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Tory Ideology and Social Policy under Theresa May: Current and Future Directions

Ben Williams

Since becoming Prime Minister, Theresa May has sought to gradually establish a distinctive policy agenda, **specifically in social terms**. Although much of her initial attention understandably focused on Brexit, as she settled into Downing Street she endeavoured to cultivate a political narrative bearing her own imprint. She has **consequently** sought to distinguish her government from **what she has perceived to be the** less appealing aspects of David Cameron's regime (both **implicitly** and **explicitly**). **This has entailed** attempting to distance herself from the Cameron administration's often socially exclusive and elitist **'Notting Hill'** image, its advocacy of relentless and inflexible austerity, and the harsh and divisive social consequences that **have often prevailed**. Of course, in the wake of the Tories' losses and Labour's gains in the 2017 General Election, May no longer has a majority in parliament. She is reliant on the socially conservative DUP for a majority, and their cooperation can by no means be taken for granted. In the Queen's Speech on 21 June, many policies set out in the Conservative manifesto were absent, including plans to change the funding of social care for the elderly, means-testing the winter fuel allowance for the elderly, and downgrading the triple lock on pensions.

Yet May remains Prime Minister for now, and it is therefore worth assessing to what extent her premiership represents a retreat from the political regime that immediately preceded it. Of course, May had a prominent role within both Cameron administrations, before and after 2015. This makes it hard in some ways for her to offer a genuinely new direction in Conservative social policy. Though her days in 10 Downing Street may **well** now be numbered, this essay asks whether May is likely to have any more success than Cameron in formulating a coherent, credible and effective Conservative social policy agenda that will stand the test of time, while also contributing to a revived party image, identity and broader electoral appeal **in the longer term**.

Thatcher, Major, and the Ideological Influences on Modern Conservatism

From the late 1970s onwards, the Conservative Party embraced a forceful Thatcherite image and agenda, with the New Right's 'vigorous virtues'¹ and neoliberal ideology supplanting previous 'consensual' One Nation traditions. Thatcher's combative, ideological style represented a breach from the party's pragmatic and empirical past, and created both opportunities and problems for British Conservatism. Firmly rejecting the 'post-war consensus', the Conservatives under Thatcher constructed an alternative political narrative, focused on individual liberty, free markets and the small state. In the decade that followed, Thatcher's approach, along with various pieces of **good fortune**, saw her win three successive general election victories. Yet, her period in power accelerated the disruption of traditional class-based loyalties and much of the UK's social equilibrium, creating significant periods of social division, dislocation and unrest, especially at the start and end of the **1980s**. This, in turn, made the Conservative Party increasingly vulnerable to a political backlash from a volatile electorate. Thatcher's key social and economic policies involved: prioritising inflation over unemployment, withdrawal of state subsidies for failing industries, tighter control of the money supply (monetarism), and a flagship privatisation programme that created 'winners' and 'losers' and contributed to a notable widening of inequality, notably through council house sales. **Further to this, her decade or so of political dominance** also saw the introduction of internal markets in the NHS, the national curriculum in schools, and the slow but steady erosion of social welfare benefits.² In the context of **such radical social policy change alongside** accelerating deindustrialisation, inequality soared.

In the 1990s, the difficult social implications of some Thatcherite policies came home to roost. The social dislocations of the 1980s came to seem by too many to be the Conservatives' Achilles heel. John Major (like the 'modernising' David Cameron a decade and half later) aimed to make the party's image and agenda seem less harsh, and spoke optimistically about a 'classless society', and a 'nation at ease with itself'. There was also a

¹ See S.R.Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, London, 1992

² See Institute for Fiscal Studies, http://www.ifs.org.uk/tools_and_resources/incomes_in_uk. In 1979, 13.4% of the population lived below 60% of median incomes before housing costs. By 1990, it had gone up to 22.2%, or 12.2m people, with huge rises in the mid-1980s: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/datablog/2013/apr/08/britain-changed-margaret-thatcher-charts>

revival of the idea of 'Civic Conservatism', particularly from David Willetts.³ Some of these themes were taken up by Cameron from 2005 onwards, in the context of a global re-invention of 'Compassionate Conservatism' stemming primarily from the USA, during George W. Bush's presidency (2001-9). In the 1990s, however, Major struggled to achieve a coherent and credible social policy agenda, facing, as he did, economic crises, political scandals and a resurgent Labour Party under Tony Blair.

