

# **From Crisis to Coalition**

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The Conservative Party, 1997-2010

Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett and Peter Dorey

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# From Crisis to Coalition

The Conservative Party, 1997–2010

Conservatives  
It's time for change



Peter Dorey, Mark Garnett  
and Andrew Denham





*Also by Peter Dorey*

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## **The Conservative Party, 1997–2010**

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# Introduction

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Until quite recently it was customary for academic observers of the Conservative Party to introduce their books with a rueful acknowledgement that their favourite subject was not receiving the attention that it deserved. Whatever its political fortunes, the Labour Party always seemed to take the lion's share of scholarly notice. Certainly during their period of opposition between 1974 and 1979 only a handful of academics thought the Conservatives worthy of serious study, compared to the steady stream of books and articles which charted Labour's chequered career during the 1970s as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Academic trends shift slowly and, even after the advent of Mrs Thatcher, Labour remained the chief focus of interest. All too often, an interest in the contemporary party was taken as evidence of overt or concealed Conservative sympathies – not a wise outlook even to imply, when only 17 per cent of academics supported the party in the 1987 general election (compared to a quarter of the unemployed).<sup>2</sup> However, over time the balance has been redressed. An important landmark was the appearance, in 1994, of *Conservative Century* – a compendious collection of essays on all key aspects of the party's history since 1900.<sup>3</sup> The title of the book, which reminded readers of the astonishing success of the Conservatives during those years, could itself be seen as a stimulus to academic specialists in the field. In the same year, Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson published a study of Conservative Party members which revealed that their ranks were shrinking, and their average age had grown to 62.<sup>4</sup> For an academic book this volume won remarkable (and well-deserved) publicity; but it is instructive that it appeared two years *after* Seyd and Whiteley had produced a similar study of the Labour Party, which by that time had been out of office for more than a decade.<sup>5</sup>

If anything, the quality and quantity of research on the Conservatives has continued to grow since the party was buried under the Labour landslide of 1997. Indeed, having accepted that the Tories were worthy of study, academics were rewarded after 1997 with the opportunity to examine a party which was truly 'in crisis' for the first time in the post-war period.<sup>6</sup> True, the electoral defeats of 1945, 1963 and (February and October) 1974 had been deeply damaging; but on none of these occasions could it be argued plausibly that the existence of the party was at stake. In contrast, the 1997 defeat was magnified into a crisis because everyone except the Conservatives themselves realised that the party would have to renew itself if it hoped to regain its former status as the 'natural party of government'. The widespread complacency which retained its grip over the party until November 2003, when Iain Duncan Smith was dethroned as leader without fighting a general election, meant that by that time there were sound reasons for thinking that the Conservatives were on course for extinction.

The present volume aims to provide students of British politics, and general readers with a survey of the key developments within the Conservative Party since the election of 1 May 1997 – the 'wake-up call' which for so long went unheeded. To understand why the party collapsed in such a spectacular fashion, a concise overview of previous events is inescapable – not least because the party's history between 1975 and 1992 is so often misunderstood. There has been a tendency, even among former opponents of 'Thatcherism', to follow 'New' Labour in accepting that, love it or hate it, the

ideological position of the Conservative leadership formed an essential ingredient in the party's four consecutive victories of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the hard evidence discussed in [Chapter 2](#) indicates that Thatcher's Conservatives were not very popular at the outset, and the size of the parliamentary majorities were (almost) as misleading in terms of public appeal as the huge advantage later handed by the first-past-the-post voting system to their New Labour successors. Contemporary surveys of attitudes on certain key issues (taxation, unemployment, welfare, etc.) show that Mrs Thatcher's decisions in office performed the unlikely feat of making the values of the post-war 'consensus' *more*, rather than less, popular.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, as Philip Norton revealed in a key article published in 1990, Thatcherites constituted only a minority (19 per cent) of the parliamentary Conservative Party a decade after Mrs Thatcher became prime minister. They made up for their lack of numbers by their intellectual confidence, organisational strength and links to New Right think-tanks. By contrast, 18 per cent of Conservative MPs and ministers were classified by Norton as 'damps' or 'wets' (One Nation Conservatives, in effect), while the remaining 63 per cent of the party in parliament were agnostics or pragmatists, willing to support their leader – any leader – only for as long as he or she looked like a vote-winner.<sup>9</sup>

Since this contemporary evidence was disregarded by Thatcher's opponents, it is hardly surprising that it made so little impact on the Conservatives themselves. As a result, the party readily embraced an 'intellectualist fallacy', convincing itself that the ideas which had earned it the reputation of 'the nasty party' had actually ensured both electoral victories and policy successes during the 1980s. William Hague (1997–2001) and Iain Duncan Smith (2001–3) were incapable of appreciating the depth of public misgivings about Thatcherism; and although Michael Howard (2003–5) acknowledged the problem to a greater degree, his political career had prospered under Mrs Thatcher and he was unable to carry through the ideological transformation which some commentators (and ambitious young Conservative politicians) had sought to promote.<sup>10</sup> [Chapter 2](#) examines the record of the party in elections and opinion polls, and shows that, even after a third consecutive defeat in 2005, the Conservatives were still a long distance from convincing the voters that they could be trusted in office – further, arguably, than Labour had been in 1987, since in 2005 the Conservatives failed to unseat a discredited government whereas in 1987 Labour had confronted Thatcher at the height of her ideological 'triumphalism'.

Thus when David Cameron won the party leadership in December 2005 he took up the baton in what was proving to be a protracted uphill relay race back to Downing Street. [Chapter 3](#) interrogates the nature and extent of the ideological modernisation pursued under Cameron's leadership in the period up to the 2010 general election. The chapter shows that while the rhetoric invited the party to move on from Thatcherism – and the accompanying 'spin' fostered that impression in the media – the substance was much more equivocal. In hindsight, we argue, Cameron's ideological re-positioning after 2005 suggests a revision, rather than a rejection of Thatcherism. By focussing on social developments rather than economic philosophy, the new leader identified a key weakness in the Conservative Party's thinking under Thatcher. However, it can be argued that Cameron's response to recent social change was an attempt to apply Thatcherite ideas to a previously neglected area, rather than a decisive break from the creed which had left him with such an ambiguous legacy.

