From Crisis to Coalition

The Conservative Party, 1997-2010
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Conservatives
It's time for change

Conservati... Conservative

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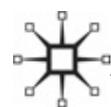
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Introduction

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.[1]

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).[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5]

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.[6] True, the electoral defeats of 1945, 1966 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 fou
consecutive victories of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992.[7] In fact, the hard evidence discussed in Chapter
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 advantag
later handed by the first-past-the-post voting system to their New Labour successors. Contempora
surveys of attitudes on certain key issues (taxation, unemployment, welfare, etc.) show that M
Thatcher's decisions in office performed the unlikely feat of making the values of the post-w
'consensus' *more,* rather than less, popular.[8]

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

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

   Thus when David Cameron won the party leadership in December 2005 he took up the baton in wh
was proving to be a protracted uphill relay race back to Downing Street. Chapter 3 interrogates t
nature and extent of the ideological modernisation pursued under Cameron's leadership in the perio
up to the 2010 general election. The chapter shows that while the rhetoric invited the party to move
from Thatcherism – and the accompanying 'spin' fostered that impression in the media – th
substance was much more equivocal. In hindsight, we argue, Cameron's ideological re-positionin
after 2005 suggests a revision, rather than a rejection of Thatcherism. By focussing on soci
developments rather than economic philosophy, the new leader identified a key weakness in th
Conservative Party's thinking under Thatcher. However, it can be argued that Cameron's response t
recent social change was an attempt to apply Thatcherite ideas to a previously neglected area, rath
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 increasing
canvassed despite the scepticism of some senior colleagues, could be seen as the counterpart
Thatcherite economics. Whereas Thatcherism proclaimed its concern to 'roll back the state' from th
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 form and sexual relationships, which was at odds with the 'authoritarian' support for traditional morali that the Thatcher governments had favoured in practice. Cameron's argument that the 'third sector' social enterprises and voluntary bodies would perform many of the welfare functions hitherto carrie out by central and local government had been heard during the Thatcher/Major years (not least in pamphlet written by his cousin, Ferdinand Mount).[11] However, the notion that many of the ke functions previously performed by the state would readily be taken over by the institutions of 'civ 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' individua need material incentives before undertaking any time-consuming task.

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

As opposition leader, Cameron faced the familiar danger that specific policies could be ridicule subjected to exaggerated 'costing exercises', or hijacked by the government if they were announce too early. The new leader's approach is examined in Chapter 4. A series of necessary policy revie was set in train, including notable contributors (such as the plain-speaking rock star Bob Geld 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 be if they emerged at inopportune moments. For example, Cameron (and his shadow chancellor Georg Osborne) handled the issue of inheritance tax with notable skill, using it to rally support at the 20 party conference when Gordon Brown seemed to be on the brink of cashing in on his early populari as prime minister.

Again, hindsight suggests that policy ideas would be accepted by the leadership so long as th fitted with the overarching theme of the 'Big Society'. The latter did provide the party with somethi like the distinctive 'narrative' which, allegedly, it had lacked since 1992. However, as noted above a discussed further in Chapter 6, the narrative of the Big Society was not seen as especially coherer even by the Conservative candidates who were supposed to sell it to the voters. The overall conclusi must be that although it was important for the party to be seen to be developing policies which wou not alienate the voters in advance of an election, the main weapon in the Conservative armoury (as had been during the Thatcher years) was public alienation from the Labour Party. This was similar the context in which previous post-war Labour governments had fallen (1951, 1970 and 1979). Give that by 2010 the 'time for a change' argument had become irresistible – even if there w disagreement about the *nature* of the desired change – one can say that the cautious hand played Cameron and his policy advisers had proved to be the wisest one, particularly as the economic outlo 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'.[12] This argument, which 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 . 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 imbalances of gender, sexual orientation or even racial origins in parliament.[13] 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.[14] 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.

