

# Foreword

This book is not an account of the Conservative Party's achievements in government, or a compendium of its policies. Others will produce that, and there is a strong story to tell. Conservatives can be proud of what has been achieved by a government that inherited from Labour the worst deficit in peacetime history: bringing spending under control and restoring economic growth; capping welfare; reforming schools.

Instead, the aim of this book is to reflect on the challenges facing this country, and suggest how the next Conservative government should apply its principles to deal with them.

A general election will soon be held. It is easy to see the dangers of Labour forming the next government, with the inevitable undoing of our achievement in rescuing the country's economic fortunes. We must not let that happen. And a major part of the agenda for the next Conservative government is clear: a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU within three years, and continuing action to deal with the deficit.

But what else? Conservatives yearn for majority government; to be able to kick the Liberal Democrats all the way down Whitehall. Now we must be clear about what we would do with this power.

It has been said that the Conservative Party exists to hold power, as though this could license an administration without purpose. It could not. Conservatism exists, as Quintin Hogg wrote, 'for the sake of promoting the good of the country'.<sup>1</sup> But so, he noted, do

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<sup>1</sup> *The Case for Conservatism*, 1947



other parties. We therefore have to explain the good we wish to do, why our vision is better, and why it is more likely to succeed than that of others.

It is also said that, after the defeat of socialism, we have entered a post-ideological age, in which voters care little for the claims of capitalism against collective provision, but simply wish to see the country run well. Yet there are enduring ideological differences fundamental to the choice facing the public. The left's blind faith in the state allowed school standards to fall unchecked; it promoted generations of welfarism that trapped the weakest in poverty; it caused the excessive public spending that brought this country to the edge of bankruptcy.

If a previous Labour leader, Tony Blair, attempted to persuade his party that collective provision could not endure, his current successor has no such mission. Ed Miliband is the most left-wing Labour leader since Michael Foot: hostile to markets in the private sector, even more so to those in public services; unrepentant in his support for higher spending, taxation and borrowing; unreconstructed in his support for the welfare state. He supports deeper European integration and opposes a referendum on the EU. There is indeed an ideological choice at the next election, and we must frame it clearly.

It will not be enough, however, to point to the dangers of a Labour government, real though they are. We must also set out our stall. That requires us to assess the problems facing the country, and say how we will fix them. Today, in an age of disillusionment with politics, the greatest danger lies in saying only what we think the public want to hear. People are not only deaf to promises without conviction, they deeply mistrust them. It is not just our responsibility to say what we believe, it is the only way to win a hearing.

Our case should be that Britain is facing serious challenges that conservatism is best placed to meet. Only if we continue to fix the economy and ensure global competitiveness will living standards be protected. This requires much more than standing still and managing



public services well. With an ageing population, rising costs and ever higher public expectations, nothing less than a transformation of the welfare state and public services is needed.

In this book, I argue that conservatism does not apply a single ideology to contemporary problems. As John Buchan said, Conservatism is ‘above all things a spirit not an abstract doctrine’.<sup>2</sup> We can identify principles that should guide us as we shape a modern Conservative agenda. But we must not repeat our opponents’ mistakes and claim that a single doctrine can right every wrong.

To take just one example, we need more houses; it is clearly right to extend opportunity. But we must also protect the countryside. This reflects the tension which exists in so many policy choices because of the rival claims of Conservative principles.

If we ignore the failures of the planning system, we will fail a generation for whom property ownership is becoming an ever more distant dream. But if we lazily conclude that planning restrictions simply need tearing up, we will fail future generations by destroying the national asset of the countryside. The Conservative solution will acknowledge the force of both claims. It will turn an eye to people’s needs now, and propose reforms, while being sensitive to the reasons that saw the introduction of planning controls in the first place.

The Conservative writer Graeme Archer eloquently expressed the importance of this tension in the Conservative condition, describing himself as ‘a mixture of gloom for what has gone and optimism for the future ... Two horses pull the Tory chariot: the trick is not to allow either to pull us out of kilter.’<sup>3</sup>

The most powerful moments in the most recent chapter of our party’s history have been when we have re-told Conservative truths. When David Cameron spoke of aspiration; when George Osborne liberated pensions; when Iain Duncan Smith challenged welfarism

2 Preface to A. Bryant, *The Spirit of Conservatism* (1929), p. vii, quoted in *Ideologies of Conservatism*, E. H. H. Green, 2002

3 Article on ConservativeHome, 14 August 2014



or when Michael Gove drove through education reforms, our hearts beat faster, not because we knew that these policies were right, but because they spoke to our core beliefs. Holding to Conservative ideals, it turns out, energises our party and is popular in the country. As my colleague David Willetts, author of an earlier edition of *Why Vote Conservative* and a leading thinker about modern conservatism, has said, 'Mrs Thatcher's government showed that the Conservative enjoys the luxury of being able to stick to his principles knowing that they also work in practice.'<sup>4</sup>

It was a new incarnation of conservatism, more than three decades ago, which rescued this country from what some thought was terminal decline. Today's economic and political challenges are different, but equally profound. In the age of fierce globalisation, no country has an entitlement to success. But if we have the courage to take the right decisions now; if we are willing to apply our principles, a regeneration of conservatism can once again ensure Britain's prosperity.



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4 *Modern Conservatism*, 1992

