron's idea of the 'Broken Society'. But Stephen Driver notes the enormous practical difficulties in using the voluntary sector as a solution to intractable social problems, while Philip Lynch demonstrates how British membership of the European Union will act as a constant drag on David Cameron's attempts at change. Only in issues of secondary political importance,

above the environment, do the Cameron Tories diverge in a tangible way from the New Labour analysis. It remains to be seen whether the Tory flirtation with green voters can be sustained for long in office.

Yet there have been certain signs this year that David Cameron's political identity is starting to change. At the start of 2009 he began to widen his circle beyond the small group of Tory modernisers who placed him in power four years earlier. One sign of this was the appointment of former Chancellor Ken Clarke to the shadow cabinet in a powerful blow to the authority of David Cameron's friend and guru George Osborne, the shadow chancellor. Another sign was his private dinner with Margaret Thatcher and a group of her loyal supporters at the Goring Hotel. He could never have dared do this during the early years of his leadership when he was trying to change the Tory Party image. This series of rapprochements with the *ancien régime* suggests that Cameron is slowly turning back into a more traditional type of Tory leader.

The sheer scale and severity of the economic crisis is also forcing Cameron to become a different kind of leader. In his early years David Cameron and George Osborne's modernising analysis caused them to adopt a strategy of adopting New Labour's economic policies. As Simon Lee shows in an original and eye-opening essay, the severity of slump has already forced Cameron to abandon his early allegiance to governing spending targets. Changed circumstances will now force Cameron to take an axe to spending – just as Margaret Thatcher did in 1979. Mass unemployment, civil unrest, financial instability and structural deficit of approaching £100 billion may all lie ahead. 42 year old David Cameron will define himself by how he confronts these disparate, unexpected and perhaps insoluble problems.

# The Centre for British Politics

The Centre for British Politics is a research centre that promotes the study of British Politics; in particular, it conducts research on British political parties, their ideologies and their public policy. It was designed to unify the research interests of Philip Norton, Simon Lee, Richard Woodward and Matt Beech, thereby creating a research cluster with a British Politics identity and collaborative ethic in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Hull. The establishment of the Centre for British Politics reinforces the tradition of teaching and research in the area of British Government and Politics that the Department has had for over 30 years. The Centre for British Politics strives to produce internationally renowned research in the form of monographs, edited volumes and articles in peer-reviewed journals. It is represented in this volume by Philip Norton, Simon Lee and Matt Beech.

This book was inspired by a symposium of the Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull on 24–25 September 2008. The ‘David Cameron and the Conservatives’ symposium evaluated developments in the Conservative Party’s ideology, policy, and strategy since David Cameron’s election as Conservative Party leader in December 2005. The event brought together some of the key thinkers in this area.

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We have been greatly fortunate to have as contributors a team of first rate scholars who made the 'David Cameron and the Conservatives' symposium, 24–25 September 2008 at the University of Hull a pleasure to participate in. We are also particularly grateful to Peter Osborne for agreeing to write the foreword to this book. We would like to thank the publisher and especially Amy Lankester-Owen for commissioning this project, Alison Howson for overseeing it, and Gemma d'Arcy Hughes and Katherine Bullas for their work in bringing the book through to publication. The authors are also grateful to Oliver Howard and Ray Addicott for their work on the manuscript.

Finally, Matt as ever would like to thank his wife Claire, for her continued support. Simon's contribution would not have been possible without the love and support of Helen McGarry.

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**Philip Norton** [Lord Norton of Louth] is Professor of Government and Director of the Centre for Legislative Studies at the University of Hull. He is the author or editor of 27 books covering British politics, the constitution, the Conservative Party, parliament and legislatures in comparative perspective. He was elevated to the peerage in 1998. He chaired the Conservative Party's Commission to strengthen parliament and has served as chairman of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution.

**Peter Osborne** is a journalist, author and commentator. He is a political columnist for the *Daily Mail* and was Political Editor of the *Spectator* from 2001 to 2006. He is the author of *The Rise of Political Lying; Alastair Campbell: New Labour and the Rise of the Media Class* and, in a different vein, a biography of the cricketer Basil D'Oliveira (for which he won the William Hill Sports Book of the Year in 2004). His most recent book, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, was published in September 2007.