Notes

1. For notable exceptions, see Robert Behrens, *The Conservative Party from Heath to Thatcher*, Farnborough, Saxon House, 198... and John Ramsden, *The Making of Conservative Party Policy: The Conservative Research Department since 1929*, Harlo... Longman, 1980. Students of Conservative Party history will always have reason to regret that the late Professor Ramsden nev... produced a detailed account of the Thatcher years to follow up his excellent *The Winds of Change: Macmillan to Heath*, 195... *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 Univers... Press, 1994.

4. Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Jeremy Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxfo... 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, 199... Peter Dorey (ed.), *The Major Premiership: Politics and Policies under John Major, 1990–97*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 199... Mark Garnett and Philip Lynch (eds), *The Conservatives in Crisis*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003; Kev... Hickson (ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Andr... Denham and Keiron O'Hara, *Democratising Conservative Leadership Selection: From Grey Suits to Grass Roots*, Manchest... Manchester University Press, 2008; Peter Snowdon, *Back from the Brink: The Inside Story of the Tory Resurrection*, Londo... 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; fo... 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 Beco... 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 Statesm...* 10 November 2003. Ideas for 'decontaminating the Conservative brand' had begun to appear under Duncan Smith; s... especially Edward Vaizey, Nicholas Boles and Michael Gove (eds), *A Blue Tomorrow: New Visions for Modern Conservative...* London, Politicos, 2001, and Gary Streeter (ed.), *There is Such a Thing as Society: Twelve Principles of Compassion... Conservatism*, London, Politicos, 2002.

11. See, for example, Ferdinand Mount, *Clubbing Together: The Revival of the Voluntary Principle*, W.H. Smith Contempora... Papers, n/d.

12. For the classic exposition of this view see Jim Bulpitt, 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domes... Statecraft', *Political Studies*, 34.1 (1985), pp.19–39.

13. For a forceful expression of this view see Peter Oborne, *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: T... 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 Belgrade-born businessman, Branislav Kostic, whose disinherited son argued that his father's fin bequests had been inspired by a 'delusional and paranoid mental illness'. The judge accepted that th will, in which Mr Kostic had left £8.3 million to the Conservative Party, could not have been th product of a 'sound mind'.

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

When she was ejected from power in 1990, Mrs Thatcher had left her party with a comparab dubious legacy. Over the three decades after 1979, a more exaggerated version of the post-w electoral cycle seemed to have become established in British politics. Each of the main parties won succession of considerable majorities, based on unimpressive shares of the national vote. After th third of these victories, the governing party looked unassailable; but in reality it was growi vulnerable to hostile forces which had the potential to consign it to a crushing defeat next time roun In part, both the Conservatives in 1992 and Labour in 2010 were faced by a familiar electoral attitu summed up in the phrase 'it's time for change'; and secretly even the fatigued ministers of bo parties might have been receptive to this view. But while in previous post-war decades this gener mood had produced moderate swings towards the leading opposition party, between 1979 and 2010 was reinforced by more dangerous developments. Years of untrammelled power can tempt a party int 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 rout which will knock it out of serious contention for a generation. At the same time, the persisti sense of electoral complacency can make members of the governing party feel that they are absolv from the normal rules of political conduct. Eventually this gives rise to allegations of 'sleaze'. In th phase of the new cycle, there is nothing that a governing party can do to stave off the inevitab verdict of the voters. It can perform policy U-turns; but it is likely to find that for every new friend acquires it loses at least two old allies. It can change its leader; but even if this works in the short ter (as it did for the Conservatives under John Major between 1990 and 1992) the final reckoning at th polls is likely to be only more complete.