As we will see in [Chapter 3](#) especially, the notion of the 'Big Society', which Cameron increasingly canvassed despite the scepticism of some senior colleagues, could be seen as the counterpart to Thatcherite economics. Whereas Thatcherism proclaimed its concern to 'roll back the state' from the economic sphere, Cameron and his fellow modernisers promised to limit its social intervention

However, this implied a form of social liberalism, in terms of acceptance of ‘alternative’ family forms and sexual relationships, which was at odds with the ‘authoritarian’ support for traditional morality that the Thatcher governments had favoured in practice. Cameron’s argument that the ‘third sector’ of social enterprises and voluntary bodies would perform many of the welfare functions hitherto carried out by central and local government had been heard during the Thatcher/Major years (not least in a pamphlet written by his cousin, Ferdinand Mount).<sup>11</sup> However, the notion that many of the key functions previously performed by the state would readily be taken over by the institutions of ‘civil society’ (or the ‘little platoons’ which Edmund Burke had evoked in the late eighteenth century) seemed incompatible with the key Thatcherite assumption that ‘economically rational’ individuals need material incentives before undertaking any time-consuming task.

Cameron evidently believed that the theme of the ‘Big Society’ would acquire more resonance in the context of financial retrenchment. The coalition government proposed unprecedented expenditure cuts in order to eradicate the fiscal deficit by the time of the next general election. With the bulk of such cuts falling on the public sector and the welfare state, the ‘Big Society’ slogan was deployed as a means of persuading social enterprises of various kinds to step in and fill the gaps in provision left by the retreating state. Yet the practical evidence in the early days of the coalition suggested that ministers were not quite so idealistic about the resurrection of active citizenship in the UK. Rather, they assumed that profit-seeking companies would take over many state activities; so that in practice (and regardless of the leader’s original intentions), Cameron’s brand of ‘Conservatism’ could turn out to be little more than the application of Thatcherite dogma to those few remaining spheres of activity (such as health, and particularly education) which had previously escaped excessive exposure to free market reforms.

As opposition leader, Cameron faced the familiar danger that specific policies could be ridiculed or subjected to exaggerated ‘costing exercises’, or hijacked by the government if they were announced too early. The new leader’s approach is examined in [Chapter 4](#). A series of necessary policy reviews was set in train, including notable contributors (such as the plain-speaking rock star Bob Geldof, drafted in to advise on tackling global poverty) who had no previous links with the ‘nasty party’. However, policy initiatives were either closely controlled or subjected to qualified approval (at best) if they emerged at inopportune moments. For example, Cameron (and his shadow chancellor George Osborne) handled the issue of inheritance tax with notable skill, using it to rally support at the 2009 party conference when Gordon Brown seemed to be on the brink of cashing in on his early popularity as prime minister.

Again, hindsight suggests that policy ideas would be accepted by the leadership so long as they fitted with the overarching theme of the ‘Big Society’. The latter did provide the party with something like the distinctive ‘narrative’ which, allegedly, it had lacked since 1992. However, as noted above and discussed further in [Chapter 6](#), the narrative of the Big Society was not seen as especially coherent, even by the Conservative candidates who were supposed to sell it to the voters. The overall conclusion must be that although it was important for the party to be seen to be developing policies which would not alienate the voters in advance of an election, the main weapon in the Conservative armoury (as it had been during the Thatcher years) was public alienation from the Labour Party. This was similar to the context in which previous post-war Labour governments had fallen (1951, 1970 and 1979). Given that by 2010 the ‘time for a change’ argument had become irresistible – even if there was disagreement about the *nature* of the desired change – one can say that the cautious hand played by Cameron and his policy advisers had proved to be the wisest one, particularly as the economic outlook had changed so dramatically since Gordon Brown became prime minister in 2007.

During the 1980s, one strand of academic opinion attributed the electoral success of ‘Thatcherism’ not to ideology, but rather to a revival of Conservative ‘statecraft’.<sup>12</sup> This argument, which is addressed in [Chapter 1](#), is based on an implausible attempt to de-couple the electoral strategies of the Conservative Party between 1979 and 1990 from the ideas of its leader. It can be argued that, having forgotten after 1975 that its main purpose was to win power rather than lead a crusade, the Conservative Party suddenly remembered its traditional role when it chose David Cameron as its leader after the 2005 general election. The opinion polls between 2005 and 2010, and the results of parliamentary by-elections and other ‘real’ contests, tend to bear this out, as shown in [Chapter 2](#). However, as this chapter also shows, the evidence suggests that the public appreciated Cameron’s political skills while still reserving judgement on his party. Indeed, even by the time of the 2010 election, Cameron was more popular than the party he led, a factor which partly accounts for the Conservatives’ failure to win an outright victory on 6 May.

In previous periods of post-war difficulty for the Conservatives, their leaders have tended to endorse or even initiate bouts of institutional reform. David Cameron was chosen through a selection procedure which his predecessor as leader, Michael Howard, had tried to change – and for good reason, since on its first trial it had entrusted a position once occupied by Disraeli, Salisbury and Churchill to Iain Duncan Smith. As [Chapter 5](#) shows, Cameron was mainly concerned to effect a transformation of his party’s image not only through ideological modernisation and policy renewal but also by encouraging a change in the profile of its parliamentary candidates, especially in winnable seats. Critics had plausible reasons for arguing that this was a superficial approach to a problem which arose from a perceived lack of connection between representatives and the electorate rather than the imbalances of gender, sexual orientation or even racial origins in parliament.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the eruption of the parliamentary expenses scandal in 2009 could have been more damaging for the Conservatives than for the Labour government; but Cameron’s assured handling of the issue reinforces the idea that after the 2005 election the Tories had finally alighted upon a skilled exponent of ‘statecraft’.