# 1

## Introduction: David Cameron's Political Challenges

*Simon Lee*

When David Cameron was elected to the leadership of the Conservative Party in December 2005, barely seven months had passed since his party had suffered its third consecutive general election defeat. Cameron found himself confronting six major political and personal challenges. First, in electoral terms, his four immediate predecessors – John Major, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard – had delivered three consecutive general election defeats. Despite having been in opposition for more than eight years, there was little evidence that the Conservative Party had convinced a disenchanted and highly sceptical electorate that it could offer them a better alternative to New Labour's programme of political, economic and social renewal. Second, in ideological terms, the party appeared to have lost the battle of ideas decisively to New Labour's modernization project. Third, in policy terms, the Conservative Party had failed to identify a policy agenda that would resonate with the British electorate. It had also failed to resolve the extent to which there would need to be continuity with or departure from the legacy of Thatcherism.

Fourth, in organizational terms, the party possessed a declining and ageing membership, and a parliamentary party with little representation of women or ethnic minorities and over-representation of public school-educated, white middle-class Englishmen-traits shared by the majority of constituency parties. It had also faced electoral oblivion in Scotland and Wales at the three previous general elections, and seen its vote decline in the five northern-most English regions at the 2005 general election.

Theresa May, a recent Conservative Party Chairman, had described her party as 'the nasty party' (May, 2002), a label which it had found difficult to dislodge. Fifth, in personal terms, the Conservative Party had failed to find politicians who could provide a credible challenge to the polished double act of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, despite their own well-publicized rivalry. Sixth, in financial terms, the Conservative Party remained heavily dependent upon funding from a limited number of rich individuals, laying it open to the charge that it had failed to cast off the sleaze that had so damaged the party during the Major government.

The Conservative Party's prospects of not suffering a fourth consecutive general election defeat would depend critically upon whether David Cameron could succeed, where his four predecessors had failed, by providing the necessary leadership and vision to identify Conservative ideas, policies and an electoral strategy, built to last, which could meet each of these six challenges. This book provides an evaluation of how the Conservative Party has performed under the leadership of David Cameron to meet those challenges. This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of Cameron's approach to his task before summarizing the contributions of our team of authors. Although, at the time of researching and writing the book, there were still a possible 18 months to go before the next general election, already Cameron had been leader of his party for three years. Consequently, it was possible for a detailed scrutiny of his leadership, ideas, policies and strategy to be undertaken.

### **Cameron's electoral challenge: smelling the coffee**

The Conservative Party is not accustomed to spending long periods in opposition, let alone to suffering three consecutive general election defeats. Indeed, the twentieth century had been depicted as 'The Conservative Century', because the party had held office for more than twice as long as its political opponents (Seldon and Ball, 1994). At general elections from 1918 to 2005, the Conservative Party was the largest political party on 14 occasions, with the best post-war result in 1983, when it won 397 seats. However, in 1997, the Conservatives had won 165 seats, the worst performance since 1906, and 9.6 million votes, their lowest total since 1929. Indeed, the party's share of 30.7 per cent of the vote was its lowest since 1832. Not a single seat was won in Wales or Scotland. In 2001, the Conservatives won 8.36 million votes, 31.7 per cent of the vote, and just 166 seats. This was an increase in the share of the vote of only 1.0 per cent, with one additional seat won. Not a single seat was won in Wales, and only one won in Scotland. On 5 May 2005, the Conservative

Party won only 8.8 million votes and 198 seats, or 32.4 per cent of the total, and up only 0.7 per cent on 2001. Of its 198 seats (31 per cent of the total at Westminster), 194 or 98 per cent of the total were won in England, an increase of 29 seats and a 0.5 per cent rise in the votes, and 65,000 more votes than won by the Labour Party in England. However, the Conservatives' share of the vote in the four northern-most regions of England actually fell. Indeed, the total number of votes it won in the United Kingdom was its fewest in post-war general elections, with the exception of 2001 (Tetteh, 2008a).