While the scenario outlined above could be applied to the Conservatives between 1979 and 199 and New Labour ~~for the ensuing thirteen years, much more detailed analysis is required to provide~~ explanation for the travails which began for the Tories after the party had secured a third successiv term of office in 1987. The starting point for the present discussion is a celebrated article by the la Professor Jim Bulpitt, published in 1986. Eschewing the most fashionable explanations of M Thatcher's success, which in their various ways focused on ideology and widespread dissatisfactic with the post-war 'consensus', Bulpitt claimed that Thatcher's approach was best understood as attempt to recover her party's aptitude for 'statecraft' – that is, 'the art of winning elections ar achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office'.[2]

Bulpitt's attempt to rationalise the motivations underlying Thatcher's first decade as Conservativ leader is vulnerable to criticism at several points.[3] Despite his strenuous efforts he does not succeed disentangling his notion of 'statecraft' from the more orthodox ideological interpretations of the ear Thatcher years; his analysis cannot efface the impression that ideology was integral to everything M Thatcher did in politics, at least after she decided in late 1974 to contest the party leadership. Also, h thesis depends on the assumption that when Thatcherites and their opponents within the party we 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 riv understandings of 'statecraft'). Nevertheless, his general framework can help us to explain why th party so comprehensively *lost* 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree governing competence in office' after 1992.

Bulpitt identifies five key dimensions of 'statecraft': party management; a winning elector 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 n relevant, and can thus be discarded. In the present discussion the remaining four elements will b discussed in turn, in an order which is intended to develop the argument rather than to suggest ar 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 par had defeated Labour three times, and seen off the electoral challenge from the Liberal/Soci Democratic Alliance. Within her own party, her so-called 'wet' opponents had been picked off i piecemeal fashion, before and shortly after her re-election in 1983. Militant trade unionists and loc government radicals had suffered morale-sapping defeats during Thatcher's second term. Thatch even stayed in office long enough to celebrate the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the collapse the Soviet bloc.

On the face of it, this record looks like more than ample evidence that the Conservatives ha established 'political argument hegemony' under Thatcher. In fact, things were not quite so simple. I 1988 Ivor Crewe showed, on the basis of extensive survey evidence, that the electorate ha emphatically *not* become 'Thatcherite' after almost a decade of resolute ideological direction from Downing Street.[4] This may have been because voters thought that the Conservatives had achieved a 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 fervo in the first place. Either way, the evidence assembled by Crewe should have been sufficient to giv

pause to anyone who thought that Mrs Thatcher owed her success to ideology rather than propitiou[s] circumstances. But at the time, the triumph of 'Thatcherism' seemed indisputable even to many of th[e] prime minister's ideological opponents. After suffering a third consecutive electoral defeat in 198[7] 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 four[th] successive defeat, in 1992. Two years later Tony Blair became leader and persuaded his party to g[o] further in its acceptance of Thatcherism than any observer could have predicted at the time th[at] Bulpitt wrote his article. The death of Blair's predecessor John Smith made little difference to t[he] outcome of the next election – Labour would have coasted to victory in any case – but in hindsig[ht] that event can be seen as calamitous for the Conservatives, as well as for Labour supporters wh[o] continued to hope that their party would continue to offer effective resistance to Conservativ[e] 'political argument hegemony'.

Mrs Thatcher herself counted the creation of New Labour among her greatest achievements.[5] itself, this suggests that her main priority had been the promotion of a specific ideology, rather tha[n] the restoration of Conservative 'statecraft' or even the preservation of her own party as a leading for[ce] in British politics. Whether or not Blair should be considered a Thatcherite, it is reasonable to suppo[se] that he would never have been selected as a Labour parliamentary candidate had he espoused in 198[?] the approach which he implemented after 1994, starting with the erasure of the old Clause IV from t[he] party's constitution. He was only able to impose his will on Labour's activists because they, wi[th] varying degrees of reluctance, had convinced themselves that the Conservatives had establishe[d] 'political argument hegemony': from this perspective, Thatcher had been right to assert that the[re] 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 ma[in] points and continues to quibble over only the details of policy, the electoral advantage can be nullifie[d] or even turned against the 'winning' side, which can be vulnerable to a public demand for fresh fac[es] if all other considerations are roughly equal. In other words, Bulpitt could with more reason hav[e] written about the need for 'political argument *parity*' – or even sufficient *plausibility* to win a seriou[s] hearing from the electorate – rather than adopt the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' which w[as] 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 eith[er] 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' th[e] public would refuse to accept the sincerity of its conversion. As it was, the party's failure to reb[el] against Blair's open endorsement of the broad outlines of Thatcherite economic policy – in particula[r] the pledge not to increase any of the existing rates of income tax, which senior Labour figures ha[d] criticised bitterly when they were established in 1988 – left Conservative strategists with an invidiou[s] choice.[6] They could either shift their policy stance to the right – thus threatening their own 'politic[al] argument hegemony' by appearing more extreme than Thatcher herself – or claim that Blair was muc[h] more left-wing than his programme implied. The latter approach was adopted when the Conservativ[es] unveiled their 'demon eyes' posters in the year before the 1997 election; but these only betrayed the[ir]

