



# In defence of David Cameron

## How the Tories have gotten past soul searching in opposition

James Campbell

Until recently it was easy for many in the Australian Liberal Party—apparently safe in their possession of government—to mock British Conservative leader David Cameron. His concern for the environment and climate change, along with poverty in the developing world, and social exclusion seemed to mark him as a classic ‘wet’, if not an outright leftist.

But before passing judgement on David Cameron and his band of Tory modernisers it is necessary to understand just how far the Conservative party has fallen out of favour with the British public in the past ten years and how unprecedented this fall was.

The Conservative party is the oldest and most successful political party in the English speaking world. It governed Britain for most of the twentieth century, with a remarkably consistent share of the popular vote. Only twice between the end of the Second World War and its defeat in 1997, did its share of the vote dip below 40 per cent: Margaret Thatcher won with 43.9 per cent in 1979 and John Major won with 41.9 per cent in 1992.

But after Major’s surprise victory, something went horribly wrong for the Conservative party. In 1997 its vote collapsed to 30.7 per cent, and has stayed in the low 30s at two subsequent elections (with an only pitiful recovery in 2005 to 32.4 per cent).

As bad as they appear, merely looking at the percentages doesn’t do justice to how unpopular the party has become. The Tories’ electoral position is actually worse. To get the full picture you need to look at the actual number of people who voted for it. In 1979, the year the Tories won power, the party received 13.7 million votes. In 1997, the year it lost power, it received 9.6 million votes. In 2005—despite winning an extra 32 seats—it received 8.7 million votes. In other words the party continued to lose voters—nearly a

million—over the eight years it had been out of power.

What has gone wrong? The arguments over the causes of the strange death of Tory England and what the party might need to do to get itself back into government have raged for the past decade.

The early phases, say from 1997-2001, was over what had gone wrong with the Major government. Some thought that the government’s policies had been basically sound but it had been destroyed by ill-discipline, treachery, voter fatigue as well as a series of sex and money scandals which came to be known by the headline shorthand of ‘sleaze’.

Those who tended to this view could point to Tony Blair’s ‘small-c’ conservatism and his continuation of Tory policies to support it. After all, in its first years in office Labour kept to the Conservatives spending targets (something Ken Clarke, the last Tory chancellor, later admitted he would never have done). Nor had it renationalised any of the Tories’ privatisations. The only significant question to divide the two parties was whether or not Britain should adopt the Euro. The Tories (apart from a Europhile rump of the parliamentary party) were fanatically opposed and the Labour party cautiously in favour, but only if several, unpassable tests were met.

The Tory right-wing were therefore convinced that the way back to government was to keep talking about tax, crime, immigration and Europe.

There was another group of Conservatives however who felt that the collapse in the party’s vote was a sign of something much deeper than disgust at the misdeeds of the Major years. They argued that Britain had changed and that the Tory party needed to change to better reflect it: it needed to be friendlier to Britain’s migrants, gays and women, to confront what former Tory adviser Daniel Finkelstein has recently called the task of ‘making peace with the sixties’.

As with the Liberals, the Conservatives seemed to have lost a type of middle class voter—sometimes in Australia called doctor’s wives, or latte and chardonnay drinkers—who ought to be their natural constituency. These voters are liberal in both economic and social matters and are sometimes called ‘post-materialist voters’.

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Those Tories concerned with getting these voters back felt that the party needed to accept that there were certain parts of the British state in which the populace did not want to see the operation of market forces—especially the National Health Service (NHS). They were also prepared to whisper that some privatisations (especially the railways) had been a mistake, or badly managed, or might have been better managed.

William Hague, the first post Major leader belonged to this group by instinct. One of his first acts was to attend the Notting Hill Carnival, a massive West Indian street festival and icon of multicultural, liberal Britain, notorious for its pot smoking crowds and the fact that it frequently ends in a riot. No previous Tory leader would have gone near it—let alone wearing a baseball cap—it was as though John Howard had decided to march in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

But Hague's problem was that he was never in a strong enough position to impose his views on the party. After two years in the job, with low poll ratings and a discontented back-bench and grass roots, Hague veered rightwards. He began talking about tax, Europe and immigration to the exclusion of all else. These themes were well expressed in his famous 'foreign land' speech of 2001:

Just imagine four more years of Labour. Try to picture what our country would look like. Let me take you on a journey to a foreign land—to Britain after a second term of Tony Blair.

The Royal Mint melting down pound coins as the euro notes start to circulate. Our currency gone forever.