Michael Howard greeted his party's third consecutive general election defeat, unprecedented in modern British political history, by expressing his pride in the campaign that had been fought. Indeed, he proclaimed confidently that the Conservatives had taken 'a significant step towards our recovery' (Howard, 2005). The implication of his statement was clear. One more heave would be sufficient to dislodge New Labour at the next general election. Others did not share Howard's optimism, believing that, as had been the case following previous Conservative defeats in 1945, 1966 and 1974, a more fundamental review of party ideology, policy and strategy might yet be required. One of the most important contributions to this debate came from the former Conservative Party Treasurer, Lord Michael Ashcroft. He issued a vehement rallying cry for the Conservatives to heed the wake-up call from the electorate and 'smell the coffee' (Ashcroft, 2005). Ashcroft had already attracted personal opprobrium from sections of the media sympathetic to the Blair government because he had provided substantial funds to the Conservatives to target winnable seats in marginal constituencies. He was soon attracting similar sentiments from sections of his own party because his detailed study of public opinion during the 2005 general election campaign did not pull any punches. Among its principal findings, the study found the Conservative Party to be out of touch with the attitudes to contemporary social and cultural issues of ordinary people. The party was also 'thought less likely than their opponents to care about ordinary people's problems, share the values of voters or deliver what they promised. Majorities in key marginal seats thought that the party was out of touch, had failed to learn from its mistakes, cared more about the well-off than have-nots, and did not stand for opportunity for all.' Indeed, voters actually possessed 'a more negative view of the Conservative Party at the end of the campaign than they did at the beginning' (Ashcroft, 2005: 3).

If this was not damning enough in its own right as a verdict upon Michael Howard's leadership and David Cameron's role as policy coordinator, Ashcroft's study also found that 'To the extent that the

party had identified concerns that people shared, it had failed to articulate solutions, and on the issues that mattered most to people, Labour's lead remained unassailable – or at least, unassailed.' In short, Ashcroft concluded that 'The Conservative Party's problem is its brand', which was not associated with 'opportunity for all, or economic competence, or the delivery of good public services, or with looking after the less fortunate, or with life in modern Britain' (Ashcroft, 2005: 4). Above all, to Ashcroft it was evident that 'To the extent that the voters who rejected us in 2005 associate the Conservative Party with anything at all it is with the past, with policies for the privileged few and with lack of leadership. We cannot hope to win a general election while this is how we are seen by people who should be our supporters' (Ashcroft, 2005: 4).

As a consequence of these damaging revelations about public opinion of the Conservative Party, Ashcroft identified five clear lessons for the party to learn, irrespective of who was chosen to succeed Michael Howard as leader. First, party resources must be targeted more effectively. Second, campaigns must be fought hardest 'on the things that matter most to people, rather than things we hope can be made to matter'. Third, given the number of parties competing for votes, Labour's unpopularity could not be assumed to translate automatically into support for the Conservatives. Fourth, any appeal to the conservative or reactionary instincts of people would be at the expense of attracting the real core vote and the support of minority communities. Fifth, to avoid the party becoming a rump, it must recreate the real core vote among 'the election-winning coalition of professionals, women, and aspirational voters' (Ashcroft, 2005: 5). However, as a measure of the scale of the challenge confronting the successor to Michael Howard, to persuade the Conservative Party of the need to change to win, Ashcroft's survey had also found that while only 38 per cent of voters thought the Conservative Party was actually making progress and on the right track to return to power before long, no fewer than 79 per cent of Conservatives thought this was case. Despite an unprecedented eight years of opposition for the modern Conservative Party and three consecutive general election defeats, many Conservatives were still refusing to face up to the need for substantive change in their party's ideas, policies and strategy.

### **Cameron's campaign challenge: change to win**

Despite this unpromising political inheritance, both during the campaign for the Conservative Party leadership and in the months immediately following his election, David Cameron appeared to approach the task

confronting him with a confident optimism that seemed to defy his party's position on the opposition benches. That confidence appeared to flow from an analysis of modern British politics, shared with George Osborne, the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and Cameron's campaign manager. Historically, the development of Conservative Party ideology, policy and electoral strategy, in the wake of electoral defeat, had presented something of a paradox. On the one hand, British conservatism historically had stood for a limited number of core tenets, notably the maintenance of social order, the defence of private property and the rule of law, an organic society and orderly change, and a limited role for the state (Seldon and Snowdon, 2001). The Conservative Party had not been a pressure group for capitalism (Gilmour, 1978). On the other hand, ever since the establishment by Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph of the Centre for Policy Studies in 1974, the Conservative Party had sought to win the battle of ideas by abandoning the social democratic middle ground, and occupying instead the 'common ground' in British politics. This common ground entailed a new agenda, embracing the moral and material benefits of the market, and a politics founded upon a descending hierarchy of 'values, aspiration, understanding, policies'. The common ground was that political territory occupied by politicians aspiring to transform the expectations of government in pursuit of prosperity, low inflation, private profit and investment, 'housing choice, decent education, less dependency, less crime' and 'freedom within the law to run our own lives' (Joseph, 1976a: 27–33).