desperation since Blair's public image was more akin to Bambi than Beelzebub.[7] Even worse for t
Tories, branding Blair a closet communist only handed him a welcome opportunity to re-emphasis
his intentions in office – namely to adorn Thatcherism with the human face which the Conservativ
themselves had never managed to provide.

For the Conservatives this was particularly galling; their historic role, after all, was to ste
attractive policies from the left, and now the roles were comprehensively reversed. Geoffr
Wheatcroft has claimed that as far as Thatcherism was concerned 'Blair took the meat and left t
Tories the bones'.[8] This is somewhat misleading; one could just as easily claim that in Nig
Lawson's tax-slashing budget of 1988 the Tories had guzzled all of the meat in one orgiastic mea
leaving them little further scope to offer material incentives for would-be Conservative voter
However, it is certainly true that after their 1997 defeat the Tories were condemned to subsist on ar
scraps that might fall from Tony Blair's table. After the second Conservative defeat in 2001 som
senior Tories realised the role that imputed 'political argument hegemony' had played in making th
party feel invulnerable. In 2002, for example, the then Chief Whip David Maclean admitted that aft
the 1997 result 'there was an attitude that the British people had made a terrible mistake and all v
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 h
party were still unable to grasp what had happened to them; Maclean gave that interview shortly aft
the rank and file had alighted upon the unelectable Iain Duncan Smith as the best person to lead the
back into office. Even by the time of the next election in 2005, the Conservatives had not recover
from Blair's audacity in enrolling the Labour Party as a stakeholder in Thatcherite 'political argume
hegemony'. 'We are far too slow in learning the lessons from Blair', one 'senior Conservativ
admitted after the 2005 election – when Blair had been Labour's leader for eleven years.[10] Not on
was this a spectacular admission of the failure of Conservative 'statecraft' between 2001 and 200
but it also carried the ominous implication that when they devised their strategy for the next electi
the Tories would still be trying to understand how New Labour managed to win in 1997, rather tha
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 flinche
from unpopular decisions, and that although these had often caused hardship they had turned out to k
efficacious. Certainly compared with Labour between 1974 and 1979, the Conservatives had giv
concrete evidence of their 'governing competence'. The result of the 1992 election is often explaine
as an example of the electorate 'clinging to nurse for fear of finding something worse'. Th
Conservative nurse had usually administered unpleasant medicine, but in 1979 the British patie
really had required a succession of unsugared doses of reality. As Ivor Crewe put it, 'Cohesio
purpose and success take precedence over ideology and policy in voters' eyes; that is the lesson
Mrs Thatcher's and Thatcherism's astonishing success.'[11] As time would tell, it was actually on
part of the lesson; the fact that the voters had continued to offer sufficient (though hard
overwhelming) support to Mrs Thatcher *despite* their deep misgivings about her principles did not ru
out the possibility that one day those misgivings would burst to the surface, with mortifyin
consequences for Thatcher's successors. Almost certainly the day of reckoning would have come fe
the Conservatives if they had not changed their leader in 1990. But soon after taking over fro
Thatcher, John Major rose to the challenge of war in the Persian Gulf, thus apparently proving th