Cameron's modernization of social policy

In seeking to formulate and market to voters an improved Conservative political 'offer', since the late 1990s a key area of social policy for Conservative 'modernisers' has been the potentially dynamic sphere of 'non-state' activity, in between government and the individual (often referred to as 'civil society'). Civil society has been increasingly viewed as an important focus for social policy innovation, with the output of such actions described by David Cameron and his political sympathisers as 'social capital'. Cameron consolidated this evolving political discourse by instigating his much-criticized 'Big Society' agenda, which suggested that a controlling, centralised state did not have all of the answers to the country's long-term social problems. Launching the idea in 2009, Cameron said that:

The size, scope and role of government in Britain has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality, and increasing general well-being. Indeed there is a worrying paradox that because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism. But ... just because big government has helped atomise our society, it doesn't follow that smaller government would automatically bring us together again.⁴

³ D.Willetts, *Civic Conservatism*, London, 1994.

⁴ D.Cameron, *The Big Society*, The Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, 10.11.09, <http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601246>.

This apparent rejection of *both* Labour's supposed inclination towards 'big government' *and* the Thatcherite focus on a 'small state' and the free market, formed the basis of a broader attempt to 'modernise' the Conservative Party's appeal. This re-branding was linked to evidence from focus groups and opinion polling that indicated that the party had become out of touch with **the social aspirations and values of** early twenty-first century British society. The Big Society agenda was a form of triangulation: it presented the Conservatives as libertarian and anti-statist, while also seeking to suggest that they cared about society, community, and social issues. Distancing himself rhetorically from Thatcher's claim that there is 'no such thing as society', Cameron instead argued that 'there is such thing as society, it is just not the same as the state'.⁵

Alongside the 'Big Society' rhetoric, the Conservatives under Cameron adopted a more 'permissive' tone, encouraging a more tolerant mood regarding issues such as gay rights, multiculturalism, and environmentalism, more liberal views towards marriage and divorce, and enhanced equality laws; reflecting a more diverse British society and looking favourably on an 'enabling' role for the state in delivering practical policy outcomes in such areas. While this social liberalism has been applauded by many, most political observers have gradually come to view the 'Big Society' more cynically, as a vacuous policy initiative. Indeed, some of Cameron's own internal party critics cited this particular social agenda as a confusing factor that blurred the party's appeal during the inconclusive 2010 general election campaign; and it was hardly mentioned at all in 2015, before vanishing without trace in 2017. Opponents from other parties have alleged that former PR man Cameron sought to use 'Big Society' rhetoric to mask significant public spending cuts imposed by his post-2010 administration, while much academic and media debate has subsequently centred on whether The Big Society was a genuinely significant development in Conservative social policy, or merely a marketing ploy to disguise the realities of austerity.⁶

As a senior Cabinet Minister under Cameron in the coalition government after 2010, Theresa May never displayed much obvious public enthusiasm for the concept of the 'Big

⁵ Extract from Cameron's victory speech after the Tory leadership election result, BBC News, 6.12.05, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4504722.stm.

⁶ See J. Edwards, ed, *Retrieving the Big Society*, London, 2012.

Society’, although earlier in her political career she made a high-profile intervention at Tory party conference in 2002, when she acknowledged that the Conservatives were out of touch with social attitudes and seen as ‘the nasty party’. However, she supported the post-2010 emphasis on austerity in the wake of the 2007-8 economic crash, and a policy agenda that shrank the state while hoping a decentralised and voluntarist civil society would take over some of its core functions. Negative social implications have certainly arisen from the long years of austerity: the growth of foodbanks and homelessness, as well as reduced welfare benefits for some vulnerable groups. Given the tight financial constraints imposed by the narrative of austerity, there was limited room for manoeuvre in terms of social policy radicalism under Cameron between 2010-16, and the roll-out of the major social security policy innovation of these years – IDS’s ‘Universal Credit’ – was dogged by administrative problems and stymied by lack of funding.⁷ Universal credit, and the regime of benefit sanctions that has accompanied it, have been widely criticised in the left-wing press as harsh and punitive towards the poor. Cuts to tax credits announced by Osborne as Chancellor but introduced in 2017 have likewise been controversial.

