CHAPTER 5

Political ideas: the major parties

Bill Jones

> "At a time of febrile instability, anyone who tells you that anything is settled for 'a generation' is going to be made to look like a complete idiot. Nothing is settled for five minutes"
>
> Andrew Rawnsley, *The Observer*, 19th March 2017

Learning objectives

- To explain the provenance of Conservatism and the ideology of capitalist free enterprise, to explain the difference between 'one nation' and ***neo-liberal*** Conservatism and to assess the impact of Margaret Thatcher on her party's ideas.
- To trace the origins of Labour thinking to the rejection of nineteenth-century **capitalism**, to describe its maturing into corporate socialism and **revisionism** plus the left-wing dissent of the 1970s and 1980s and to analyse the impact of Labour's rapid move into the centre and the apparent embrace of neo-Thatcherite and communitarian ideas by Tony Blair. Further, to sketch in some of the changes in Labour thinking since its defeat at the 2010 election and again in 2015.
- To sum up the message of the Liberal Party over the years, including its alliance with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and evolution into the Liberal Democrats.
- To assess the impact of UKIP and, in turn, Brexit, on party positions.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, some commentators felt that the two major political parties in Britain were 'converging' ideologically. Daniel Bell, the American sociologist, wrote of 'the end of ideology', and in the 1970s, a postwar 'consensus' was discerned between the two parties on the desirability of a welfare state and a mixed economy. Britain's relative economic decline inclined both parties to adopt more radical remedies that drew on their ideological roots. Margaret Thatcher swung the Conservatives violently to the right, while Labour went radically to the left in the early 1980s. Once Thatcher had gone in 1990, John Major adopted a less overtly ideological stance, while Labour, following the failed experiment of Michael Foot as leader (1981–3), successively under Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair moved rapidly into the centre. This chapter analyses the evolution of the ideas of the major parties and brings up to date their most recent changes.

The Conservative Party

Source: Courtesy of the Conservative Party (www.conservatives.com)

Key elements of Conservatism

Lord Hailsham (1959) has described 'Conservatism' as not so much a philosophy as an 'attitude'. However, it is possible to discern a number of key tenets on which Conservative policies have been based:

1. *The purpose of politics is social and political harmony*: Conservatives have traditionally believed that politics is about enabling people to become what they are or what they wish to be. They also believe in a balance, a harmony in society, a measured **pragmatism** that has always kept options open. Like Edmund Burke, they have tended to believe that 'all government . . . is founded on compromise' (Hailsham 1959: 21).
2. *Human nature is imperfect and corruptible*: This quasi-religious notion of 'original sin' lies at the heart of Conservatism, leading its supporters to doubt the altruism of humankind beyond close family, to perceive most people as more interested in taking than giving and to see them as fairly easy to corrupt without the external discipline of strong government and other social forces.
3. *The rule of law is the basis of all freedom*: Law restricts freedom, yet without it, there would be no freedom at all. This is because without limitations to actions motivated by humankind's selfish and aggressive nature, the consequence would be anarchic chaos. Limiting freedom via the law is therefore the basis of freedom. It follows that accepting the authority of the law is the precondition of all liberty.
4. *Social institutions create a sense of society and nation*: Social and political institutions help to bind together imperfect human beings in *society*. Living together constructively and happily is an art, and this has to be learned. At the heart of the learning process lies the family and the institution of marriage. The royal family, Conservatives used to believe (less so now perhaps), provides an idealised and unifying 'micro-model'. At the macro level is the idea of the 'nation', ultimately a cause worth dying for.
5. *Foreign policy is the pursuit of state interests in an anarchic world*: States exhibit all the dangerous characteristics of individuals plus a few even more unpleasant ones of their own. A judicious defence of national interests, advise Conservatives, is the best guide for any country in the jungle of international relations.
6. *Liberty is the highest political end*: Individuals need freedom to develop their own personalities and create their own destinies. Conservatives agree with J.S. Mill that this should entail freedom from oppression by others. Such freedom should be limited only when it begins to encroach upon the liberty of others. It should not embrace the 'levelling' of wealth, as advocated by socialists, as the redistribution would be imposed, tyrannically, upon a reluctant population by the state (see also Chapter 1).
7. *Government through checks and balances*: 'Political liberty', said Tory Lord Chancellor Lord Hailsham, 'is nothing else than the diffusion of power' (Hailsham 1959: 74). This means in practice institutions that divide power between them, with all having a measure of independence, thus preventing any single arm of government from being over-mighty.
8. *Property*: Conservatives, like David Hume, believe that the right to property is the 'first principle of justice' on which the 'peace and security of human society entirely depend'. Norton and Aughey (1981) take this further, arguing that owning property is in itself an 'education. It enlightens the citizens in the value of stability and shows that the security of small property depends upon the security of all property' (34). The Conservative policy of selling council houses reflected this belief in that it is assumed that people will cherish their houses more once they enjoy personal ownership.
9. *Equality of opportunity but not of result*: Conservatives believe everyone should have the same opportunity to better themselves. Some will be more able or more motivated and will achieve more and accumulate more property. Thus, an unequal distribution of wealth reflects a naturally unequal distribution of ability. Norton and Aughey (1981) maintain that the party is fundamentally concerned with justifying inequality in a way that 'conserves a hierarchy of wealth and power and make[s] it intelligible to democracy' (47). To do this, Conservatives argue that inequality is necessary to maintain incentives and make the economy work; equality of reward would reward the lazy as much as the industrious.
10. *One nation*: Benjamin Disraeli, the famous nineteenth-century Conservative Prime Minister, added a new element to his party's philosophy by criticising the 'two nations' in Britain, the rich and the poor. He advocated an alliance between the aristocracy and the lower orders to create one nation. His advice was controversial and has come to be seen as synonymous with the liberal approach to Conservatism.
11. *Rule by elite*: Conservatives have tended to believe the art of government is not given to all; it is distributed unevenly, like all abilities, is carefully developed in families and most commonly in good schools, universities and the armed forces.
12. *Political change*: Conservatives are suspicious of political change as society develops organically as an infinitely complex and subtle entity; precipitate change could damage irreparably things of great value. Therefore, they distrust the system builders such as Marx, and the root-and-branch reformers such as veteran Labour ideologue Tony Benn. But they do not deny the need for all change; rather they tend to agree with the Duke of Cambridge (1819–1904) that the best time for it is 'when it can be no longer resisted', or with Enoch Powell that the 'supreme function of a politician is to judge the correct moment for reform'.

The impact of Thatcherism

This collection of pragmatic guides to belief and action was able to accommodate the postwar Labour landslide, which brought nationalisation, the managed Keynesian economy, close cooperation with the trade unions and the welfare state. The role of Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister (1957– 63) was crucial here. In the 1930s he wrote *The Middle Way*, a plea for a regulated laissez-faire economy that would minimise unemployment and introduce forward economic planning. He was able to accept many of the reforms introduced by Labour and reinterpret and implement them for his own party during his time as its leader.

The *postwar consensus* continued with little difference over domestic policy for the next decade and a half, embracing the effective consensus between Harold Macmillan and Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell, on the one hand, and Labour premier Harold Wilson and his Tory successor in 1970, Edward Heath, on the other. However, when the economy began to fail in relation to competitors in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a hurricane of dissent began to blow up on the right of the Conservative Party – in the person of Margaret Thatcher. She had no quarrel with traditional positions on law, property and liberty, but she was passionately convinced of a limited role for government (although not necessarily a weak one); she wanted to 'roll back' the socialist frontiers of the state. She was totally uninterested in checks and balances but wanted to maximise her power to achieve the things she wanted. She opposed contrived 'equality' and favoured the functional inequalities – she called them '*incentives*' – required by a dynamic economy. She had scant respect for the aristocracy as she admired only ability and energy – qualities, it cannot be denied, she owned in abundance. She was not in favour of gradual change but wanted radical alterations, *in her lifetime*. She was a revolutionary within her own party, which still, even in 2013, has not stopped reverberating from her impact.

Thatcherite economics

1. Margaret Thatcher was strongly influenced by Tory intellectual Sir Keith Joseph (1918–94), who was in turn influenced by the American 'Chicago' economist Milton Friedman (1912–2006). He urged that to control inflation it was merely necessary to control the supply of money and credit circulating in the economy.
2. Joseph was also a disciple of Friedrich von Hayek, who believed that freedom to buy, sell and employ, i.e. economic freedom, was the foundation of all freedom. Like Hayek, he saw the drift to collectivism as a bad thing: socialists promised the 'road to freedom' but delivered instead the 'high road to servitude'.
3. Hayek and Friedman agreed with the classical Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith and the classical liberals that, if left to themselves, market forces – businessmen using their energy and ingenuity to meet the needs of customers – would create prosperity. To call this 'exploitation' of the working man, as socialists did, was nonsense, as businessmen were the philanthropists of society, creating employment, paying wages and endowing charities. When markets were allowed to work properly they benefited all classes: everyone benefited, even the poor: 'the greatest social service of them all', said Thatcher, 'is the creation of wealth'.
4. Thatcher believed strongly that:
   (i) state intervention destroyed freedom and efficiency through taking power from the consumer – the communist 'command' economies were inefficient and corrupt, protecting employment through temporary and harmful palliatives and controlling so much of the economy that the wealth-producing sector became unacceptably squeezed; and
   (ii) state welfare was expensive and morally weakening in that it eroded the self-reliance she so prized, and was, in addition, monopolistic, denying choice as well as being less efficient than private provision.
5. Trade unions were one of Thatcher's bêtes noires: major enemies. She saw them as undemocratic, reactionary vested interests that regularly held the country to ransom in the 1970s. She was determined to confront and defeat them.