Even so, and despite the advantages he had unwittingly been handed by Blair and Brown, Cameron failed to lead his party to outright victory in the May 2010 general election. In itself, the verdict summarised in [Chapter 6](#) demonstrates the lasting damage which had been inflicted on the party by the unappealing image it had created for itself during the 1980s, and its unruly behaviour after the drama of Mrs Thatcher’s deposition. Notoriously, the electoral system of 2010 did the Conservatives no favours, compared to 1979 when the party had been led by an individual who was less popular than her party. It can never be known how Margaret Thatcher would have fared in the 1979 election if a series of televised debates had been held before the poll. As it was, 2010 saw the first of such debates in Britain, and David Cameron initially proved disappointing in this format. Nevertheless, despite the ambiguities in his personal beliefs, the economic emergency which he inherited, and, after the poll, his rapid and decisive steps towards a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, he showed that his party had made the right decision when it chose him as leader in 2005.<sup>14</sup> As a result of that choice, although it would be premature to say that the Conservatives are no longer a party ‘in crisis’, their place at the forefront of British politics is probably assured in the short term. However, it might turn out that the 2010 general election (like that of 1992) was a good one to lose; and it is still open to question whether, after all of the organisational and ideological changes since 1979, the Conservative Party continues to be an institution with the kind of organic connection to communities (even those which typify ‘Middle England’) which provide it with the necessary ballast for long-term survival in an age

whose spirit is essentially uncongenial to its most loyal and vocal supporters.

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## Notes

1. For notable exceptions, see Robert Behrens, *The Conservative Party from Heath to Thatcher*, Farnborough, Saxon House, 1981 and John Ramsden, *The Making of Conservative Party Policy: The Conservative Research Department since 1929*, Harlow, Longman, 1980. Students of Conservative Party history will always have reason to regret that the late Professor Ramsden never produced a detailed account of the Thatcher years to follow up his excellent *The Winds of Change: Macmillan to Heath, 1951–1975*, Harlow, Longman, 1996.
2. David Willetts, *Modern Conservatism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992, 21.
3. Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (eds), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.
4. Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Jeremy Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994.
5. Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Labour's Grass Roots: The Politics of Party Membership*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.
6. Among the books alone, see Ian Gilmour and Mark Garnett, *Whatever Happened to the Tories?*, London, Fourth Estate, 1999; Peter Dorey (ed.), *The Major Premiership: Politics and Policies under John Major, 1990–97*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999; Mark Garnett and Philip Lynch (eds), *The Conservatives in Crisis*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003; Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Andrew Denham and Keiron O'Hara, *Democratising Conservative Leadership Selection: From Grey Suits to Grass Roots*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008; Peter Snowdon, *Back from the Brink: The Inside Story of the Tory Resurrection*, London, HarperPress, 2010; and Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron*, London, Polity Press, 2010.
7. Others have tried to rationalise their acceptance that there was 'no alternative' by playing down the ideological element; for prime example see Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era*, London, Simon & Schuster, 2009.
8. For a devastating survey of changing public attitudes during the Thatcher period, see Ivor Crewe, 'Has the Electorate Become Thatcherite?', in Robert Skidelsky (ed.), *Thatcherism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988, pp.25–49.
9. Philip Norton, 'The Lady's Not for Turning, but What About the Rest? Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party 1979–89', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 43.1, 1990, pp.41–58.
10. See, for example, John Gray, 'Michael Howard Might Turn out to be the Leader Who Lays Thatcher's Ghost', *New Statesman*, 10 November 2003. Ideas for 'decontaminating the Conservative brand' had begun to appear under Duncan Smith; see especially Edward Vaizey, Nicholas Boles and Michael Gove (eds), *A Blue Tomorrow: New Visions for Modern Conservative Politics*, London, Politicos, 2001, and Gary Streeter (ed.), *There is Such a Thing as Society: Twelve Principles of Compassionate Conservatism*, London, Politicos, 2002.
11. See, for example, Ferdinand Mount, *Clubbing Together: The Revival of the Voluntary Principle*, W.H. Smith Contemporary Papers, n/d.
12. For the classic exposition of this view see Jim Bulpitt, 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft', *Political Studies*, 34.1 (1985), pp.19–39.
13. For a forceful expression of this view see Peter Osborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, London, Simon & Schuster, 2007.
14. For a compelling account of David Cameron's background and beliefs see Francis Elliott and James Hanning, *Cameron: The Rise of the New Conservative*, London, HarperPerennial, 2009.

# The Art of Losing Elections: The Conservative Party and ‘Statecraft’, 1997–2005

In October 2007 the High Court reached a verdict in a legal dispute over a will. The testator was a Belgrade-born businessman, Branislav Kostic, whose disinherited son argued that his father’s final bequests had been inspired by a ‘delusional and paranoid mental illness’. The judge accepted that the will, in which Mr Kostic had left £8.3 million to the Conservative Party, could not have been the product of a ‘sound mind’.

Admittedly, the late Mr Kostic had carried his affection for the Tories and their leaders to lengths that would have unsettled even a *Daily Mail* leader-writer. For example, he believed that Margaret Thatcher had been sent to save the world from ‘satanic monsters and freaks’. Even the impeccably Conservative had decided that it was prudent not to take advantage of the terms of the will until the testator had been tested in court. Even so, there was something poignant in the fact that in 2007 a person’s posthumous generosity towards the Conservative Party could be taken as reasonable grounds for questioning his sanity. One wonders what the court’s verdict would have been if Mr Kostic had died soon after writing the will in the 1980s, while Mrs Thatcher was still in Downing Street slaying ‘satanic monsters’, rather than in the autumn of 2005 when the Conservatives had been out of office for almost a decade and faced the prospect of their fourth new leader in little over eight years.<sup>1</sup>

When she was ejected from power in 1990, Mrs Thatcher had left her party with a comparably dubious legacy. Over the three decades after 1979, a more exaggerated version of the post-war electoral cycle seemed to have become established in British politics. Each of the main parties won a succession of considerable majorities, based on unimpressive shares of the national vote. After the third of these victories, the governing party looked unassailable; but in reality it was growing vulnerable to hostile forces which had the potential to consign it to a crushing defeat next time round. In part, both the Conservatives in 1992 and Labour in 2010 were faced by a familiar electoral attitude summed up in the phrase ‘it’s time for change’; and secretly even the fatigued ministers of both parties might have been receptive to this view. But while in previous post-war decades this general mood had produced moderate swings towards the leading opposition party, between 1979 and 2010 it was reinforced by more dangerous developments. Years of untrammelled power can tempt a party into a series of decisions which offend various groups, activating a ‘Law of Accumulated Grievances’. This brings into being a coalition of voters who seek not just a defeat for the government, but rather a rout which will knock it out of serious contention for a generation. At the same time, the persisting sense of electoral complacency can make members of the governing party feel that they are absolved from the normal rules of political conduct. Eventually this gives rise to allegations of ‘sleaze’. In the phase of the new cycle, there is nothing that a governing party can do to stave off the inevitable verdict of the voters. It can perform policy U-turns; but it is likely to find that for every new friend it acquires it loses at least two old allies. It can change its leader; but even if this works in the short term (as it did for the Conservatives under John Major between 1990 and 1992) the final reckoning at the polls is likely to be only more complete.