Theresa May’s ‘meritocratic’ social policy

In early speeches as Prime Minister, May emphasised her ‘social’ credentials using carefully chosen language such as ‘fairness’, ‘making government work for all people’, ‘opportunity’, and ‘social mobility’; she even claimed at the 2016 Conservative Party Conference that the Conservatives were now the ‘workers’ party’.⁸ The latter claim is a direct and provocative assault on Labour’s traditional identity, and in making it, May was aiming to outflank the radical appeal of Jeremy Corbyn’s ‘new politics’. In adopting such an approach, May has sought to formulate a political ‘offer’ not overly-reliant on the free market, which acknowledges the existence of socio-economic inequality, yet which also asserts that most people are unified by a sense of personal aspiration, that can be fulfilled by well-managed ‘popular capitalism’. Where Cameron offered a paternalistic aura and metropolitan image,

⁷ G.Morris, ‘Universal Credit, Ideology and the Politics of Poverty’, *Renewal*, 24.3, 2016.

⁸ May’s 2016 Conservative Party Conference speech, 5.10.16, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/news/79517/read-full-theresa-mays-conservative>.

May appears to advocate more 'bottom-up' and 'suburban' social mobility. She has repeatedly emphasised the values of her aspirational middle-class grammar school background, as opposed to Cameron's upper-class private education and inherited wealth.

This has been most evident in May's attempts to revive the thorny debate over grammar schools, which in recent times has been a divisive issue for the Conservatives. Critics both within and outside her party claim grammar schools benefit only limited social groups, widen educational inequality and are a misguided return to a high-profile failure of the past. Indeed, while in opposition in 2007, David Cameron famously voiced his vehement opposition to a revival of grammar schools, arguing it was not an issue for 'an aspiring party of government' but more suitable for a 'right-wing debating society'. He asserted that those advocating grammar schools were 'splashing around in the shallow end of the educational debate' and 'clinging on to outdated mantras that bear no relation to the reality of life'.⁹ May, however, (as a grammar school product) has identified such schools as a tool for improving social mobility, arguing that the current **educational** status-quo favours the wealthier families who can afford private schools, or the striving middle classes who can pay to live closer to the best state schools. She has argued **that the** re-invention of this controversial policy will make Britain into a 'great meritocracy',¹⁰ and hopes to appeal to aspirational skilled working class and lower-middle class families (as well as socially authoritarian **and traditionalist** UKIP-inclined voters). She has sought to depict Labour's opposition to the policy as anti-aspirational, yet whether academic selection produces more winners than losers is doubtful, with most contemporary research (indeed, most research in the last four decades) concluding that it does not actually produce more social mobility.¹¹ Opponents of May's education policies have also emphasised that her government **has outlined proposals** to cut the existing schools budget by 6.5%,¹² creating a clear prospect of winners and losers **in the process**. With

⁹ 'Cameron steps up grammars attack', BBC, 22.5.07, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6679005.stm.

¹⁰ May, 'Britain, the great meritocracy: Prime Minister's speech on grammar schools', 9.9.16, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech>.

¹¹ See findings of Educational Policy Institute, 23.9.16, <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/epi-grammar-schools-report-the-7-key-findings/>; J.H.Goldthorpe, C.Llewellyn, and C.Payne, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*, Oxford, 1980.

¹² J.Stone, 'Government to cut school funding for first time since 1990s, IFS says', *Independent*, 27.2.17,

grammar school expansion dropped from the June 2017 Queen's speech, it remains to be seen whether this policy will reappear, and how popular it really is.