The Chancellor returning from Brussels carrying instructions to raise taxes still further. Control over our own economy given away.

The jail doors opening as thousands more serious criminals walk out early to offend again. Police morale at a new low.

The right wing press were delighted. They particularly liked the bit where he claimed that people could tell that 'something is going badly wrong when tens of thousands of people are crossing the entire length of the European continent, travelling through safe countries en route, before suddenly lodging an asylum claim in Britain'. People might well have suspected that something was wrong, but unfortunately for Hague, they were not inclined to express it at the ballot box. The party was thumped as badly in 2001 as it had been in 1997.

Despite the evidence that that British public were not interested in a Conservative party obsessed with tax, Europe, crime and immigration, Hague's two successors fell into exactly the same trap. He now admits his change of tack was a mistake: 'We've fought two elections on tax, Europe and immigration and we know what the results of those elections were', he reflected in August last year.

Cameron began by vowing to be different. He was concerned to appear worried about the environment. He rode to work to cut his carbon footprint (though a driver followed behind with his briefcase). He made noises about the need to understand what ailed troubled teens ('Hug a hoodie'

in the words of the Labour Party). He created his own web-cam where viewers could watch the Conservative leader at home. He spoke about the importance of fathers being present at their children's birth. He replaced the party's logo, a lighted torch, with an oak tree. He attempted to impose more women and ethnic minorities as candidates. And most importantly, he took care never to be photographed in public with Margaret Thatcher.

It might have been easy to mock Cameron as a trendy 'heir to Blair' but there was no denying the evidence of the opinion polls. At the end of his first year as leader the Tories' support reached 40 per cent for the first time in 14 years.

But six months later it appeared to be going horribly wrong again. Labour had recovered in the polls after Blair was replaced by the dour self-styled son of the manse Gordon Brown. As the polls got worse over last summer, the right began to stir. Newspapers began reporting pressure on Cameron to sound more like a traditional Tory, a large donor mused in public that he didn't know what the party stood for, and most damagingly, the party indulged in pointless fighting over the future of selective education. As summer turned into autumn and Labour's poll lead continued to increase, the government contemplated a snap general election to capitalise on Tory divisions and their leader's honeymoon period.

Gordon Brown's mistake was to wait until after the Tory party conference last year to decide whether to call an election. Had he gone to the country in the first flush of his honeymoon, there is no doubt he would have been returned. But he got greedy by gambling that the Tories could be relied upon to air their divisions in public at their conference. The Conservative rank and file might not like Cameron much but even they could see that damaging him six weeks before an election was not the wisest thing to do. The conference was calm. Cameron made a brilliant speech without notes, in which



he looked Prime Ministerial, and the Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne promised that a Conservative government would cut taxes.

Tax cuts? Wasn't the whole modernisation project meant to be about getting away from talk about tax cuts? How could it be that the Conservatives were promising tax cuts and within a week their poll numbers began to rise? Why was it that when William Hague and Michael Howard had promised tax cuts the public had soured on them but the same thing was not happening to Cameron?

The answer is timing. When Hague was talking about tax between 1997 and 2001, Labour was still basically keeping to the Tories spending plans—indeed government spending as a percentage of gross domestic product actually fell during the first two years they were in office. It wasn't until 2000 that the government turned on the public spending tap. Politically this meant that any talk of tax cuts would mean cutting into public services and starving public sector investment—something which most people agreed was needed.

In 2007 however the landscape is

completely different. According to the think tank Reform, overall public spending increased by 25.5 per cent in real terms between 1999-00 and 2004-05. It is estimated to increase by 44 per cent between 1999-00 and 2009-10.

According to the Taxpayers Alliance, under Labour:

- Families' disposable income has risen at a slower rate since 1997 than in the two decades previously.
- Tax payments ... have risen by £219 billion since 1996, or nearly £9,000 per household.
- Government borrowing has exceeded £30 billion in every year since 2002.
- It is estimated there are 700,000 more public sector employees than there were when Labour came into office.

What have the British public got in return for all this money? Not a lot—or, rather, not anything approaching a reasonable return on their investment. Barely a day goes by without some report of millions lost through bad gov-

ernment management, which is hardly surprising given the rate and speed of the spending increases. Tony Blair came to the realisation too late that increasing public spending without reforming the structures of government—especially the NHS—was a recipe for disaster. As might have been predicted, much of the money has disappeared in wage increases. Under the Tories the NHS might have been dreadful but it had the merit of being cheap—British expenditure on health was amongst the lowest in the European Union. Under Labour, it's still dreadful compared with most EU member states but health spending is now near the top of the EU average. It is no wonder that the Shadow Chancellor's speech proposing cuts to stamp duty and inheritance tax met with a better reception from the public than previous Tory tax pledges.