While the scenario outlined above could be applied to the Conservatives between 1979 and 1992 and New Labour for the ensuing thirteen years, much more detailed analysis is required to provide an explanation for the travails which began for the Tories after the party had secured a third successive term of office in 1987. The starting point for the present discussion is a celebrated article by the late Professor Jim Bulpitt, published in 1986. Eschewing the most fashionable explanations of Mrs Thatcher's success, which in their various ways focused on ideology and widespread dissatisfaction with the post-war 'consensus', Bulpitt claimed that Thatcher's approach was best understood as an attempt to recover her party's aptitude for 'statecraft' – that is, 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office'.<sup>2</sup>

Bulpitt's attempt to rationalise the motivations underlying Thatcher's first decade as Conservative leader is vulnerable to criticism at several points.<sup>3</sup> Despite his strenuous efforts he does not succeed in disentangling his notion of 'statecraft' from the more orthodox ideological interpretations of the early Thatcher years; his analysis cannot efface the impression that ideology was integral to everything Mrs Thatcher did in politics, at least after she decided in late 1974 to contest the party leadership. Also, his thesis depends on the assumption that when Thatcherites and their opponents within the party were consciously undertaking one task (i.e., fighting to preserve or revise the post-war 'consensus') the *real* purpose was to achieve something quite different (i.e. to assert the superiority of rival understandings of 'statecraft'). Nevertheless, his general framework can help us to explain why the party so comprehensively *lost* 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office' after 1992.

Bulpitt identifies five key dimensions of 'statecraft': party management; a winning electoral strategy; 'political argument hegemony'; a governing competence; and 'another winning strategy'. For incumbent parties, like the Conservatives in 1992, the initial 'winning electoral strategy' is no longer relevant, and can thus be discarded. In the present discussion the remaining four elements will be discussed in turn, in an order which is intended to develop the argument rather than to suggest any priority among the different factors examined in Bulpitt's article.

### **Political argument hegemony**

By the time of her departure from office in 1990, Mrs Thatcher was widely accredited with inspiring Conservative victory in 'the battle of ideas'. In the name of a revived economic liberalism her party had defeated Labour three times, and seen off the electoral challenge from the Liberal/Social Democratic Alliance. Within her own party, her so-called 'wet' opponents had been picked off in piecemeal fashion, before and shortly after her re-election in 1983. Militant trade unionists and local government radicals had suffered morale-sapping defeats during Thatcher's second term. Thatcher even stayed in office long enough to celebrate the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

On the face of it, this record looks like more than ample evidence that the Conservatives had established 'political argument hegemony' under Thatcher. In fact, things were not quite so simple. In 1988 Ivor Crewe showed, on the basis of extensive survey evidence, that the electorate had emphatically *not* become 'Thatcherite' after almost a decade of resolute ideological direction from Downing Street.<sup>4</sup> This may have been because voters thought that the Conservatives had achieved all of their sensible goals, and should now desist from prosecuting the causes which they had brought in office with them; or that, with hindsight, those goals had not been worth prosecuting with such fervour in the first place. Either way, the evidence assembled by Crewe should have been sufficient to give



pause to anyone who thought that Mrs Thatcher owed her success to ideology rather than propitious circumstances. But at the time, the triumph of ‘Thatcherism’ seemed indisputable even to many of the prime minister’s ideological opponents. After suffering a third consecutive electoral defeat in 1987, the Labour Party embarked on a far-reaching policy review, with the unmistakable purpose of shedding commitments which offended a supposedly fully ‘Thatcherised’ electorate.

Although this process was well under way by 1990, it was incomplete before Labour’s fourth successive defeat, in 1992. Two years later Tony Blair became leader and persuaded his party to go further in its acceptance of Thatcherism than any observer could have predicted at the time that Bulpitt wrote his article. The death of Blair’s predecessor John Smith made little difference to the outcome of the next election – Labour would have coasted to victory in any case – but in hindsight that event can be seen as calamitous for the Conservatives, as well as for Labour supporters who continued to hope that their party would continue to offer effective resistance to Conservative ‘political argument hegemony’.

Mrs Thatcher herself counted the creation of New Labour among her greatest achievements.<sup>5</sup> If, in itself, this suggests that her main priority had been the promotion of a specific ideology, rather than the restoration of Conservative ‘statecraft’ or even the preservation of her own party as a leading force in British politics. Whether or not Blair should be considered a Thatcherite, it is reasonable to suppose that he would never have been selected as a Labour parliamentary candidate had he espoused in 1994 the approach which he implemented after 1994, starting with the erasure of the old Clause IV from the party’s constitution. He was only able to impose his will on Labour’s activists because they, with varying degrees of reluctance, had convinced themselves that the Conservatives had established ‘political argument hegemony’: from this perspective, Thatcher had been right to assert that there really was ‘no alternative’.

These developments point to a counter-intuitive flaw in Bulpitt’s analysis. The establishment of ‘political argument hegemony’ *ought* to be part of a winning electoral formula. But if the victory in the ‘battle of ideas’ at elite level is so complete that the main opposition party capitulates on the main points and continues to quibble over only the details of policy, the electoral advantage can be nullified or even turned against the ‘winning’ side, which can be vulnerable to a public demand for fresh faces if all other considerations are roughly equal. In other words, Bulpitt could with more reason have written about the need for ‘political argument *parity*’ – or even sufficient *plausibility* to win a serious hearing from the electorate – rather than adopt the Gramscian notion of ‘hegemony’ which was fashionable on the left at the time that his article was written.