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

From Bulpitt's perspective, the restoration of Conservative 'governing competence' was the centr[al] aim of Mrs Thatcher's programme in 1979. In particular, he nominated monetarism as 'a superb (o[r] 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 econom[ic] micromanagement in the form of incomes policy. In Thatcher's second term, the developin[g] programme of denationalisation had similar significance. Meanwhile, the Conservatives were tryin[g] to work out a way of separating administration from policy-making by 'hiving off' importa[nt] 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'.[12] In view of the turmoil within the Labour Party since it lost the 1970 gener[al] election this was not an unreasonable judgement at the time. Unfortunately for the Conservative[s] 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 decisi[on] 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 Conservati[ve] Chancellors Nigel Lawson and Kenneth Clarke had both favoured it without being able to put it in[to] practice. The Catch-22 for the Conservatives, in short, was that if the policy of hiving-off prove[d] successful they would have provided opposition parties with a model to emulate; and if it failed, t[he] 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 institution[al] and policy changes did make it harder for future ministers to be held responsible for mistakes. But th[is] reduced the chances that the Conservatives could indict New Labour for incompetence once the ne[w] 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 unnotice[d] by the public even though the party continued to win elections. Professor Crewe was right to arg[ue] that voters set a high premium on 'Cohesion, purpose and success'; but after 1990 the Conservati[ve] Party had a distinctly mixed record in all of these respects. Ironically, the most damaging of t[he] Conservative errors was Mrs Thatcher's decision to allow sterling to join the European Exchange Ra[te] Mechanism (ERM) just before she left office in 1990. On this issue, Nigel Lawson and his predecess[or] 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-politicisin[g]' British monetary policy. However, for several years they were thwarted by Thatcher, whose opposit[ion] to the ERM ultimately derived from nationalistic impulses. The supporters of ERM membership we[re] unable to take effective action until Mrs Thatcher's political position was suitably wea[k.] Unfortunately for them (and for Conservative 'statecraft') this coincided with a time when t[he] currency was over-valued, leading to the notorious 'Black Wednesday' of September 1992 whe[n] sterling was forced out of the ERM in humiliating (and expensive) circumstances. Thus, the mo[st] serious breach in the Conservatives' reputation for 'governing competence' was directly attributab[le] to decisions taken in Mrs Thatcher's third term. The same period also saw the introduction of the il[l-] conceived Community Charge or Poll Tax, despite the opposition of key Thatcherite insiders li[ke] Lawson, who rightly anticipated that this half-baked product of economic liberal fantasy would pro[ve]

disastrous for the Conservatives.

Party management

In his 1986 article, Bulpitt paid relatively little attention to the question of party management, f[...] reasons that must have seemed persuasive at the time. After all, the internal ructions which followe[...] the deposition of Edward Heath in 1975 had apparently subsided a decade later. Bulpitt's accoun[...] suggests that although party management 'is a continuous problem for party leaders', the fact that M[...] Thatcher had outfaced her internal opponents could be taken as evidence that the Conservatives we[...] much better at maintaining unity in the ranks than their Labour opponents, and by the time that Bulpi[...] wrote his article Labour was verifying his remark by engaging in public wrangles with members of t[...] 'entryist' Militant Tendency.

Back in 1986, Bulpitt could be excused for failing to anticipate the fratricidal squabbles unleashe[...] within the Conservative Party by Mrs Thatcher's Bruges speech of September 1988. Yet that occasio[...] en sured that for almost twenty years party management was an impossible task for Conservativ[...] leaders. The issue of Europe proved divisive at all levels, from the cabinet to the grassroots, so th[...] the euro-moderate John Major found himself in July 1993 labelling some of his truculent cabin[...] 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 h[...] own 'militants'. Underlying the disloyalty of Conservative cabinet members and backbenchers was[...] recalcitrant (albeit shrinking and ageing) party membership, which seemed determined to disprove t[...] dubious notion that loyalty was the secret weapon of the Conservative Party. It was no secret that t[...] opponents of Major's pragmatic approach towards Europe enjoyed the support of Margaret Thatche[...] whose conduct in retirement suggests that if she had ever wanted the Conservative Party to restore i[...] reputation for 'statecraft' her commitment to this project had waned dramatically as soon as she le[...] office.