6 Her defence of national interests was founded in a passionate patriotism, which sustained her support for the armed forces and the alliance with the USA. During the Falklands War she showed great composure and courage in taking risks and ultimately triumphing. The reverse side of this was her preference for the US link over the European Union, which she suspected of being a Trojan horse for German plans to dominate the whole continent.

Thus, Margaret Thatcher drove a battering ram through traditional Conservatism, but economically it was a return to the classical liberalism of the early to mid-nineteenth century (see Chapter 4). Many claimed to have been converted to her ideas, but the 1980s witnessed a tough internal battle, which the Prime Minister eventually won, between her and the so-called 'wet' wing of the party, which still hearkened back to the inclusive 'one nation' strand of the party's thinking, characterised by Harold Macmillan and Ted Heath.

The Major and Hague years

John Major was a very different politician to Thatcher, but whilst he articulated a more moderate brand of Conservatism, in practice he largely pursued his predecessor's policies. Even the 'Wets', Ken Clarke, Michael Heseltine and Chris Patten had accepted the supremacy of the markets by the middle of the decade and were to serve in Major's Cabinet. Major even took Thatcher's ideas further than she had managed, privatising British Rail and introducing the market principle into areas of the welfare state. If Thatcher had led a 'heroic' version of her beliefs, 'smashing socialism', Major offered a more managerial version. However, fatally perhaps, he added a moral dimension: personal obligation and citizenship. Conservatives have long been worried by the downside of market forces – growing inequality, the emergence of an underclass – and there was a feeling the nation's social fabric was in dire need of some repair. Added to this was a growing and visceral hostility to immigrant groups and the role of the EU which facilitated yet more immigration. The growing band of determined Euro-sceptics gleefully held Major to ransom over his small majority, encouraging him to describe them as 'bastards' on one occasion. Major's 'Back to Basics' campaign backfired in that his appeal on social morality was focused by the media on the individual morality of Tory MPs a procession of whom were exposed in sexual and financial scandals of various kinds. Major was criticised for 'poor judgment and weak leadership' (*The Sun*); 'drifting with the intellectual tide' (Thatcher); 'He is not a natural leader, he cannot speak, he has no sense of strategy or direction' (Lord Rees-Mogg, *The Times*); 'a nice bloke but not up to the job' (Ken Clarke) and the cruellest cut – 'the government gives the impression of being in office but not in power' (Norman Lamont). Major lost the 1997 election to a historic landslide initiating the long reign of New Labour. In the ensuing leadership contest, the youthful William Hague was preferred to the excessively Europhile Clarke. Hague was very sharp intellectually and bitingly witty at Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) where he frequently bested Blair. He was explicitly sceptical on the EU and very hostile to the idea of the single euro currency but sympathetic to a more moderate brand of Conservatism. However, when polls failed to shift his colleagues were worried the party's core support might crumble and initiated a shift to the right. 'The Commonsense Revolution' was introduced to the 1999 conference, a bundle of right-wing measures promising to: cut taxes as a share of national income, keep clear of the euro, a 'parent's guarantee' that inefficient heads would be dismissed and a get-tough pledge on work dodgers whereby they would lose all benefits if they refused work after eight weeks. Thatcher herself appeared at the conference and was cheered to the echo whilst her successor's name was scarcely mentioned. Most of the right-wing press applauded the party's rediscovery of its identity – being right-wing, Euro-sceptic and proud. But others were not so sure. That shrewd commentator Peter Riddell wrote that:

> The more William Hague roused his party faithful in Blackpool, the more he led them away from power. . . . [His] main achievement . . . may have been to deepen the divisions within his own party and to reduce still further its chances of winning the next election.
>
> (Riddell, 12 October 1999)

PROFILE

William Hague (1961–), created Baron Hague of Richmond in 2015

English Conservative politician. Made his debut with a precocious speech at the 1977 conference. After Oxford, he worked as a management consultant and then became MP for Richmond in his native Yorkshire. He was seen as suitably opposed to Europe in 1997 and was preferred to Kenneth Clarke as leader. His early years were difficult with successes inside the Commons but rarely in the country. In the election of 2001 he stuck to his Euro-sceptic guns throughout the campaign but could only persuade the nation to return one more Conservative MP. He resigned, with remarkably good grace, shortly after the election defeat. After that he busied himself with brilliant after-dinner speaking, an acclaimed biography of the Younger Pitt and occasional broadcasting. In December 2005, however, David Cameron summoned him back to his party's front bench as Shadow Foreign Secretary and unofficial Deputy Leader. After the May 2010 election he took up the post of Foreign Secretary.

Riddell, not for the first time, proved remarkably prescient: in June 2001 Labour's second landslide occurred. Hague resigned and a contest for the leadership of the Tories took place amid some acrimony. According to the new rules for electing a leader, the parliamentary party held a series of ballots to find the two candidates between whom the party faithful would choose. Portillo soon fell by the wayside, foundering, it seemed, on his admission of a homosexual experience when a student at Cambridge. It was left to Kenneth Clarke, again, to battle it out with the inexperienced right-winger, Iain Duncan Smith. The latter's Euro-scepticism, tough line on crime and general Thatcherite orthodoxy proved much more attractive, in the judgement of the ageing party membership, compared with the liberal one-nation approach of Clarke – despite his obvious political gifts – who lost by a two-to-one majority.

Iain Duncan Smith

Many had expected the charismatic Michael Portillo to win the contest but it was a right-wing Euro-sceptic Iain Duncan Smith who took over the reins from Hague. He tried initially to move his party towards social justice and the reduction of poverty. However when polls refused to shift upwards, dissatisfaction with his performances in the Commons and in the media grew. In 2002 Theresa May issued her famous 'nasty party' warning, and in the run-up to the 2003 conference, discontent with IDS grew and the safe hands of Michael Howard were voted in to take over.

The Michael Howard interlude

On Thursday, 6th November 2003, the man who came sixth in the 1997 leadership challenge was, remarkably, elected unopposed to the leadership of his party. Despite his reputation for being a right-winger, Howard stressed his desire to continue IDS emphasis on social justice. His concerns regarding Europe were underlined by renewed calls for a referendum on the proposed new constitution for the EU.

The party continued to languish in the polls as the General Election approached in 2005. The party lacked a distinctive message right up to polling day on 5th May and duly paid the price when the votes were counted. The Conservatives won 33 more seats but had to sit back and watch an unpopular government led by a gifted but mistrusted Tony Blair maintain its hold on the Commons to the extent of an overall majority of 66. Howard resigned quite soon afterwards but stayed on to preside over the election of his successor. This period – May to October – saw much soul searching during which most party members came to realise that drastic change was necessary. The Conservative Policy Exchange think tank produced a devastating report on the party, highlighting its unpopularity, lack of contact with modern society and hopeless image as a party favouring middle-class people in the shires and the

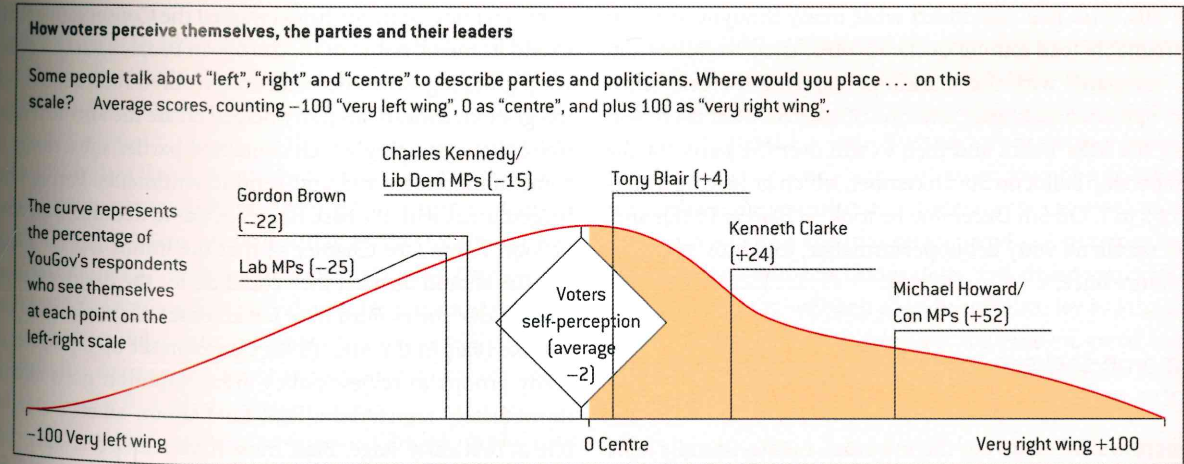

Figure 5.1 How voters perceive themselves, the parties and their leaders

Source: From Policy Exchange (2005) *The Case for Change*, May 2005. Reproduced with permission

South-east. Figure 5.1, drawn from the report, reveals how people viewed their own political position on the left–right continuum and then superimposed their estimates of where leading politicians stood. Inevitably the majority of people occupy the centre ground, indicating where any party wishing to win an election needs to project its messages. Howard was perceived as being quite far to the right – his MPs also. Kenneth Clarke, on the other hand, was seen as substantially closer to the centre. Gordon Brown was located slightly to the right of Labour MPs and to the left of Charles Kennedy. And Tony Blair? His brilliant sense of where the centre of political gravity lay enabled him to sit astride the middle of the graph, four points to the right of dead centre.