In the 1997 general election campaign the Conservatives suffered grievously from the effects of their presumed victory in the ‘battle of ideas’. It was too easy for party strategists to assume either that Blair would push the Labour Party past its limits of tolerance, provoking a disastrous schism at some convenient moment before polling day, or that even if New Labour stayed ‘on message’ the public would refuse to accept the sincerity of its conversion. As it was, the party’s failure to rebel against Blair’s open endorsement of the broad outlines of Thatcherite economic policy – in particular the pledge not to increase any of the existing rates of income tax, which senior Labour figures had criticised bitterly when they were established in 1988 – left Conservative strategists with an invidious choice.<sup>6</sup> They could either shift their policy stance to the right – thus threatening their own ‘political argument hegemony’ by appearing more extreme than Thatcher herself – or claim that Blair was much more left-wing than his programme implied. The latter approach was adopted when the Conservatives unveiled their ‘demon eyes’ posters in the year before the 1997 election; but these only betrayed the

desperation since Blair's public image was more akin to Bambi than Beelzebub.<sup>7</sup> Even worse for the Tories, branding Blair a closet communist only handed him a welcome opportunity to re-emphasise his intentions in office – namely to adorn Thatcherism with the human face which the Conservatives themselves had never managed to provide.

For the Conservatives this was particularly galling; their historic role, after all, was to steal attractive policies from the left, and now the roles were comprehensively reversed. Geoffrey Wheatcroft has claimed that as far as Thatcherism was concerned 'Blair took the meat and left the Tories the bones'.<sup>8</sup> This is somewhat misleading; one could just as easily claim that in Nigel Lawson's tax-slashing budget of 1988 the Tories had guzzled all of the meat in one orgiastic meal leaving them little further scope to offer material incentives for would-be Conservative voters. However, it is certainly true that after their 1997 defeat the Tories were condemned to subsist on scraps that might fall from Tony Blair's table. After the second Conservative defeat in 2001 some senior Tories realised the role that imputed 'political argument hegemony' had played in making the party feel invulnerable. In 2002, for example, the then Chief Whip David Maclean admitted that after the 1997 result 'there was an attitude that the British people had made a terrible mistake and all we had to do was put the arguments in the right way and they would come back to their senses'. Although the Chief Whip had evidently embarked on the learning process, most other members of the party were still unable to grasp what had happened to them; Maclean gave that interview shortly after the rank and file had alighted upon the unelectable Iain Duncan Smith as the best person to lead the party back into office. Even by the time of the next election in 2005, the Conservatives had not recovered from Blair's audacity in enrolling the Labour Party as a stakeholder in Thatcherite 'political argument hegemony'. 'We are far too slow in learning the lessons from Blair', one 'senior Conservative' admitted after the 2005 election – when Blair had been Labour's leader for eleven years.<sup>10</sup> Not only was this a spectacular admission of the failure of Conservative 'statecraft' between 2001 and 2005, but it also carried the ominous implication that when they devised their strategy for the next election the Tories would still be trying to understand how New Labour managed to win in 1997, rather than focusing on the very different circumstances of 2010.

## Governing competence

A common view at the time of the 1992 general election was that the Conservatives had never flinched from unpopular decisions, and that although these had often caused hardship they had turned out to be efficacious. Certainly compared with Labour between 1974 and 1979, the Conservatives had given concrete evidence of their 'governing competence'. The result of the 1992 election is often explained as an example of the electorate 'clinging to nurse for fear of finding something worse'. The Conservative nurse had usually administered unpleasant medicine, but in 1979 the British patient really had required a succession of unsugared doses of reality. As Ivor Crewe put it, 'Cohesion, purpose and success take precedence over ideology and policy in voters' eyes; that is the lesson of Mrs Thatcher's and Thatcherism's astonishing success.'<sup>11</sup> As time would tell, it was actually only *part* of the lesson; the fact that the voters had continued to offer sufficient (though hardly overwhelming) support to Mrs Thatcher *despite* their deep misgivings about her principles did not rule out the possibility that one day those misgivings would burst to the surface, with mortifying consequences for Thatcher's successors. Almost certainly the day of reckoning would have come for the Conservatives if they had not changed their leader in 1990. But soon after taking over from Thatcher, John Major rose to the challenge of war in the Persian Gulf, thus apparently proving the

even after an unexpected change at the top the Conservatives could produce a substitute with the necessary attributes for national leadership, while his more emollient personality suggested a period of relative tranquility after Thatcherite *sturm und drang*.

From Bulpitt's perspective, the restoration of Conservative 'governing competence' was the central aim of Mrs Thatcher's programme in 1979. In particular, he nominated monetarism as 'a superb (or lethal) piece of statecraft', because in significant ways it allowed economic management to be 'depoliticised'. For example, it enabled the central state to withdraw from economic micromanagement in the form of incomes policy. In Thatcher's second term, the developing programme of denationalisation had similar significance. Meanwhile, the Conservatives were trying to work out a way of separating administration from policy-making by 'hiving off' important governmental functions to semi-autonomous agencies ('quangos'), whose main purpose was to 'depoliticise' mistakes which would once have been blamed on the 'responsible' minister.

Writing in 1988, Ivor Crewe opined that 'Strong government is an electoral card dealt only to Conservative leaders'.<sup>12</sup> In view of the turmoil within the Labour Party since it lost the 1970 general election this was not an unreasonable judgement at the time. Unfortunately for the Conservatives more than one party could play at Thatcher's version of 'statecraft' – a game which promised a comparatively easy life for incoming ministers. It was no accident that New Labour's first decision after the 1997 general election was to relinquish responsibility for interest rate policy to the Bank of England – a 'piece of statecraft' that was all the more 'superb (or lethal)' because Conservative Chancellors Nigel Lawson and Kenneth Clarke had both favoured it without being able to put it into practice. The Catch-22 for the Conservatives, in short, was that if the policy of hiving-off proved successful they would have provided opposition parties with a model to emulate; and if it failed, the whole idea of revived Conservative 'governing competence' would fall to the ground.