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

The man who had been elected as the least divisive of the three Conservative leadership candidat[...] in 1990 was left looking hopelessly weak as he struggled to keep his turbulent troops under control. [...] June 1995 Major resigned from the party leadership in order to fight for his position at a time of h[...] choosing, rather than letting things slide until the inevitable challenge materialised at the end of t[...] parliamentary year. His failure to secure the support of more than two-thirds of his colleagues in t[...] 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 bizarr contrast, between the party's continuing torment over Europe (symbolised by the governmen impotent protests over an export ban on British beef products) and the deft management of th economy by Kenneth Clarke. In the latter respect the last four years of Conservative rule really d offer some glimpses of 'statecraft'. But since the party was sure to lose the next election from th moment of Britain's ejection from the ERM this was entirely counterproductive; it merely ensure that New Labour would inherit a sound economy. Once they had returned to opposition th Conservatives denied themselves any profit from Clarke's proven skills in the art of 'statecraft', sinc his moderately favourable attitude towards the developing European Union ruled him out as 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 1997 were in place before the 1992 election. However, old habits die hard, and in the circumstances 1992 party strategists were anxious to argue that a Labour government would be detrimental to Briti interests. It was still possible to develop 'another winning strategy' in 1992, even if owed much negative campaigning like the wilful exaggeration of Labour proposals on taxation and *The Sun* 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 th 1992 general election. The victory had been secured in defiance of almost all of the pundits and th opinion polls, and in the midst of another serious recession. It looked like the crowning triumph f Conservative 'statecraft', proving that the usual ebb and flow of post-war electoral politics had be superseded. If the Tories could succeed in such unpropitious circumstances, surely they could nev lose. In reality, as Hywel Williams has noted, 'they had been bought on approval and would have keep their promises'.[13] Among the latter was a pledge not to increase Value Added Tax (VAT) Within a year of the election, the government was forced to go back on its word, imposing VAT o domestic fuel which had previously been exempt.

This breach of a pre-election promise, just a few months after the humiliating withdrawal from t ERM, suggests another refinement to Bulpitt's thesis. There are times when 'another winnin strategy' is the last thing that a party needs; or rather, victory in an election can sometimes be the be way to ensure that a party will lose the next one by a crushing margin. While it was indeed remarkab that the Tories won in 1992 – on the basis of a record tally of more than 14 million votes – the reali was that the contest gave them an overall parliamentary majority of just 21 seats, leaving t government painfully exposed to the whims of just a handful of rebellious MPs. Even worse from t point of view of 'statecraft', the inaccuracy of most opinion polls in 1992 was attributable at least part to a 'spiral of silence' – in this context, a refusal of voters to give honest replies to researcher apparently because they were ashamed of owning up to their intention of voting for the Conservative It was not difficult to foresee that many of these 'bashful' Tory supporters would vote for a differe party next time, unless Major proved a resounding success in his first full term of office. But this w never likely, with a reduced majority, a complacent party, and a horde of well-nurtured Conservativ 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 wh

accepted at face value the 'political argument hegemony' allegedly established by the Conservative under Thatcher. In 1997 any vestigial chance that the Tories would stumble upon yet another winnin strategy was torpedoed by the emergence of the Referendum Party, to mop up the support Conservative voters who demanded a more forthright style of opposition towards 'Europe'. Whatev its precise electoral impact, the intervention of the Referendum Party and the panic-stricken respon 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 recover of 'statecraft', the story of the party's subsequent decline seems obvious: under Major, it forgot ho to practise that invaluable art. However, this is easier to state than to explain. If the exercise 'statecraft' proved so successful between 1979 and 1990, why did the party forgo such a 'letha approach to politics? We have seen that in some senses the Conservatives were victims of their ow successes, especially in the field of 'political argument hegemony'. Yet surely a party whic acknowledged the importance of 'statecraft' would not have scored so many spectacular own-goa after 1990?