The election of David Cameron, December 2005

The Conservative Party conference in October 2005 at Blackpool indicated that the party had finally realised that major change to the party and its thinking was necessary before an election win could be contemplated. The declared leadership candidates were able to address the delegates and make an initial pitch. Howard had influenced his own succession by placing members of the new young liberal or 'moderniser' group in his party to major positions in the Shadow Cabinet – George Osborne (34) to Shadow Chancellor and David Cameron (39) to Education – and allowing them to make an impression before the leadership contest in the autumn. Osborne, it seemed, had already decided not to run but to manage the campaign of his old Etonian friend, Cameron. Parallels with Tony Blair's rise to power were already being made before Cameron delighted the conference with a speech he had learnt by heart and delivered, apparently spontaneously, without notes. David Davis, the former minister in his mid-50s, who had assembled what many thought to be an impregnable lead among declared MPs, tried to follow suit but, compared with the sparkling, inspiring rhetoric of his rival, appeared lacklustre and dull. Cameron went on to win easily the MPs' ballot and then to win over the party for the membership ballot on 5th December, which he won by a margin of 2 to 1. On 6th December he took on Blair at PMQs and, in an excellent, witty debut performance, told him 'you were the future once'.

Cameron seeks to 'rebrand' and move into the centre ground

Cameron, while copying the informal, media-friendly style of the younger Tony Blair, was careful to steer clear of specific policy commitments, though it was clear his period in power would see a jettisoning of the party's much beloved positions on a number of issues. Cameron and his coterie of 'Notting Hill Set' colleagues were very keen to change the brand image of the party. During the 2005 election, focus groups had revealed that members who liked a policy position when it was explained to them changed their mind when they discovered it was a Conservative party policy. Concerted efforts were made to banish the notion of the 'nasty party', the idea of a bigoted, intolerant group of richer, older people who wanted power merely to advance their own interests and outdated way of life. Consequently Cameron let it be known his name was not David but 'Dave'; that he cared deeply about special-needs childcare (his NHS-cared-for disabled son, Ivan, died in February 2009); that he cared about the environment (cycling to the Commons, snow-sledding in the Arctic, appointing environmentalist Zac Goldsmith to an advisory position); that he cared about world poverty (Bob Geldof's turn to be included); and that the party no longer hated gays and opposed civil partnerships.

In late December Oliver Letwin declared that his party favoured redistribution of wealth, and shortly afterwards Cameron shifted its position on immigration from opposition to qualified support for those incomers essential to the economy. Cameron also addressed the key area of tax cuts. It seemed Conservatives now would basically accept the 4 per cent increase in basic taxation since 1997 as necessary to sustain public services at requisite levels. He also declared that cuts would have to come in the wake of economic stability, a reversal of the Thatcherite view that the latter is a condition for the achievement of the former. And the party would no longer be the natural adjunct of the free enterprise economy; henceforward, the party would stand up to as well as be a supporter of business.

The new boy was careful, however, to keep the core vote onside with a judicious dash of Euro-scepticism. True, he wished to bury the party's civil war over the EU, but, in a sop to his sceptics, he nevertheless wanted the Conservative Party to end its membership of the European People's Party, a right-wing grouping which nevertheless favoured rather too much integration. Instead, his party helped create the anti-federalist Reformist's grouping which contained parties subscribing to some homophobic and anti-semitic sentiments. Perhaps his biggest break with the past, however, was to declare, in an echo of John Rawls (see Chapter 4) that the litmus test for social policies should be what they could do for the disadvantaged: many older Tories must have felt an onset of apoplexy at that.

Like Blair in the mid-1990s Cameron set up a number of study groups to review policy areas. Opinion polls almost immediately registered a lead for Labour, albeit a slender one at that early stage. Blair must have realised at once that the political situation had changed drastically and that he no longer could expect a free ride in his domination of the centre ground. But Cameron too did not face an easy ride: right-wing commentator, Melanie Phillips, writing in the *Daily Mail*, believed his prospectus 'leaves millions of natural Conservatives effectively disenfranchised – and even worse demonized as dinosaurs by the party that is supposed to represent them'.

Wise old commentators judged such opposition to be precisely what Cameron needed. Blair had risen to public prominence through his brilliant victory over party traditionalists concerning Clause Four. As the 2010 election approached, Cameron and his advisers sought to position themselves on the major questions of the day: reduce government 2009 debt of £175 billion to reduce interest rates on further borrowing; blame Labour for the recession triggered by the 2007 US banking crisis; protect the NHS and education budgets but offer deep cuts elsewhere to reduce the deficit; and on the EU to sustain Euro-sceptical rhetoric but reject any talk of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty or membership of the EU by abandoning the referendum idea. In their election campaign these ideas received great emphasis within the framework of its alleged theme – the 'Big Society' – the involvement of ordinary people in their own government. This theme, the brainchild of Cameron's strategist Steve Hilton, was derided by more traditional Tories but staunchly expounded by the boss himself.

Conservatives in power since 2010

Cameron was constrained in his ambitions once in office by a recession – caused by a lack of funding and his Lib-Dem Coalition partners who vetoed some of his plans, though not the main outlines of his and Osborne's 'austerity' policy cuts in expenditure. Labour was (mostly unfairly) blamed for the recession and the mountain of inherited debt; Keynesian remedies were shunned in favour of severe Hayekian cuts. Osborne hoped private sector expansion would kick start growth, but by 2013, economic growth flat-lined until a slow rate of growth returned, assisted by large sums being injected into the economy via Quantitative Easing. This enabled Cameron to claim the economy was now in vigorous recovery.

Education and health had been 'ring fenced' from cuts but both struggled to keep pace with demand and the highest standards. Meanwhile the ill-defined so-called Big Society vision was more or less forgotten, and it was Europe which absorbed much of Cameron's energies as Prime Minister. He did much to reflect pressures from his Euro-sceptic right-wing on immigration as well as measures to deflect the attractions of UKIP to Tory Euro-sceptic voters. His ultimate concession, against the advice of his Chancellor, occurred in January 2013 when he promised to hold an In-Out referendum on EU membership, should his party win the 2015 election. Cynics suggest Cameron expected the election to be 'hung' and that Coalition partners, the Lib-Dems, would veto such a test of public opinion. This did not happen, and Cameron's plans to resign in 2019 with a formidable legacy of achievements behind him, turned into dust on 24th June 2016.

BOX 5.1

The influence of Ayn Rand

British political ideas don't emerge in a vacuum: overseas influences are bound to intrude, especially from within the English-speaking world. Jonathan Freedland has assessed the substantial influence of the Russian-born American novelist, Ayn Rand, whose two novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* have captured the minds of many leading politicians on both sides of the Atlantic – Rex Tillerson, Alan Greenspan, Ron Paul, Donald Trump – not to mention leading Silicon Valley entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel, Steve Wozniack and the late Steve Jobs. UK devotees include Communities Secretary Sajid Javid who reads sections of *The Fountainhead* twice a year.

Rand's ideas – *Objectivism* – were based on the idea that 'man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself'. Her assertion of the 'morality of rational self interest' sounded to some like a justification for extreme selfishness. She was wholly opposed to big government, preferring instead a state limited to 'an army, a police force, a court system – and not much else'. She glorifies the 'alpha-male capitalist entrepreneur, the man of action who towers above the little people and the pettifogging bureaucrats – and gets things done'. Freedland concludes that Rand's ideas 'will find a ready audience for as long as there are human beings who feel the rush of greed and the lure of unchecked power, longing to succumb to both without guilt'.

Source: Based on Jonathan Freedland, 'The New Age of Ayn Rand: How She Won over Trump and Silicon Valley', *The Guardian*, 10th April 2017.