From May 1979 to April 1992, the Conservative Party's success in occupying the common ground, by building institutions for the market, through policies such as privatization, deregulation and liberalization, had enabled it to secure four consecutive general election victories. The Conservative Party's traditional core electorate had been joined by a new generation of aspirational voters, keen to share in the property-owning, share-owning democracy of Thatcher's popular capitalism. Thereafter, John Major, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard had all struggled and ultimately failed to identify a means of reoccupying the common ground. In seeking to consolidate and rally the party's core vote, each leader had alienated the floating voters who had deserted en masse to New Labour in 1997, and not returned to the Conservatives thereafter.

David Cameron and George Osborne's route out of this political and policy conundrum was simple. Their analysis had concluded that, despite its consecutive general election defeats, the Conservative Party had actually won the vital battle of ideas. Indeed, the very

election of Tony Blair and the creation of the New Labour project were themselves the ultimate evidence of that Conservative ideological triumph. New Labour's "'Social justice and economic efficiency" are the common ground of British politics' (Cameron, 2006a). Therefore, the task confronting the Conservative Party was straightforward. Modern conservatism simply had to come to terms with that triumph, and its previous problem in eight years of opposition of not knowing how to deal with it (Cameron, 2006a).

In launching his leadership bid on 29 September 2005, Cameron dismissed his relative youth and parliamentary inexperience as obstacles to his candidacy. In being equally dismissive of the 'one more heave' approach to winning the next general election, upon the back of New Labour's unpopularity or faltering economic performance, Cameron identified the key obstacle to electoral success as the absence of popular trust in the Conservative Party. The party had to change, but this would entail something more fundamental than mere changes in organization or presentation. The essential task was ideological, namely 'to explain to people what it means to be a Conservative in 2005' and how Conservative principles would make a difference in future. Cameron identified a series of ideas that illustrated his thesis. First, the party's commitment to personal responsibility should mean freedom to choose, but 'must not mean selfish individualism because there was "a we in politics as well as a me"'. Second, support for the family to redress what he portrayed as 'an increasingly atomized society' would mean 'a shared responsibility among individuals and families, government and business'. Third, a commitment to lower taxes should mean a commitment to sharing the proceeds of economic growth 'between better public services on the one hand and lower taxes on the other hand'. Fourth, in identifying the idea of limited government, Cameron stated that he desperately wanted 'the State to be our servant and not our master' but that rolling back its frontiers must mean 'a whole new compact with the voluntary sector and social enterprises' which would enable social problems to be tackled but without leaving behind the weak and defenceless (Cameron, 2005a).

From the outset, Cameron and Osborne built their conception of modern Conservatism and their political strategy for reviving their party's political fortunes upon the need for change. Throughout his leadership campaign, Cameron was adamant about the direction his party should take. For the Blair era to end, the Conservative Party would have to change. The three choices confronting Conservative MPs and ordinary party members in the leadership contest were: to move to the right (with David Davis), or fight from the centre ground (with Cameron); to 'stick to

our core vote comfort zone' (with Davis), or 'reach out' (with Cameron); and to 'repeat the mistakes of the past' (with Davis), or 'change to win the future' (with Cameron) (Cameron, 2005b).

In his keynote speech to the Conservative Party conference, which proved a decisive moment in the campaign given David Davis' own faltering performance, and the lukewarm reception the latter received both from the party faithful and the media, Cameron chose the theme 'Change to Win'. Cameron began by reminding his audience that their party had lost to a government that had made a litany of mistakes and 'won fewer votes than any in history'. No comfort could be taken in 'solid, but slow progress'. The government had failed, but so had the Conservative Party. The answer was not to move to the right, because that would turn the Conservatives 'into a fringe party, never able to challenge for government again'. The party must recognize that it was 'in third place amongst under 35s', had lost support amongst women, while public servants no longer thought the party was 'on their side'. To reverse these trends, there would have to be change and modernization of the party's 'culture and attitudes and identity'. This could not be 'some slick re-branding exercise', but had to be 'fundamental change', not least of the party's culture 'so we look feel, think and behave like a completely new organization'. The task would be 'to build together a new generation of Conservatives'; 'to switch a new generation on to Conservative ideas'; and to dream 'a new generation of Conservative dreams'. In short, the party should commit itself to 'a Modern Compassionate Conservatism', which would lead 'a new generation of social entrepreneurs tackling this country's most profound social problems' and 'a new generation of business men and women who are taking on the world, creating the wealth and opportunity for our future' (Cameron, 2005c).