As it happened, the Conservatives got the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, their institutional and policy changes did make it harder for future ministers to be held responsible for mistakes. But this reduced the chances that the Conservatives could indict New Labour for incompetence once the next electoral cycle had run its course. On the other hand, even within the new, more restricted sphere of direct government action the Conservatives made very serious mistakes, which did not pass unnoticed by the public even though the party continued to win elections. Professor Crewe was right to argue that voters set a high premium on 'Cohesion, purpose and success'; but after 1990 the Conservative Party had a distinctly mixed record in all of these respects. Ironically, the most damaging of the Conservative errors was Mrs Thatcher's decision to allow sterling to join the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) just before she left office in 1990. On this issue, Nigel Lawson and his predecessor as Chancellor, Sir Geoffrey Howe, acted broadly in accordance with Bulpitt's notion of 'statecraft' insofar as they believed that ERM membership would be the most effective way of 'de-politicising' British monetary policy. However, for several years they were thwarted by Thatcher, whose opposition to the ERM ultimately derived from nationalistic impulses. The supporters of ERM membership were unable to take effective action until Mrs Thatcher's political position was suitably weakened. Unfortunately for them (and for Conservative 'statecraft') this coincided with a time when the currency was over-valued, leading to the notorious 'Black Wednesday' of September 1992 when sterling was forced out of the ERM in humiliating (and expensive) circumstances. Thus, the most serious breach in the Conservatives' reputation for 'governing competence' was directly attributable to decisions taken in Mrs Thatcher's third term. The same period also saw the introduction of the ill-conceived Community Charge or Poll Tax, despite the opposition of key Thatcherite insiders like Lawson, who rightly anticipated that this half-baked product of economic liberal fantasy would prove

disastrous for the Conservatives.

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## Party management

In his 1986 article, Bulpitt paid relatively little attention to the question of party management, for reasons that must have seemed persuasive at the time. After all, the internal ructions which followed the deposition of Edward Heath in 1975 had apparently subsided a decade later. Bulpitt's account suggests that although party management 'is a continuous problem for party leaders', the fact that Margaret Thatcher had outfaced her internal opponents could be taken as evidence that the Conservatives were much better at maintaining unity in the ranks than their Labour opponents, and by the time that Bulpitt wrote his article Labour was verifying his remark by engaging in public wrangles with members of the 'entryist' Militant Tendency.

Back in 1986, Bulpitt could be excused for failing to anticipate the fratricidal squabbles unleashed within the Conservative Party by Mrs Thatcher's Bruges speech of September 1988. Yet that occasion ensured that for almost twenty years party management was an impossible task for Conservative leaders. The issue of Europe proved divisive at all levels, from the cabinet to the grassroots, so that the euro-moderate John Major found himself in July 1993 labelling some of his truculent cabinet colleagues as 'bastards'. Tony Blair later landed a palpable blow on Major at prime minister question-time, when he boasted that he led his party while Major could only trail in the wake of his own 'militants'. Underlying the disloyalty of Conservative cabinet members and backbenchers was a recalcitrant (albeit shrinking and ageing) party membership, which seemed determined to disprove the dubious notion that loyalty was the secret weapon of the Conservative Party. It was no secret that the opponents of Major's pragmatic approach towards Europe enjoyed the support of Margaret Thatcher, whose conduct in retirement suggests that if she had ever wanted the Conservative Party to restore its reputation for 'statecraft' her commitment to this project had waned dramatically as soon as she left office.

Europe was not the only issue over which the party lost self-control in the decade after its third successive victory, in the 1987 general election. A surreal succession of scandals, both financial and sexual, afflicted the party of the family and of economic rectitude in the 1990s. Although this sorry saga was given additional impetus by sections of the media which had fallen out of love with the Conservatives since Thatcher's downfall, in part it was fuelled by serious mistakes among party managers. In a fateful moment John Major decided that the best way to fight back from the ERU fiasco and the melee over Maastricht was to unveil to the 1993 party conference a new slogan – 'Back to Basics'. Although Major was clearly hoping to use the phrase as part of a fight-back on the key issue of 'governing competence', in media briefings his speech was interpreted as an appeal to old-fashioned moral values. Since so many Conservative MPs had heartily embraced the modern outlook on such matters – and Major himself had a private life which was not free from complications – the whole 'Back to Basics' project was clearly launched without adequate consideration of potential 'blow-back'.

The man who had been elected as the least divisive of the three Conservative leadership candidates in 1990 was left looking hopelessly weak as he struggled to keep his turbulent troops under control. In June 1995 Major resigned from the party leadership in order to fight for his position at a time of his choosing, rather than letting things slide until the inevitable challenge materialised at the end of the parliamentary year. His failure to secure the support of more than two-thirds of his colleagues in the contest against the euro-fixated Thatcherite John Redwood made the outcome of the ballot a distinct

pyrrhic victory for the prime minister. The remainder of Major's premiership presented a bizarre contrast, between the party's continuing torment over Europe (symbolised by the government's impotent protests over an export ban on British beef products) and the deft management of the economy by Kenneth Clarke. In the latter respect the last four years of Conservative rule really do offer some glimpses of 'statecraft'. But since the party was sure to lose the next election from the moment of Britain's ejection from the ERM this was entirely counterproductive; it merely ensured that New Labour would inherit a sound economy. Once they had returned to opposition the Conservatives denied themselves any profit from Clarke's proven skills in the art of 'statecraft', since his moderately favourable attitude towards the developing European Union ruled him out as a potential leader of the Tory fight-back.

### **Another winning strategy**

In hindsight, the long-term interests of the Conservative Party would have been served by a (narrow) electoral defeat in 1992. As we have seen, many of the reasons why the party lost so disastrously in 1997 were in place before the 1992 election. However, old habits die hard, and in the circumstances of 1992 party strategists were anxious to argue that a Labour government would be detrimental to British interests. It was still possible to develop 'another winning strategy' in 1992, even if it involved much negative campaigning like the wilful exaggeration of Labour proposals on taxation and *The Sun*'s persistent attempts to vilify Labour's leader Neil Kinnock.