In the league tables of prime ministers since 1945 compiled by historians, Cameron did not fare too badly for his adroit handling of Coalition 2010–5, but his second term saw him plunge to 11th out of the 13. This is explained almost entirely by his catastrophic decision to hold the Referendum on 23rd June 2016. Despite throwing all his energies into campaigning, the Remain cause was bested by a clever Leave campaign which was none too scrupulous with the truth and exploited the 'feel bad' sentiment of voters who felt ignored, left behind and wounded by government cuts. Out of the confusion of the Referendum decision, the Leave victors Johnson and Gove sabotaged their own leadership credentials and opened the door to Number Ten's door to the socially shy, slightly austere figure of the Home Secretary for six years, Theresa May.

Theresa May in power

As a midterm replacement Prime Minister, May lacked a personal mandate from voters so was keen to place her own 'state educated' stamp on her administration from the start and clear out the 'public school' cronyism of her predecessor. Her first speech was a remarkable attempt to claim the centre ground of politics, left vacant by a Labour Party obsessed with its own leadership concerns. She declared she would address the problems of those people who were 'just about managing' while 'working around the clock'. 'That means fighting against the burning injustice that if you are born poor you will die on average nine years earlier than others'. For an 'ordinary working class family . . . life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise' (quoted in Cowburn 2016). She also famously declared 'Brexit means Brexit' and indeed this issue preoccupied her government for the next year or more. Most commentators saw little evidence her pledge to the less well-off being fulfilled any time soon; she had little time left to do much at all given the obsessive requirements of dealing with the repercussions of the Brexit vote (see Chapter 7). Theresa May, daughter of a vicar and a supremely cautious politician, ruled out calling an election before 2020 several times but electrified the country 17th April 2017 by boldly announcing a snap general election 8th June. Writing in *The Economist*, 22nd April, columnist Bagehot commented that, though she is 'not an ideas woman', Mrs May

> has a sense of what sort of a country she wants. Her Britain is the Britain of the provincial Tory heartlands: a Britain of solid values and rooted certainties, hard work and upward social mobility, a Britain where people try to get ahead but also have time for the less fortunate . . . her provincial prejudices are beginning to cohere into a political doctrine: an updated version of the one nation Toryism which dominated the party before Thatcher pulverised it. Mrs May is much more willing to contemplate intervention in the market than her predecessors: she wants to make takeovers more difficult and has even talked about putting workers on boards. . . . Mrs May is much more worried about social atomisation than has been the fashion in her party. Whereas Mrs Thatcher championed liberal markets and Mr Cameron championed liberal morals, Mrs May wants to rebuild communities that have been battered by social change.

Whatever 'Mayism' might have been became arguably academic on 9th June 2017 when instead of increasing her majority as intended, the general election resulted in her losing any majority at all and being eight seats short of one instead.

The Labour Party and Socialism

Source: Courtesy of the Labour Party (www.labour.org.uk)

Socialism

Socialism developed as a critique and alternative to capitalism and its political expression, Conservatism. It focused on economics as the key activity, but the full sweep of its message provided guidance on virtually all aspects of living.

Critique of capitalism

Socialism asserted that capitalism 'exploited' the working masses by selling the fruits of their labour, taking the lion's share of the revenue in exchange for subsistence wages. This produced huge disparities in income between the suburban-living rich and the urban-based poor. Because the ruling capitalists dominate all the institutions of the state, argued Karl Marx, whose analysis was more influential in Britain than his prescriptions, they subtly intrude their values into all walks of life, and a complex web of mystifications produces a 'false consciousness' in which the working class believes wrongly, that its best interests are served by supporting capitalist values. Capitalist championing of 'individualism' and 'freedom' are mere cloaks, he claimed, for the exploitation of the weak by the strong. The ruthlessness of the system induces similar qualities within society. Wage labour merely relieved employers of any residual obligations they might have felt towards their workers. By living in large urban settlements, working men were alienated from each other, while the automating of industry denied workers any creative input or satisfactions. A final criticism was that capitalism with its booms and slumps was inevitably inefficient and inferior to a planned economy. Socialists argued that two large antagonistic classes emerge in capitalist societies: a small, wealthy ruling class and a large impoverished proletariat, living in the cities, which actually created the wealth which for the most part benefited the already wealthy.

Underlying principles of socialism

Socialism developed out of this critique of nineteenth-century capitalism. The principles underlying the new creed included the following:

1. *Human nature is basically good*: People wish to live together peacefully and cooperatively, according to this view; it is only the selfish competitive economic system of capitalism that distorts man's innate qualities.
2. *'Environment creates consciousness'*: It followed from this Marxist axiom that a superior environment will create a superior kind of person: change the environment and you change the person.
3. *Workers create the wealth*: They are entitled to receive the full fruits of their efforts and not the small fraction that the rich, bourgeois factory owners pay them.
4. *Equality*: Everyone has the right to start off in life with the same chances as everyone else; the strong should not exploit their advantage and impose themselves on the weak.
5. *Freedom*: The poor need more resources for the playing field of life to be level and thus be truly free.
6. *Collectivism*: Social solidarity should take the place of selfish individualism.

The Labour Party

Labour in power

Labour held power briefly in the 1920s and began to formulate a more pragmatic, less emotional and more coherent version of socialism. During the 1930s and the war years socialist thinkers who were also active politicians such as Hugh Dalton (1887–1962) and Herbert Morrison (1888– 1965) developed what has since been called 'corporate socialism', comprising:

1. *Keynesian economics*: Management of the economy, using investment to cure slumps and squeeze out unemployment.
2. *Centralised planning of the economy*: This was the corollary of the Keynesian approach; it had worked brilliantly during the 1939–45 war and would do the same for the peace, promised Labour.
3. *Nationalisation*: Morrison devised this approach based on bringing an industry out of private and into public control via a board accountable to Parliament. Once in power, Labour nationalised 20 per cent of the economy, including the major utilities: water, gas and electricity.
4. *Welfare state*: Labour established the National Health Service and expanded universal social services into a virtual 'welfare state' in which the state had obligations to citizens 'from the cradle to the grave'.
5. *Mixed economy*: The extent of nationalisation was not defined but, unlike the Soviet command economies, it was intended to maintain a private sector, albeit one subordinate to the public.
6. *Socialist foreign policy*: The trauma of two world wars convinced Labour that a new approach was needed based on disarmament and international collective security. The USSR, however, proved resistant to fraternal overtures from a fellow left-wing government, and ultimately Labour's combative Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin (1881–1952), was forced to encourage the USA into the NATO alliance.

Revisionism

Anthony Crosland (1918–77), along with others like Hugh Gaitskell, Dennis Healey and Roy Jenkins, was not content, like Morrison, to declare cynically that 'socialism is what the Labour government does'. In his *The Future of Socialism* (1956), Crosland asserted that Marx's predictions of capitalist societies polarising before revolutions established left-wing government had been proved hopelessly wrong; the working class had ignored revolutions and had been strengthened by full employment. The business class had not fought the advance of socialism but had been *tamed* by it. Crosland argued that the ownership of the economy was no longer relevant, as salaried managers were now the key players.

He attacked another sacred cow by maintaining that nationalisation was not necessarily the most effective road to socialism and that other forms of collective ownership were

more effective. He concluded that Labour should now concentrate its efforts on reducing inequality through progressive taxation and redistributive benefits and – the key proposal – reducing class differences through an end to selection in education. In practice, revisionism was Labour's policy for the next 30 years, but when in government in the 1970s its possibly fatal flaw was exposed: it was dependent on an expanding economy; when this fell into decline, public expenditure cuts became inevitable and with it the end of the socialist vision.

The left wing of the party, however, never accepted revisionism, and first Aneurin (Nye) Bevan, then Michael Foot, opposed the new drift towards a 'diluted' ideology. In the 1960s, led by Tony Benn, the Left now offered an alternative economic strategy based on workers' control, extended state control of the economy, in effect, participatory democracy at all levels of national life; all this plus fresh injections of funds into the welfare state, encouragement of extra-parliamentary activity, and unilateral abandonment of nuclear weapons. The revisionist leadership tried to ignore the Left, but when the 1979 General Election was lost to a new and militantly ideological leader, Margaret Thatcher, the Left insisted that a similar return to the roots of socialist ideology was necessary. With the revisionist leadership defeated and discredited, the Left made its move, managing to translate its candidate, Michael Foot, into leader in 1980, plus imposing a radically left-wing set of policies on the party. This resulted in the 1983 manifesto being dubbed by Gerald Kaufman 'the longest suicide note in history' (Mann 2003). More significantly, the Left's ascendancy led to the defection of an important centre-right section of the party to form the Social Democratic Party (see Box 5.2). The conventional view is that the new party split the anti-Tory vote and helped to keep Thatcher in power for a decade. However, the party's history as written by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King (1995) concluded that this transient new force, if anything, reduced the Tory majority.