Tax however is not the only area in which the Tories' old tunes are suddenly finding new listeners. Europe, which has lain dormant for the past few years, after Labour gave up any attempt to join the Euro, is stirring. The fact that the Conservatives won that argument has strengthened their credibility, as has the

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government's broken promise to hold a referendum on the EU constitution—which has since been rebadged as a treaty. The Conservatives have been in the comfortable position of being able to damn Labour for a broken promise and saying that 'the people must be heard', without it being clear whether the party would adopt a united position if such a vote was ever held.

But it is immigration—an issue which has seemed to offer so much electorally on so many occasions, but has delivered so little—that finally seems to be living up to its potential. When Labour opened the doors to migration from the newly admitted EU states in 2004 it predicted that 15,000 would arrive each year. By the end of 2006 at least 600,000 had arrived. Official figures show that at least 500,000 people are moving to Britain each year—probably more. The change to the ethnic mix of the country is much greater than that however, because around 400,000 Britons are also emigrating each year. England is now the most densely populated country in Europe.

It is no surprise therefore that immigration has leapt to the top of the political agenda. The extra pressures on social services from this sudden increase in population has been immense, though one can't help wondering sometimes if the government is not happy to use immigration as an excuse to hide its failure to improve those services despite the enormous increases in spending.

The sheer volume of immigration and its impact has meant the Tories have been able to discuss the subject for the first time in a decade without seeming to be playing to xenophobia.

But the biggest unforeseen political consequence of the increase in migration has been the light it has thrown on the enormous numbers of the unemployed native population. It has not escaped notice that the UK has managed to absorb 600,000 Poles into its work force without

the local rate of unemployment moving at all. Clearly the jobs were there, but for whatever reason the natives were unwilling or unfit to take them. The realisation that large number of Britons are not fit for purpose has caused a huge amount of hand-wringing and finger pointing amongst the political class, most recently over the discovery that there are 500,000 people on disability pensions—under the age of 35.

The news that the problems of millions of people in Britain stem not from their material circumstances but the culture in which they live has been seized by Cameron and labelled, along with the apparent rise in lawlessness, as The Broken Society. His message is simple: in 1979 Britain's problems were economic. In 2008 the country's problems are social. In both cases only the Conservatives will fix them.

So in 2008 the Conservative party again finds itself talking about tax, crime, immigration and welfare dependency, as it has been doing since it lost office. But this time it is doing so from a position of strength—not merely because the times are changing and Labour seems to have run out of ideas, but because Cameron has softened the edges of the message. The point of the modernisers' project was not to move away from tax, crime, immigration and welfare dependency but to rejuvenate the image of the party so that the public were prepared to listen to them on those subjects again.

Since the general election that wasn't, events have overtaken the Gordon Brown government: the sub prime crisis has caused a run on a bank, requiring a bail out of billions, the government lost the personal data of 24 million people in the post, and it is engulfed in another round of scandals involving fundraising. More ominously, there are signs the British economy is heading into a recession.

After events like these Cameron and

Osborne must be regretting their decision last year to accept Labour's spending targets which will tie their hands going into the next election.

The Tory modernisation project arose from circumstances peculiar to British politics in response to British problems which are of limited application in Australia. Try as it did, the Howard government never managed to get public spending up to the level achieved by Tony Blair, Australia does not face social breakdown on the same scale (outside indigenous communities), is not being over-run with migrants, and its sovereignty is not threatened by membership of the EU.

But the lesson of the Tory modernisers is that tone matters—if the public don't like the singer then they won't listen to the song. Cameron has understood that to win the argument about the destructive nature of social welfare your language needs to be compassionate, not judgmental. You also need to be seen to be engaged with social problems on a personal level.

Cameron's effort to get more ethnic faces into parliament was important because the party needed to send a message that it was not racist—to middle class white people as much as to ethnic minorities. The Australian Liberal Party needs to think hard about Cameron's example given that the ALP holds every one of the 20 seats with the highest non-English speaking population in the country. If it can soften its image and reclaim those middle class voters that abandoned it in 2007, it will be able to go hard on tax and welfare issues without being quickly dismissed as uncompassionate. There is no reason for the party to wait ten years and endure two more election losses, as the Tories have done, to learn this lesson.