    The most plausible answer to this apparent conundrum is that Bulpitt's account of Conservativ 'statecraft' provides a misleading picture of the party's intentions and situation between 1979 a 1990: in other words, that the imputed recovery of 'statecraft' is a myth. Margaret Thatcher, like a her post-war predecessors, wanted to win elections; indeed, her urge to build an 'election winnin strategy' after 1975 was unusually potent, given her genuine detestation of 'Old' Labour and h knowledge that electoral defeat would put an abrupt and unpleasant end to her political caree However, very few political leaders have sought to lose elections; so the fact that Thatcher wanted win can hardly serve as an adequate basis for a challenge to more 'orthodox' interpretations whic draw on a wide range of empirical evidence. Beyond this, all of Bulpitt's points can be questioned i 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 on commentator to attribute this status to Mrs Thatcher's ideas in the mid 1980s. It is significant that h article appeared in the year after the defeat of the miners' strike, which was regarded on both left a right as the decisive political encounter of these years. Yet the notion of Thatcherite 'hegemony' w most prevalent among left-leaning academics, whose argument can be explained as a product 'pessimism of the intellect' rather than an objective account of the 'battle of ideas' during Thatcher first two terms.[14] Dismayed that a significant proportion of the British electorate had prove susceptible to Thatcher's socio-economic simplicities, their responses betrayed a suspicion th virtually *everyone* had been affected. This is not demonstrably false; people who continued to vote f opposition parties might have done so under the impulse of motives which had nothing to do wi political arguments. However, the electoral evidence even in Thatcher's triumphalist heyday, and th findings of opinion surveys at the same time, suggest that the term 'hegemony' was being stretche beyond its limits when applied to political debate in the mid 1980s. As we have seen, even on the mo sceptical reading of opinion polls relating to attitudes, the experience of Conservative governme after 1979 made the British electorate *less* 'Thatcherite', not more.[15] Since Thatcher was a uniquel divisive figure in post-war British politics, the fact that the main opposition parties shared about 5 per cent of the vote in the pivotal, post-Falklands 1983 election – up from less than 51 per cent 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 198[...] far from collapsing in the face of Conservative 'hegemony', the combined vote share of Labour a[...] 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', t[...] failure of opposition parties to topple Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives has so often been used as t[...] basis for claims about 'political argument hegemony'. In 1951, 1955 and 1959, when the fro[...] benchers of the two major parties differed about the details of policy rather than fundamentals, Labo[...] and the Conservatives shared more than 90 per cent of the vote; and yet academics continue to quibb[...] about the use of the word 'consensus', which has much weaker connotations than 'hegemony'. It ca[...] be argued, indeed, that Mrs Thatcher did not even establish 'political argument hegemony' within h[...] own party. Although most of the senior 'wets' had been removed from the cabinet when Bulpitt[...] article appeared, they remained unconvinced by Thatcher's arguments and were still strong[...] represented on the government benches. In particular, prominent Tories like the ex-premier Edwar[...] Heath and the former cabinet minister Sir Ian Gilmour continued to deny the credibility and effica[...] 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 Ben[...] accused Labour strategists of making repeated concessions to 'Thatcherism'. Even so, in 1992 bo[...] Labour and the Liberal Democrats presented distinctively non-Thatcherite programmes to t[...] electorate, and in combination they secured a level of public support which broadly corresponded [...] that of 1979, 1983 and 1987. In reality, unhappy commentators like Benn were identifying a *tre[...]* towards the acceptance of Thatcherism, rather than the fact of a Labour capitulation. Only when To[...] Blair succeeded John Smith as Labour leader in 1994 could it be argued with any plausibility that t[...] main opposition party had embraced the key elements of Conservative political arguments; and [...] 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 par[...] lacked 'governing competence'; and it is often argued that this was a new development, whol[...] attributable to Major's maladministration. However, the idea that Mrs Thatcher and her allies ha[...] succeeded in restoring the party's reputation for competence can be only based on a selective readi[...] of the evidence, and an ultimate dependency on the unquestionable fact that under her leadership t[...] Conservatives won three consecutive elections. By post-war standards, the record of the 1979–8[...] government is open to serious question. The level of inner-city unrest in 1981, partly provoked [...] soaring youth unemployment, indicated unprecedented levels of contempt for the rule of law under t[...] stewardship of the 'party of law and order'. The Falklands War, which ultimately helped t[...] government to win re-election in 1983, can be attributed to avoidable government mistakes which l[...] to ministerial resignations (even if the wrong ministers resigned). The record in the second te[...] marked an improvement, although Mrs Thatcher thought that the Westland Affair of 1986 could bri[...] her down.[16] Since this crisis related to Thatcher's style of government, it provided an unfortuna[...] context for the appearance in the same year of Bulpitt's article about 'statecraft'. In the third ter[...] bitter disagreements concerning economic management precipitated the resignation of the Chancell[...] Nigel Lawson. Afterwards Mrs Thatcher capped a mixed record in office with the self-inflicted woun[...] of the Poll Tax. It is difficult to disagree with Christopher Stevens' view that if Thatcher was to [...] judged entirely on the record of her third term, 'she would almost certainly be accounted one of t[...] major failures of the twentieth century'.[17] The opinion polls of the time are ample evidence that t[...] electorate shared this view; by the time of her departure only a quarter of voters approved of the pri[...] 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 wh[o] regard 1979–90 as an heroic period would have to admit that it was marked to an unusual degree b[y] what tennis statisticians would mark down as 'unforced errors'. This conclusion might be rationalise[d] into a backhanded testament to Mrs Thatcher's success in restoring 'governing competence'; on th[is] view, while her predecessors had failed to overcome a range of serious problems facing Britain, sh[e] took the right decisions on the key questions and blundered only over the inessentials. However, th[e] errors concerned key issues (the Falklands, Britain's membership of the ERM, etc.), as well as mo[re] 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 Sing[le] European Act.