Neil Kinnock, elected as Foot's successor, was a child of the Left but soon recanted, dismissing its prescriptions as 'Disneyland thinking'. He assiduously began to nudge his party towards the centre ground via a series of policy reviews which essentially accepted the 'efficiency and realism' of the market as the best model of economic organisation. It was implicit in this new analysis – although hotly denied – that socialism was no longer relevant; even the word disappeared from party policy documents. When he lost the crucial 1992 election, Kinnock resigned and John Smith continued this dilution of socialism. When Smith died tragically of a heart attack in May 1994, Tony Blair was elected leader and soon placed his stamp on a party denied power for nearly 15 years.

BOX 5.2

Social Democratic Party

On 1st August 1980 Shirley Williams, David Owen and Bill Rodgers published their famous 'Gang of Three' statement: an open letter in *The Guardian* 'rejecting class war, accepting the mixed economy and the need to manage it efficiently'. After the Wembley conference of 1981 which passed rule changes strengthening the power of left-wing activists over candidate selection and the party leadership, the Gang of Three was joined by Roy Jenkins to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Over the next few months over two dozen Labour MPs made the same journey, joined by a solitary Conservative. The SDP fought the 1983 election in 'Alliance' with the small Liberal Party, garnering 26 per cent of the vote but less than 4 per cent of the seats. The much wished for breakthrough in 1987 failed when they mustered only 22 per cent of the vote. A formal merger of the two parties was delayed by personality problems posed largely by David Owen, but by 1988 the future Liberal Democrats had emerged, albeit for a while with a defiant Owenite rump. The SDP was formed in a blaze of publicity and 'breaking the mould' rhetoric, but a genuine alternative was probably not on offer. In one sense its message represented an amalgam of policies picked up across the political spectrum. Decentralisation was close to the Liberal, Bennite and Green position; SDP views on the market economy and trade unions were close to Margaret Thatcher's position – she actually praised Owen for being 'sound' on both – and on social policy and defence the SDP was close to the position of the Callaghan Government, to which the SDP leaders had once belonged. This is not to say that the SDP lacked a carefully worked out and detailed programme, merely that it lacked a distinctive alternative or even radical quality. History will judge the SDP as a party of protest with a limited appeal outside the middle classes.

Tony Blair in Power

Having already abandoned its former policies of opposition to the European Community/Union, unilateral nuclear disarmament and nationalisation, Blair shifted the party even further to the right by attacking the power of trade unions in the party. He waged a spectacularly successful war against the 'collective ownership' Clause Four in the party's constitution, drafted by Sidney Webb in 1917:

> To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.

Clause Four rewritten

The iconic clause, so fundamental that it was inscribed on membership cards, was replaced in April 1995 at a special conference by a massive majority. The new clause endorsed a 'dynamic economy, serving the public interest'; a 'just society which judges its strength by the condition of the weak as much as the strong'; 'an open democracy, in which government is held to account by the people'; and where 'decisions are taken as far as practicable by the communities they affect'.

Not content with this, Blair later drew the party away from the social democratic heartland of full employment and welfare spending: it was deemed that the requisite high taxation would never be endorsed by middle-class voters; with modern technology the economy has become globalised so that flows of capital can break companies and even currencies in minutes. To maintain policies of high taxation, it was believed, risked massive withdrawals of capital by speculators and investors from any economy contemplating such socialistic measures.

According to Blair, 'socialism' had proved lacking. There was now no alternative to Thatcher's economics; **'New Labour'** had effectively embraced tax cuts, low inflation, a market economy plus encouragement of entrepreneurial activity and some privatisation. Thatcherism, in a sense, had 'won'. Tony Blair flirted for a while with Will Hutton's idea of a 'stakeholder society', that everyone, individuals and groups, should have some investment in society, and everyone should feel part of their community at all levels, economic, cultural and social; the idea withered through business opposition to any wider role. The other biggish idea supported by Blair, though not with obvious huge enthusiasm, was constitutional reform; Labour embraced devolved assemblies for both Scotland and Wales plus reform of the House of Lords and a referendum on the electoral system. However, the changes were not without major flaws, none more so than the unresolved, so-called 'West Lothian question', whereby Scottish MPs would have the ability to vote on English issues but English MPs do not have the ability to reciprocate as the internally elected assembly would assume this role (see Chapter 13). The Lords reform agenda stalled after the virtual abolition of hereditary peers and the chamber continued in its half-reformed way. As for reforming the voting system, the results of the PR recommending Jenkins Report continued to gather dust as the party swung in favour of an idea responsible, in part for putting Labour in government.

Blairism

The massive endorsement of New Labour in the General Election of 1st May 1997 was the fulfilment of the strategy conceived and implemented by Tony Blair and his close collaborators Peter Mandelson and Philip Gould to move the Labour Party into a position where it embraced the market economy and removed the fear of old-style socialism felt by the middle-class occupants of 'Middle England'. 'Blairism' was vaguely expressed and lent itself to wide interpretation, but some commentators disagreed and claimed that Blairism boasted a coherent philosophical framework and was a well worked-out 'project'. Socially it is based on the idea of communitarianism. At university, Blair was very interested in the ideas of John McMurray, a Scottish philosopher who took issue with the modish idea of 'individualism', that the individual has choices and freedoms and is an autonomous unit. McMurray argued the contrary, that, as Adams puts it:

> People do not exist in a vacuum; in fact, they only exist in relation to others. The completely autonomous self of liberal theory is a myth. People's personalities are created in their relationships with others, in the family and the wider community. By pursuing the interests of society as a whole we benefit individuals including ourselves.
>
> (Adams 1998:148–9)

Blair argued that people should build communities based on the idea of responsibility, a sense of duty towards others that may be less fortunate and a recognition that one's actions have repercussions and may require reparation. Old Labour tended to see poor people as 'victims of the system'; to speak of them having responsibilities is to borrow from another right-wing lexicon. Blair also subscribed to the idea of a *Third Way*. Apart from being an alternative to socialism and pro-capitalist ideology, it was never clearly defined although its opponents were alarmed by what they thought was an inappropriate drawing in of the private sector into the public. Another participant has been the eminent sociologist

Anthony Giddens, highly regarded by Blair, who wrote, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*. This argues that the old definitions of left and right are obsolete (see Chapter 4) and that in the world of globalisation a new approach is required. He defines the overall aim of Third Way politics as helping citizens to:

> pilot their way through the major revolutions of our time: globalisation, transformations in personal life and our relationship to nature. . . . One might suggest as a prime motto for the new politics, 'No rights without responsibilities'.
>
> (Giddens 1998: 64–5; see also Box 5.3)

Blair in power

For the first two years in power, Gordon Brown kept the brake firmly on expenditure, but after the 2001 election, Labour embarked in 2002 on the spending of over £100 billion over the following years, marking for many a welcome return to Old Labour orthodoxy. However, the event that transformed Labour during the early months of 2003 was the war on Iraq. Tony Blair had decided to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with George W. Bush after the horrific attacks on the World Trade Center on 11th September 2001, but the extent of his loyalty to a right-wing president advised by Republican hawks was anathema to many Labour MPs. When it proved impossible to muster a United Nations Security Council majority for the war in March, 139 MPs supported a hostile motion and Robin Cook resigned from the Cabinet. Left-wing critics spoke of a leadership contest. Such speculation proved premature but Blair's blind support for US foreign policy was squeezing support in his own New Labour power base (see also Chapter 26).

Blair's legacy

As it became obvious there was not much time left, Blair seemed to obsess with leaving a lasting 'legacy'. While he would have loved to include a shiny new health and education service, polls showed voters relatively unimpressed and Labour critics furious at his encouragement of private sector invasion of such public sector citadels. For so many people, whatever their party loyalties, the debacle of the Iraq war will be emblazoned on Blair's grave. But this would be unfair. His tireless efforts in Northern Ireland arguably proved crucial in winning an admittedly fragile settlement which saw a new Executive formed before he left office. Secondly, Blair caused the Conservatives to desert the aridities of Thatcherism. He had stolen Tory clothes to an extent but had subtly re-attired his party as liberal, tolerant and dedicated to improving the condition of the less well-off majority. As leader followed leader, the Conservatives finally got the message: they would have to change, just as Labour did from the mid-'80s. David Cameron was the result: the litmus test for a new policy, according to 'early' Cameron ostensibly was what can it do for the disadvantaged? (Critical cynicism would perhaps be justified in respect of this claim.) Homophobia is out; environmentalism is very much in; pro-business yes, but at a distance; tax cuts maybe but not until the economy can sustain them. Already the signs of Blair's greatest legacy perhaps were evident: Thatcher finished off left-wing socialism, but Blair weakened right-wing Conservatism, at least for a while. Cameron and Osborne, moreover, both admired Blair; in re-branding and repositioning their party, they absorbed much of Blairism, just as Blair had done the same with Thatcherism.

BOX 5.3

How 'new' is New Labour?