The problem for the Conservatives was that it proved all too easy to misinterpret the result of the 1992 general election. The victory had been secured in defiance of almost all of the pundits and the opinion polls, and in the midst of another serious recession. It looked like the crowning triumph of Conservative 'statecraft', proving that the usual ebb and flow of post-war electoral politics had been superseded. If the Tories could succeed in such unpropitious circumstances, surely they could never lose. In reality, as Hywel Williams has noted, 'they had been bought on approval and would have to keep their promises'.<sup>13</sup> Among the latter was a pledge not to increase Value Added Tax (VAT) on domestic fuel which had previously been exempt. Within a year of the election, the government was forced to go back on its word, imposing VAT on domestic fuel which had previously been exempt.

This breach of a pre-election promise, just a few months after the humiliating withdrawal from the ERM, suggests another refinement to Bulpitt's thesis. There are times when 'another winning strategy' is the last thing that a party needs; or rather, victory in an election can sometimes be the best way to ensure that a party will lose the next one by a crushing margin. While it was indeed remarkable that the Tories won in 1992 – on the basis of a record tally of more than 14 million votes – the reality was that the contest gave them an overall parliamentary majority of just 21 seats, leaving the government painfully exposed to the whims of just a handful of rebellious MPs. Even worse from the point of view of 'statecraft', the inaccuracy of most opinion polls in 1992 was attributable at least in part to a 'spiral of silence' – in this context, a refusal of voters to give honest replies to researchers, apparently because they were ashamed of owning up to their intention of voting for the Conservative party next time, unless Major proved a resounding success in his first full term of office. But this was never likely, with a reduced majority, a complacent party, and a horde of well-nurtured Conservative chickens about to come home to roost.

If the internal problems of the Conservative Party were not enough, as we have seen the four consecutive defeat for Labour cleared the last obstacle from the path of an opposition leader who

accepted at face value the 'political argument hegemony' allegedly established by the Conservatives under Thatcher. In 1997 any vestigial chance that the Tories would stumble upon yet another winning strategy was torpedoed by the emergence of the Referendum Party, to mop up the support of Conservative voters who demanded a more forthright style of opposition towards 'Europe'. Whatever its precise electoral impact, the intervention of the Referendum Party and the panic-stricken response among Conservative candidates shows that any pretence of 'statecraft' had evaporated by this time.

### Conservative 'statecraft', 1979–1990

If one accepts Bulpitt's thesis that the Conservatives owed their success under Thatcher to a recovery of 'statecraft', the story of the party's subsequent decline seems obvious: under Major, it forgot how to practise that invaluable art. However, this is easier to state than to explain. If the exercise of 'statecraft' proved so successful between 1979 and 1990, why did the party forgo such a 'lethal' approach to politics? We have seen that in some senses the Conservatives were victims of their own successes, especially in the field of 'political argument hegemony'. Yet surely a party which acknowledged the importance of 'statecraft' would not have scored so many spectacular own-goals after 1990?

The most plausible answer to this apparent conundrum is that Bulpitt's account of Conservative 'statecraft' provides a misleading picture of the party's intentions and situation between 1979 and 1990: in other words, that the imputed recovery of 'statecraft' is a myth. Margaret Thatcher, like all her post-war predecessors, wanted to win elections; indeed, her urge to build an 'election winning strategy' after 1975 was unusually potent, given her genuine detestation of 'Old' Labour and her knowledge that electoral defeat would put an abrupt and unpleasant end to her political career. However, very few political leaders have sought to lose elections; so the fact that Thatcher wanted to win can hardly serve as an adequate basis for a challenge to more 'orthodox' interpretations which draw on a wide range of empirical evidence. Beyond this, all of Bulpitt's points can be questioned in a manner that helps to explain why the Tories lost so comprehensively in 1997.

Taking first the idea of 'political argument hegemony', Bulpitt was far from being the only commentator to attribute this status to Mrs Thatcher's ideas in the mid 1980s. It is significant that his article appeared in the year after the defeat of the miners' strike, which was regarded on both left and right as the decisive political encounter of these years. Yet the notion of Thatcherite 'hegemony' was most prevalent among left-leaning academics, whose argument can be explained as a product of 'pessimism of the intellect' rather than an objective account of the 'battle of ideas' during Thatcher's first two terms.<sup>14</sup> Dismayed that a significant proportion of the British electorate had proved susceptible to Thatcher's socio-economic simplicities, their responses betrayed a suspicion that virtually *everyone* had been affected. This is not demonstrably false; people who continued to vote for opposition parties might have done so under the impulse of motives which had nothing to do with political arguments. However, the electoral evidence even in Thatcher's triumphalist heyday, and the findings of opinion surveys at the same time, suggest that the term 'hegemony' was being stretched beyond its limits when applied to political debate in the mid 1980s. As we have seen, even on the most sceptical reading of opinion polls relating to attitudes, the experience of Conservative government after 1979 made the British electorate *less* 'Thatcherite', not more.<sup>15</sup> Since Thatcher was a uniquely divisive figure in post-war British politics, the fact that the main opposition parties shared about 50 per cent of the vote in the pivotal, post-Falklands 1983 election – up from less than 51 per cent in 1979 – really should have been sufficient to quash any talk about 'political argument hegemony'.

among serious academic observers who paid attention to developments beyond the elite level. In 1986, far from collapsing in the face of Conservative 'hegemony', the combined vote share of Labour and the Liberal/SDP Alliance edged up again, albeit very slightly.

It is somewhat ironic that, when scholars hotly dispute the reality of the post-war 'consensus', the failure of opposition parties to topple Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives has so often been used as the basis for claims about 'political argument hegemony'. In 1951, 1955 and 1959, when the front benchers of the two major parties differed about the details of policy rather than fundamentals, Labour and the Conservatives shared more than 90 per cent of the vote; and yet academics continue to quibble about the use of the word 'consensus', which has much weaker connotations than 'hegemony'. It can be argued, indeed, that Mrs Thatcher did not even establish 'political argument hegemony' within her own party. Although most of the senior 'wets' had been removed from the cabinet when Bulpitt's article appeared, they remained unconvinced by Thatcher's arguments and were still strongly represented on the government benches. In particular, prominent Tories like the ex-premier Edward Heath and the former cabinet minister Sir Ian Gilmour continued to deny the credibility and efficacy of monetarism, which Bulpitt made the centrepiece of his 1986 article on 'statecraft'.