The story concerning party management is more complicated, but the broad outlines support th[e] impression that Conservative problems after 1997 originated in the years *before* 1990, when the par[ty] 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 leadersh[ip] in 1975. Although loyalty to an incumbent leader had never been a distinctive Conservative trait, th[e] rebellion against Heath caused serious disquiet among constituency parties and even after Thatch[er] became prime minister many grassroots members continued to express support for her predecesso[r]. 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 ter[m]. Eventually, the same electoral mechanism which supplanted Heath was used to unseat he[r]; presumably no one had foreseen that rules which permitted a challenge if only two anonymous MP[s] were prepared to put a name forward might be used against an incumbent prime minister, although th[e] procedure had been fashioned in order to supplant a leader who had just lost two general election[s] within little more than six months.

Even so, the fact remained that whereas Heath was removed having lost three of the four election[s] he contested as leader, Mrs Thatcher was deposed despite her unblemished electoral record. On[e] explanation for this discrepancy is that between 1979 and 1990 the nature of the parliamentary par[ty] changed significantly; the Conservative ranks were increasingly occupied by 'career politicians', wh[o] risked losing their livelihoods along with their seats if they were led into the next general election by [a] liability. Labour was hardly free from careerists in these years; and yet Neil Kinnock, who was clear[ly] not a significant electoral asset, was allowed to retain the party leadership for nine years befo[re] leaving the post of his own volition in 1992. There was, in short, something distinctive about th[e] 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 MP[s] 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 we[re] willing to ditch a leader whose proven potency was waning, generalisations about the nature of th[e] grassroots party are more hazardous. One fact is tolerably clear: Mrs Thatcher's electoral success d[id] not reflect a surge in applications for party membership, and her replacement by John Major d[id] nothing to arrest the downward trend. Improbable estimates as late as 1984 placed the ranks of t[he] faithful at over one million, but by 1997 they had almost certainly shrunk to little over 250,000.[18] As [a] result of the failure to refresh the ranks, an academic survey found that by the mid 1990s the averag[e] age of Conservative members was 62.[19] Such a precipitate decline hardly testifies to a recovery [of]

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