A number of scholars have considered this question, but the approach of Steven Fielding of Nottingham University (2003) is perhaps the most useful for this chapter's purposes. Fielding argues that New Labour is in reality part of the continuous development of social democratic thinking over the last century and a half. He denies the claim, associated with Roy Hattersley for one, that New Labour was a kind of 'coup' involving Blair, Mandelson and Gould and also denies the idea that New Labour was, in fact, all that new. His case is that New Labour was less to do with high-profile personalities and more to do with social democratic adaptations to the constantly fluid nature of international economics. As he sees it, New Labour was an attempt to reconcile a system which produced winners and losers with the ideas of equality, justice and efficiency. This last was the crucial lacuna in socialism as Attlee's nationalisation produced overmanned, loss-making state behemoths. Labour began to view the economy not so differently from Conservatives as something where growth and productivity had to be encouraged.

When this apparent attempt failed in a welter of strikes in 1979, the left swung back to bedrock and a right-wing Conservative government was elected. When voters rejected the left in 1983 and 1987, new thinking was set in train which nudged ever closer to an acceptance of market forces and a capitalist economy.

Writing some years into Labour's period in power, Fielding concluded:

> The party at the start of the twenty-first century may be a highly cautious social democratic organization; but recognizably social democratic it remains. If the state has advanced modestly and in novel ways since 1997, Labour's purpose in office is the same as it ever was: to reform capitalism so that it may better serve the interests of the majority.
>
> (Fielding 2003: 217)

History and Tony Blair's Reputation

"It might seem unlikely just now, but when Blair is long dead and nobody alive can remember 1 May 1997, some Labour radicals might find themselves invoking the 'spirit of 97' and lauding the minimum wage, Sure Start and the £5bn windfall tax on utility companies that helped the long-term unemployed back into work. If Labour still exists then."

Source: Professor Stephan Fielding, *New Statesman*, 4th April 2017

Gordon Brown's period in power

Brown's period as Prime Minister lasted only from June 2007 to May 2010, so he did not have much time to implant any characteristic elements. Indeed his many critics claimed he lacked any real vision of what his party should offer the country.

Economy

His critics' voices were partially stilled by his reaction to the banking crisis of 2007 and the subsequent recession. He took confident strides in a Keynesian direction, channelling huge amounts of money into the banking system as a 'fiscal stimulus' to ensure that the threatened collapse did not occur. There is some justification for believing his claim that other nations followed his lead; some even claim he 'saved the world's banking system' at this troubled time. The problem with such a policy was that it helped build up huge levels of debt which imposed heavy interest repayment obligations. In the run-up to the election Labour argued that continued investment in the economy was necessary to avoid an even deeper recession. Brown's arguments were undermined to an extent, in autumn 2009, when it became clear the UK economy was not emerging from recession as robustly as other developed nations like the USA, Germany, France and Japan. Labour argued strongly that they were not to blame for the recession, and that the expenditure cuts proposed by the Tories would cause a fragile recovery to collapse into even deeper recession. Opinion polls suggest the Conservatives won this particular 'blame game'. Labour insisted in late 2009 that it would maintain public spending to sustain recovery and protect recipients of services; Conservative plans generally followed the same line. On foreign policy Labour took a positive view on the EU, supporting the Lisbon Treaty and seeking to ridicule Conservative hostility. On Afghanistan they offered continued support to the war but were damaged by accusations that British troops had not been properly equipped to fight the Taliban.

Labour in power: 1997–2010

As with the Tories in 1997, Labour suffered from the fact that they had been in power for three terms (over 12 years) and voters were tired of them. Frequent examples of poor or incompetent government received considerable publicity and fuelled fears of a major rejection at the 2010 election. In the event, Labour was fortunate to survive May 2010 with 258 seats when a total meltdown had threatened. After an extended leadership contest Ed Miliband stood against his elder brother for the top job and, surprisingly, won, with the votes of the unions proving decisive in Labour's then **electoral college** system.

Ed Miliband's tenure as leader was clouded initially by the fact that he had won in a contest against his very able brother, former Foreign Secretary, David. Things did not improve once Osborne and his coalition effectively pinned the blame for the 2007–9 recession on Labour and proceeded to introduce an austerity programme designed to 'Clear up Labour's Mess'. Miliband tried hard to find a message which would resonate with voters – a distrust of corporate capitalism and an attempt to inspire a renaissance in public values. Throughout this time he had to face the weekly derision poured over him by Cameron at PMQs plus odium of every kind courtesy of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. Miliband had assumed public views would shift leftwards in the wake of a recession caused by the failings of capitalism. He was wrong: it shifted to the right, losing patience with people on benefits and more or less accepting the need for cuts in public spending, reducing immigration and government indebtedness. Tony Blair, in a big spread in *The Sun* in June 2011, thundered that Ed would never win except from the centre and under the banner of New Labour. Maybe he was right: whilst Labour led in most

polls during this period, by 2015 the Conservatives had held on to a large section of the centre ground and were effective in rubbishing both Labour's message and leader. On 8th May 2015 Ed Miliband resigned in the wake of Labour's defeat, and a new leadership election ensued.

Jeremy Corbyn voted in as leader, July 2015

Corbyn only managed to gain nomination in the contest for a new leader by the requisite number of Labour MPs (35) because several moderates thought the so-called 'hard left' viewpoint should, in fairness, be articulated. Some of them – for example Margaret Beckett, regretted their kindness when Corbyn's well-honed left-wing message – he'd been preaching it for over three decades as an MP – proved more coherent and attractive to Labour's membership than his predictable and uninspiring rivals. 'Jezza's' rallies were packed with the idealistic young and scores of older lefties (including a fair number of the 'far left' who had left the party when Blair excised 'socialism' from its official beliefs). Corbyn's policies sounded more like the Old Labour ones Blair had worked so hard to exorcise: higher taxes and much higher spending to restore cuts in welfare especially on education and the NHS and, even, a partial return of nationalisation. In addition Corbyn was passionately opposed to US foreign policy anywhere in the world. Directly opposed to Osborne's 'Austerity Policies' Corbyn now received his regular doses of derision at PMQs as well as a series of revolts by his moderate colleagues whose political credos had been based more on Blair's centrist social democratic position. They excoriated Corbyn for being out of touch with voters and when his lukewarm endorsement of the Remain cause during the Referendum campaign in June (as a left-winger he had earlier urged the UK should leave) was seen as helping Leave to win, a challenge arose to his leadership. Counter-intuitively perhaps, Corbyn's laid back style and unassuming personal style had won him a devoted following among party members who continued to flood into the party while its overall poll standings, and those of its leader himself, plumbed new depths. After a raucous campaign Corbyn was again triumphant and declared he would remain as leader until the next election in 2020. Previous supporters of Labour being in the political centre, despaired. In May's June 2017 snap election Corbyn's buoyant campaign proved astonishingly successful, making Labour, once again, a 'government in waiting'.

The Liberal Democrats

Source: Courtesy of the Liberal Democrats Party (www.libdems.org.uk)

After the war the Liberal Party continued to decline politically but still offered an alternative to voters in the centre of political ideas. At heart the party still adhered to the ideas of 'new liberalism' covered in Chapter 4, with emphases on individual liberty, equality, a mixed economy, a developed welfare state and a reformed, democratised system of government. Under the skilful successive leaderships of Jo Grimond, Jeremy Thorpe and David Steel, the party survived the postwar decades but hardly prospered. Then in 1981, as we have seen, it joined forces with the breakaway SDP to form the 'Alliance'. It was not difficult to unite on policies, which were very close; rather it was personalities who caused the foundering of this short-lived collaboration (see Box 5.2). In 1987 the two elements of the Alliance formally merged and fought the 1992 election as the Liberal Democrats. Its manifesto, *Changing Britain for Good*, called for a shift of power to the consumer and ordinary citizen, the development of worker shareholding and a market economy in which the market is the 'servant and not the master'. In addition, the party repeated the traditional call for reform of the voting system and **devolution** of power to the regions. Following the 1992 general election its new leader, Paddy Ashdown (elected in 1988), made steady progress with a replacing of 'equidistance' between the two big parties with a policy of open cooperation with Labour; in 1996, a joint Labour/Lib-Dem committee was set up to liaise on constitutional reform.

PROFILE

Paddy Ashdown (1941–)

Former leader of Liberal Democrats. Formerly captain in the Marines, he saw active service in Borneo. He also learned to speak Mandarin Chinese as part of the diplomatic corps 1971–6. Won Yeovil in 1983 as a Liberal and became leader of merged party in 1988. He worked hard to build a close relationship with Labour. Lib-Dems won 46 seats in the 1997 General Election, after which Ashdown retired as leader. Charles Kennedy took over in 1999. Ashdown was appointed by the UN as International High Representative in Bosnia from May 2002 to 2006. His remains a highly influential voice in the Liberal Democrats.