During Neil Kinnock's period of leadership (1983–92), left-wing politicians like Tony Benn accused Labour strategists of making repeated concessions to 'Thatcherism'. Even so, in 1992 both Labour and the Liberal Democrats presented distinctively non-Thatcherite programmes to the electorate, and in combination they secured a level of public support which broadly corresponded to that of 1979, 1983 and 1987. In reality, unhappy commentators like Benn were identifying a *trend* towards the acceptance of Thatcherism, rather than the fact of a Labour capitulation. Only when Tony Blair succeeded John Smith as Labour leader in 1994 could it be argued with any plausibility that the main opposition party had embraced the key elements of Conservative political arguments; and by that time, of course, the Conservative Party itself was in terminal trouble.

The most common explanation of Conservative decline was a popular perception that the party lacked 'governing competence'; and it is often argued that this was a new development, wholly attributable to Major's maladministration. However, the idea that Mrs Thatcher and her allies had succeeded in restoring the party's reputation for competence can be only based on a selective reading of the evidence, and an ultimate dependency on the unquestionable fact that under her leadership the Conservatives won three consecutive elections. By post-war standards, the record of the 1979–83 government is open to serious question. The level of inner-city unrest in 1981, partly provoked by soaring youth unemployment, indicated unprecedented levels of contempt for the rule of law under the stewardship of the 'party of law and order'. The Falklands War, which ultimately helped the government to win re-election in 1983, can be attributed to avoidable government mistakes which led to ministerial resignations (even if the wrong ministers resigned). The record in the second term marked an improvement, although Mrs Thatcher thought that the Westland Affair of 1986 could bring her down.<sup>16</sup> Since this crisis related to Thatcher's style of government, it provided an unfortunate context for the appearance in the same year of Bulpitt's article about 'statecraft'. In the third term bitter disagreements concerning economic management precipitated the resignation of the Chancellor Nigel Lawson. Afterwards Mrs Thatcher capped a mixed record in office with the self-inflicted wound of the Poll Tax. It is difficult to disagree with Christopher Stevens' view that if Thatcher was to be judged entirely on the record of her third term, 'she would almost certainly be accounted one of the major failures of the twentieth century'.<sup>17</sup> The opinion polls of the time are ample evidence that the electorate shared this view; by the time of her departure only a quarter of voters approved of the prime minister, compared to more than half in the months after the 1987 general election.

Although Thatcher's record in government will continue to be disputed, even commentators who regard 1979–90 as an heroic period would have to admit that it was marked to an unusual degree by what tennis statisticians would mark down as 'unforced errors'. This conclusion might be rationalised into a backhanded testament to Mrs Thatcher's success in restoring 'governing competence'; on this view, while her predecessors had failed to overcome a range of serious problems facing Britain, she took the right decisions on the key questions and blundered only over the inessentials. However, the errors concerned key issues (the Falklands, Britain's membership of the ERM, etc.), as well as more trivial matters which were allowed to escalate into major crises (Westland). From the eurosceptic viewpoint, the second term witnessed Mrs Thatcher's most culpable error – her approval of the Single European Act.

The story concerning party management is more complicated, but the broad outlines support the impression that Conservative problems after 1997 originated in the years *before* 1990, when the party was supposedly enjoying the benefits of revived 'statecraft'. It would be a mistake, for example, to underestimate the long-term effects of Edward Heath's enforced departure from the party leadership in 1975. Although loyalty to an incumbent leader had never been a distinctive Conservative trait, the rebellion against Heath caused serious disquiet among constituency parties and even after Thatcher became prime minister many grassroots members continued to express support for her predecessor. Having herself shown sufficient courage to challenge the party leader, Mrs Thatcher was subjected to regular rumours of a similar backbench mutiny during the most difficult months of her first term. Eventually, the same electoral mechanism which supplanted Heath was used to unseat her, and presumably no one had foreseen that rules which permitted a challenge if only two anonymous MPs were prepared to put a name forward might be used against an incumbent prime minister, although the procedure had been fashioned in order to supplant a leader who had just lost two general elections within little more than six months.

Even so, the fact remained that whereas Heath was removed having lost three of the four elections he contested as leader, Mrs Thatcher was deposed despite her unblemished electoral record. One explanation for this discrepancy is that between 1979 and 1990 the nature of the parliamentary party changed significantly; the Conservative ranks were increasingly occupied by 'career politicians', who risked losing their livelihoods along with their seats if they were led into the next general election by inexperience. Labour was hardly free from careerists in these years; and yet Neil Kinnock, who was clearly not a significant electoral asset, was allowed to retain the party leadership for nine years before leaving the post of his own volition in 1992. There was, in short, something distinctive about the Conservative Party in 1990; and it is not fanciful to attribute the difference to the impact of 'Thatcherism'. More than any other factor, the unsentimental self-interest of Conservative MPs contributed to Mrs Thatcher's downfall; and if 'Thatcherism' has a unifying theme it can be found in the proposition that 'rational' self-interest is a natural impulse which is a better guide to decision-making than the 'drivelling and drooling' of 'do-gooders'.

If Mrs Thatcher's version of 'statecraft' helped in the production of a cohort of MPs who were willing to ditch a leader whose proven potency was waning, generalisations about the nature of the grassroots party are more hazardous. One fact is tolerably clear: Mrs Thatcher's electoral success did not reflect a surge in applications for party membership, and her replacement by John Major did nothing to arrest the downward trend. Improbable estimates as late as 1984 placed the ranks of the faithful at over one million, but by 1997 they had almost certainly shrunk to little over 250,000.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the failure to refresh the ranks, an academic survey found that by the mid 1990s the average age of Conservative members was 62.<sup>19</sup> Such a precipitate decline hardly testifies to a recovery



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