### **Cameron's organizational challenge: a positive action plan**

In the immediate aftermath of his election as Conservative Party leader, David Cameron identified the task confronting his party as being to 'give to this country a modern and compassionate conservatism'. Having campaigned on the theme of the need to change to win, the Conservative Party would now change. First, it would change the way the party looked. The fact that nine out of ten Conservative MPs were white men had led to 'a scandalous under-representation of women'. That would change. Second, the party would change the way it felt, so that there was 'No more grumbling about modern Britain'. Third, the party would change the way it thought, so that it didn't just talk about tackling problems, but



actually developed all of the right ideas. Fourth, the party would change the way it behaved, to end ‘the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster’ name calling and point scoring, by working with the government when it did the right thing, and calling it to account when it didn’t and was wrong (Cameron, 2005d).

All of these changes would be necessary to address the big challenges confronting the United Kingdom, namely economic competitiveness, reform of the public services, the quality of life, national and international security, and, above all, ‘social action to ensure social justice, and a stronger society’. This would entail mending ‘our broken society’ by first recognizing ‘There is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same thing as the state’, and then sweeping away New Labour’s ‘command and control state, the quangos, the bureaucracy, the regional government’ (Cameron, 2005d).

One week later, Cameron reaffirmed his commitment to change by reminding his party that because he had won a convincing victory in the leadership contest, he now possessed ‘a clear mandate to make that change’. That mandate included the under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people within the Conservative parliamentary party. As an example, Cameron cited the fact that the 17 women MPs in the current parliamentary party was only four more in total than in 1932. Women accounted for only 6 per cent of the new 2005 intake of Conservative MPs, and there were only six women candidates in the top fifty winnable seats. Similarly, only 6 per cent of Conservative candidates were from ethnic minorities. To create ‘a balanced party’, Cameron announced ‘a positive action plan’, composed of five ‘decisive steps’ to dramatically increase the number of women, black and minority ethnic Conservative MPs.

First, all candidate selections would be frozen with immediate effect, until a new system of selection had been established which guaranteed ‘increased diversity, fairness and meritocracy’. Second, a priority list of ‘our best and brightest’ would be drawn up by the Party Board’s Committee on Candidates from the existing candidate list, but at least half the people on it would be women and a significant proportion would be disabled or ethnic minority candidates. In future, all target and Conservative-held seats would be expected to select from it. Third, after three months of selections, there would be a review of progress, with further action taken if necessary. Fourth, and led by Theresa May and Bernard Jenkin, the Deputy Chairman for Candidates, there would be an intensive programme of headhunting for new women, black and minority ethnic candidates, supported by a mentoring programme,

and supplemented in turn by prepared guidance to local constituency associations 'to help them understand the need for change'. Fifth, to engage the local community in the candidate selection process, non-party members would be expected to be involved in candidate selection through either a panel of local community stakeholders, or an open or closed primary system (Cameron, 2005e).

To transform the Conservative Party's policy agenda, Cameron announced the creation of six policy groups to address the six major challenges Cameron believed to be confronting the United Kingdom. The groups would address social justice; the quality of life; globalization and global poverty; national and international security; economic competitiveness; and public service improvement. They would be given 18 months to report and to engender 'the most exciting and creative 18 months of political discussion this country has ever seen' (Cameron, 2005e). However, despite this highly optimistic prediction of the policy groups' likely impact, which in the event proved to be a gross exaggeration, none of their recommendations would be binding upon the shadow cabinet. For all of his past and subsequent critique of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as centralizing, control freaks, Cameron was keeping tight central control over the formulation of the agenda of modern compassionate conservatism.

### **Cameron's ideological and policy challenge: built to last?**

When Tony Blair had become Labour Party leader in June 1994, he had wasted little time in rewriting his party's archaic 1918 constitution, including its Clause Four definition of socialism. To convince a sceptical British electorate that the Labour Party really had changed its aspirations, Blair's New Labour project began by redefining the Labour Party's aims and values themselves, before undertaking major revisions of the party's economic and social policy agenda. In a similar vein, to convince voters that the Conservative Party was equally committed to change, within three months of becoming leader of his party, Cameron had drawn up *Built to Last: The Aims and Values of the Conservative Party*, and sought the approval of the party's membership for the statement of aims and values. *Built to Last* was intended to provide the foundation upon which the policies and agenda of Cameron's modern compassionate conservatism could be constructed. In his foreword, Cameron made two major claims. First, that when confronted by changing economic, environmental, social and security challenges, at home and abroad, the 'old answers' provided by top-down government and monolithic, unreformed public services