The strong showing by the Liberal Democrats in the 1997 general election buttressed the claim of that party to be the de facto, left-of-centre conscience of the new Blair order regarding constitutional reform and the nurturing of the welfare state, especially the educational system. The Lib-Dems joined a Cabinet committee tasked with studying the future of constitutional reform – a tempting whiff of power perhaps for a party starved of it since the paltry sniff provided by the Lib–Lab pact of 1977–9. In 1999 Paddy Ashdown stood down after a distinguished period as leader of Britain's third party. His successor was the amiable Charles Kennedy, popular on quiz shows and a witty, clubbable man. He rejected suggestions to take up a left-of-Labour stance as the kind of *cul de sac* that had ruined Labour in the early 1980s. Instead he chose a 'business as usual' policy of 'constructive opposition' to Tony Blair with a view to replacing the Conservatives as the official opposition to the Labour Government. In an interview with the US magazine *Talk*, Blair said that his biggest mistake in May 1997 had been not to ask Ashdown to join his Cabinet, although with such a huge majority it was politically impossible to deny even a single post to his own party.

In the 2005 election Kennedy fought his usual relaxed campaign, offering an anti-war stance over Iraq, increased taxation for the very rich and no tuition fees for university students. This worked well in constituencies where Labour was the Lib-Dem target, and 12 seats were won in this way. However, what attracted former Labour voters did not work the same magic in the close Lib-Dem–Conservative seats: only three were won while five were lost.

This election of 62 MPs, though welcome, still carried a sense of feeling of a missed opportunity; in addition there developed a sense that the party was losing what momentum it had gained at the election and all this contributed towards a whispering campaign against Kennedy. Complicating the situation, by the time of the autumn party conference a new wing was identified in the expanded 62-strong ranks of the Lib-Dems: a group leaning more to the right, epitomised by *The Orange Book* of essays written by MPs and activists favouring a greater acceptance of market forces. Kennedy found his attempts to keep both factions happy were failing and by November senior party colleagues were said to be briefing against him.

Kennedy finally admitted the chief accusation against him – that he had a drinking problem – and a few days later, when the pressure did not abate, stood down in early January 2006. In the resultant, chaotic contest Simon Hughes and Chris Huhne waged a lively campaign, but the veteran Sir Menzies (Ming) Campbell won quite easily in the end, in March 2006. When he in turn proved unable to offer a new direction and higher poll ratings, he too resigned in October 2007. Another contest took place, and this time the young, good-looking Nick Clegg was the choice. He too had difficulty making an impact, but he led the way in his 2008 conference in suggesting tax cuts; a nudge perhaps in the direction likely to win seats in the South-east from the Conservatives. However, the Lib-Dems had much for which to hope and fight; **psephological** predictions of a hung parliament in the 2009–10 election raised much talk of which side he would swing to in any resultant coalition negotiations. The political positions of the Lib-Dems have never seemed to matter very much, as power has always seemed so far away. However, the possible prospect of a hung parliament made their evolving policy positions for once into matters of intense interest.

Coalition partners after May 2010

Clegg's decision to enter a Conservative-led Coalition Government worried many of his close colleagues, not to mention the substantial number of voters who had voted for his party, primarily to keep the Conservatives *out* of power. The Coalition Agreement of May 2010 found, surprisingly, much on which to agree but certain key areas were destined to cause problems:

1 *Health*: The agreement promised to sustain funding but to end '**top-down**' reorganisation. Unfortunately this was precisely what Tory Health Minister Andrew Lansley had in mind, not to mention an expansion of private sector involvement in the NHS. After Lib-Dems condemned some of these proposed changes an agonised debate took place within the Government, a 'pause for thought' was announced in May 2011.

2 *Constitutional reform*: Nick Clegg was given responsibility for this, in his role as Deputy Prime Minister, and his party was more than a little hopeful that the agreed referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV) system would be won and would open the way to the introduction of **proportional representation**, a system which would greatly advantage smaller parties and possibly deliver the Lib-Dems a decisive role in creating Coalition Governments. David Cameron, it had been widely rumoured, had promised, in deference to his Coalition partners, to take a back seat in the Conservative's 'No' campaign. However, his party persuaded him the AV system might prove a disaster to future Tory hopes of

ruling alone, so he threw himself into the campaign, and an issue on which only a few months earlier the country had been evenly balanced was voted down by a majority of two to one.

3 *Europe*: After voting reform the Liberal Democrats' most fervent passion is reserved for the EU. So, the party was devastated in December 2011 when Cameron returned from the 9th Brussels summit convened to save the euro, having vetoed the proposed treaty changes and effectively alienated the UK from the rest of the 26 members.

In conclusion

The Lib-Dems still nominally subscribe to a left-of-centre agenda, closer to Labour than the Conservatives, but the more market-oriented 'Orange Book' faction has found Coalition Government to its liking; in practice, the party has had to stand by and watch its dearest tenets attenuated by the exigencies of Coalition Government. Its dilemma is that this stance massively eroded its popular support.

BOX 5.4

The 'centre ground' in British politics

Because so many politicians think it is the route to political success, the 'centre ground' is a key concept in British politics. Studies show the self-perception of most people – maybe it's a feature of our political culture – would place them close to the middle of the left–right spectrum. Maybe most of us reject the idea of being on the extremes of left or right because such positions are thought to be impractical or even by some, irresponsible. 'Centre ground' sounds a bit like the 'sensible middle': it's rather a British thing. Being in the 'centre' therefore is to suggest supporting something sensible and achievable; policies on the 'extremes' are almost by definition neither. Ownership of the political centre therefore is a crucial objective, and if achieved, thought a guarantee of political success. *The Sunday Times* in 2008 suggested that 'British politics is a game in which each party tries to force the other off the centre ground'.

But what does the idea mean in policy terms? Does it mean a *fixed*, 'sensible' position on public expenditure, health and taxation? But what is 'sensible'? Surely these terms vary according to time and circumstance? If this is so then the centre ground has no permanent location or policy content: it can't be fixed but is in a state of constant flux, the concept itself essentially nebulous; describes a state of fluid consensus. The centre ground in the 1950s would have included possibly: high taxation, nationalised industries and a well-funded welfare state. In the 1990s these elements were replaced arguably by low taxation, privatisation and reduced welfare funding. So how does change occur? Partly by experience – for instance, nationalisation was seen to have largely failed by the 1980s – and partly through political agitation – leaving the EU was an 'extreme' policy in the 1990s but by 2013 UKIP, riding an anti-immigration wave, had forced it into the centre ground of achievable ideas.

Labour was perceived as 'extreme' in the 1980s, and it took the efforts of Kinnock, Blair and Brown to force it back into the centre. Similarly Conservatives were seen as extreme, out of touch and even 'nasty' in the first decade of the new millennium, but Cameron's efforts relocated it by 2010. When elected leader in July 2016, Theresa May, perceiving Labour's disarray, made a pitch for its part of the centre ground with appeals to those 'just about managing'.

Is it always an advantage to be in the 'centre'? Mostly yes, but sometimes, during times of stress and crisis, 'centre ground' risks being identified, along with other parties, of being overly cautious, unadventurous, even of advancing the interests of certain (usually rich) elites. This is when radical policies, like Brexit (or in the USA, the election of Donald Trump), gain traction and are preferred to the traditional parties which are seen to have failed. Alternatively a weakening of consensus can bring dangers from sharpening polarities. Nye Bevan, the Welsh left-wing socialist famously had little time for centrist ideas: 'We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run down' (*The Observer*, 6th December 1953). Language is so crucial in democratic politics: in British culture, 'extreme' has a negative connotation: 'centre ground' a positive one. Defining it is hard because it's a constantly moving target, an ongoing reflection of national political debate at any particular time.

The ideology of the Coalition project

The influential Conservative MP, Douglas Carswell, was quoted in *The Sunday Times* (18th November 2012) as writing:

> Bad government rules. A Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition ought to have worked – it could have been transformative. By fusing together Conservative ideas about the free market with the Liberal tradition of political radicalism, the government could have become a watershed administration. . . . But instead of change, too often the coalition has perpetuated the status quo.

Viewed from the ideological viewpoint this seems naïve indeed. To assert that such different ideological traditions could be so easily 'fused' stretches credibility. The Liberal Democrats have never been too keen on the free market, and their 'radicalism' has often required substantial public expenditure to be translated into reality. Given the Tory argument that public expenditure requires deep and rapid cuts, the project was always going to be hugely problematic, even before constitutional reform and diametrically opposed views on the EU are considered. After the 2015 election the party was returned with only eight MPs (nine after their by-election win December 2016), Clegg stood down and was replaced by Tim Farron. After the Referendum the Lib-Dems committed themselves to reversing the nation's decision, thereby attracting the support of many Labour members, disappointed at Corbyn's acceptance of the Leave result. Vince Cable was elected leader July 2017.

United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)

'UKIP is a sort of a bunch of . . . fruitcakes and loonies and closet racists', said David Cameron on LBC Radio in October 2006. But with 13 MEPs at the 2009 Euro elections – outpolling Labour – and beating the Liberal Democrats in polls, not to mention a number of electoral contests (not least coming second in the Eastleigh by-election, February 2013) plus a 146 council seats, UKIP at that time deservedly claimed to have become a 'mainstream' party of the first rank. However, Conservatives sought to marginalise the party by holding the referendum and arguably succeeding. UKIP and the Tories fought the Referendum via separate organisations and even though Nigel Farage was widely acknowledged as having (remarkably) achieved his aim of extracting Britain from the EU, it was not clear what role was now left for the party to fulfil. When Farage stood down the party's essential fragility was demonstrated via two shambolic leadership contests. Eventually Liverpudlian Paul Nuttall became leader declaring UKIP's job was to hold the government to account in fulfilling Brexit. He also declared war on Labour's northern constituencies, which he argued were ripe for takeover by a new working class-oriented party. There was much poll evidence to support such a contention, and Nuttall was given a good chance of winning the Stoke on Trent by election February 2017 given that Labour's candidate was pro Remain and voters had opted Leave by 67%. However, UKIP fought an inept campaign, and Labour won an apparently easy victory, suggesting UKIP's post-Referendum threat to other parties had been over-hyped. The 2017 election saw UKIP's vote shrink from 4m in 2015 to 1.6m in the June poll.

Impact of Brexit on Main UK Parties

There can be no doubt that the Referendum detonated something substantial into British politics, shining light on new divisions within the country and embracing a new element which makes the old left–right spectrum seem out of date. A majority of Conservative and of course UKIP voters voted Leave, but while over 60% of Labour supporters voted Remain, two thirds of their MPs represent constituencies voting Leave. Studies show people with degrees and living in cities tended to support Remain, while those leaving school earlier and living in rural or smaller towns tended to vote Leave. It might now be appropriate to add an 'open–closed' spectrum to British political thinking to complement the left–right axis. At the 'open' end would be those who favour more internationalism and welcome migrants from abroad; at the other end are those who reject internationalism, put their own national interests first and have no love of immigrants (see Chapter 4, p. 81). Perhaps the best symbol of what Brexit has done to perceived political ideas is summed up by George Osborne:

> Now we've moved more into the politics of identity than politics of economy.
>
> (quoted in Sylvester 2017)

General Election drags centre ground to left? As polling day approached, this is the contention of columnist Steve Richards (30th May 2017). Given Labour's shunt to the left under Corbyn – election offers included free university tuition, more taxes for the rich and selective renationalisation – it's clear that claiming the element of the centre ground thus vacated was a prime objective of Theresa May from her very first speech as Prime Minister. Her 2017 manifesto even went so far as to claim allegiance to remarkably left of centre values:

BOX 5.5

BRITAIN IN CONTEXT

Mainstream ideas and the political spectrum

As explained in Chapter 4, the political spectrum is usually represented from left to right, with unregulated free enterprise on the right and an anarchic or a communally owned economy on the left. Many of the ideas on the fringes – anarchism on the left or fascism on the right – would be regarded as extreme in the present day and unlikely to hold centre stage. Ideas likely to feature in the 'mainstream' of politics will usually be in the centre ground, that group of ideas which at any one time represents the general consensus of what people believe to be reasonable or legitimate political objectives.

Objectives which fall outside the mainstream are not automatic lost causes: repeated advocacy or changed circumstances can draw them into the centre – like anti-union legislation and privatisation during the early 1980s in the UK. During that same period the political spectrum was at its broadest in Britain with a near command economy being urged on Labour's left and a minimalist free enterprise state on the Thatcherite right. Since then ideological differences have narrowed significantly but they are arguably still wider in Britain than in the USA.

Naturally right-wing pro-capitalist ideas are powerful in the USA, often seen as the 'headquarters' of world free enterprise thinking. By the same token 'left-wing' ideas, together with the US mainstream, are further to the right than in the UK. Americans have traditionally regarded any left-wing idea as the thin end of a communist wedge and therefore to be resisted as 'unpatriotic', or not sufficiently 'American'. So even state-funded health services, commonplace in Europe, are seen from across the Atlantic as 'socialist' and therefore slightly sinister. Some theorists explain the weakness of US left-wing thinking as the consequence of 'hegemonic' right-wing ideas – ideas so deeply ingrained and powerful they squeeze the life out of any alternatives. It is certainly true that both major parties in the USA stoutly support free enterprise economics: even the Democrats urge economic growth and support business, though not with the visceral passion of the true-believing Republicans.

Within Europe political spectrums, as in Britain, have tended to shift rightwards. Capitalism is no longer seen as a system which necessarily disadvantages large groups of people, but rather as the motor of dynamic economic growth from which all can benefit. Consequently, communism faded away in the wake of the Cold War and most brands of left-wing socialism tended to follow suit. Former communist countries display a fascinating mix of ideas in their spectrums. During communism, as in most authoritarian regimes, the political spectrum was very narrow, containing virtually no options for genuine change.

Once the old pro-Moscow regimes imploded, however, they were replaced by volatile new democracies in which, as in Russia, wild nationalism was present together with some surviving residual old-style communism. Many Russians, relieved at the passing of communism, were alarmed by their new combustible democracy and associated social dislocation. They gratefully accepted the promise of security which the former KGB chief Putin offered as president, even if political choices were once again heavily circumscribed. It would seem to be the case that a wide political spectrum, offering the chance of usually limited change at any particular time, is a characteristic of democracies. Authoritarian regimes do not tend to offer much choice and seek to shrink their spectrums into an unchanging narrowness.

In the wake of Brexit and Trump's presidential victory in 2016, it was expected that the populist right-wing parties in Western Europe – for example France's Front Nationale (FN), Italy's Five Star Movement, Sweden's Sweden Democrats and Holland's Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom – would gain strength and pose an existential threat to mainstream parties throughout Western Europe. However, on March 18th 2017, Geert Wilders failed to beat Mark Rutte's VVD party, suggesting the populist drive had been, if not stopped then at least stalled. In the French elections of 7th May 2017, Marine Le Pen's far right FN was beaten by an unexpected landslide by the pro-EU centrist Emmanuel Macron. It seemed the advance of the populist right had stalled, at least for the foreseeable future (see also Box 5.1 on Ayn Rand).

We do not believe in untrammelled free markets. We reject the cult of selfish individualism. We abhor social division, injustice, unfairness and inequality. We see rigid dogma and ideology not just as needless but dangerous.

Margaret Thatcher would have had difficulty swallowing that declaration and Labour was maybe justified in doubting its sincerity.

General Election 8th June 2017 This election was the most sensational since 1997, possibly even 1945. By leading an ecstatically enthusiastic Labour campaign and winning 30 new seats for his party, Corbyn disproved the assumed axiom that Labour can never win an election from the left. Theresa May's lacklustre campaign proved that voters had tired of Tory austerity policies. Commentator Owen Jones (2017) noted that:

> while 35% of Britons agreed claimants were 'fiddling' in 2014, that figure fell last year to 22% – the lowest for three decades. Attitudes to public spending are being transformed too. Fewer than 30% of Britons now support slashing spending to help the economy: in 1996 it was 43%. . . . It's Labour's case that investment rather than cuts is winning the battle for public opinion.

Chapter summary

Conservatism is more than mere pragmatism in the ruling interest. It also includes a concern for unity, harmony and balance in a society based on property, equal opportunity, elite rule and gradual change. Margaret Thatcher gave major prominence to the neo-liberal strand in Conservatism, which stressed the primacy of markets in economics. Major returned to the rhetoric of 'one nation' Conservatism but contained the practice of Thatcherism. Labour began as a socialist party dedicated to the replacement of capitalism by a collectively owned economy but, in government, translated this into nationalisation, a policy of doubtful success. In opposition during the 1980s it gradually shed its socialist clothes and donned those of the free market and restricted public spending: in effect a compromise with Thatcherism. Liberal Democrats inherited the 'new liberal ideas' of the early twentieth century to which they added an initial disposition to work with the Labour Party in office, something which faded after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Coalition Government 2010–5 succeeded in lasting its full parliamentary term, but Cameron's offer of a referendum to appease his right wing and deflect the electoral threat of UKIP proved a disaster when Leave won the vote and the country was plunged into the complexities of Brexit.

Discussion points

- To what extent was Margaret Thatcher a Conservative?
- Did John Major contribute anything distinctive to Conservative thinking?
- Did Labour sell out its principles during the 1980s?
- To what extent did the political ideologies of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties genuinely overlap when the Coalition Government was being negotiated in May 2010?
- What influence did the Brexit vote have upon British political ideas?

Further reading

Andrew Heywood's *Political Ideologies* (1998) is a valuable though dated source, as is the similar book by Ian Adams (1998). The Giddens book, *The Third Way*, has been criticised as being too vague, but it is chock full of interesting ideas and more than repays a careful reading. Moran's *Politics and Governance in the UK* (2011) has an excellent Chapter 15 on this topic which is recommended. Tim Bale's *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron* (2013) is an excellent book published by the Polity Press.

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Conservative Party: www.conservatives.com
Institute of Economic Affairs: www.iea.org.uk
Institute of Public Policy Research: www.ippr.org.uk
Labour Party: www.labour.org.uk
Liberal Democrats: www.libdems.org.uk