The Shared Society

In early 2017 May's social agenda began to take a more concrete shape, and there were some clear connections with Cameron's social policy legacy. In the first month of 2017, May publicly launched her own social policy, curiously entitled the 'Shared Society'.¹³ This seemed to both transcend yet also absorb elements of Cameron's social agenda. May embraced a communitarian approach and, like Cameron, expressed enthusiasm for civil society: she argued the 'shared society' meant:

A society that doesn't just value our individual rights but focuses rather more on the responsibilities we have to one another; a society that respects the bonds of family, community, citizenship and strong institutions that we share as a union of people and nations; a society with a commitment to fairness at its heart.

This strongly communitarian vision echoes New Labour's emphasis on community and mutual responsibilities. But May also promised to move beyond the **specific** 'social justice' agenda that was **established** in the Blair/Brown years, and to some extent **further developed** under Cameron, stating that

We will move beyond the narrow focus on social justice – where we help the very poorest – and social mobility – where we help the brightest among the poor. Instead, we will engage in a more wide-ranging process of social reform so that those who feel that the system is stacked against them – those just above the threshold that typically attracts the government's focus today yet who are by no means rich or well off – are also given the support they need.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/school-funding-cuts-tories-theresa-may-education-1990s-budget-2017-a7601366.html>.

¹³ May, 'The shared society', 8.1.17,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-shared-society-article-by-theresa-may>.

Neoliberal economists (so influential in the Thatcher era) refused to even countenance or acknowledge the significance of 'social justice' as a concept.¹⁴ Yet May has consistently recognised the importance of social justice (as did Cameron), while also promising to go beyond it. She has attempted to construct a wide constituency for the Conservative Party by rejecting the idea that 'social justice' is enough. Instead, she has argued that her government would help not only the poor **and explicitly vulnerable**, but also the 'just about managing'. She has also spoken of the 'burning injustices' facing various specific social groups such as women, racial minorities, and the mentally ill which stretch back over generations, **often which lack visibility**, and which her government would seek to address. **As evidence for this, in October 2017 she used the publication of a government audit on racial equality to emphasise her commitment to tackling the widespread problems found in the report.**¹⁵

This would suggest a degree of interventionist paternalism in May's political approach that can be linked **back** to the party's 'One Nation' traditions, **s opposed to** its Thatcherite heritage. It seems likely, however, that unless the Conservatives move much further away from 'austerity' than they have yet indicated, they will fail to find the funds to make good on May's promises to use the state to improve people's lives. Within this context, responses to the 'Shared Society' have so far been mixed, with one commentator describing it in positive terms as being the 'Big Society plus the state – a welcome and much needed addition',¹⁶ while another has, more negatively, called it a 'gloomier version of the Big Society'.¹⁷ Mrs May arguably wants to have it all. Her **social policy approach** attempts to triangulate between 'Cameroon' modernization, Thatcherite free markets and the Corbynite emphasis on social justice, **and embraces broadly sympathetic language**. Yet whether her specific version of social renewal can be delivered is questionable, and its ambition has been eroded by the 2017

¹⁴ F.A Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice*, London, 1978.

¹⁵ 'Audit lays bare racial disparities in UK schools, courts and workplaces', *Guardian*, 10.10.17, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/09/audit-lays-bare-racial-disparities-in-uk-schools-courts-and-workplaces>.

¹⁶ P.Blond, Twitter, 9.1.17.

¹⁷ I.Hardman, *Spectator*, 9.1.17, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/01/shared-society-seems-gloomier-version-big-society/>.

general election result and the subsequent resignations of her influential policy advisors, Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy.

Since becoming Prime Minister, May has also promised government support for specific (and often neglected) social issues such as mental health and domestic violence,¹⁸ indicating a commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable people and a willingness to further leverage the co-ordinating power of the state. This potentially marks a retreat from Cameron's 'Big Society' and its emphasis on networks of charitable, bottom-up endeavours. Yet critics of the post-2010 administrations have argued that actions speak louder than words, and that the austerity agenda and reduced public funding for such services over the past seven years is not consistent with this positive rhetoric. Indeed, official government figures from 2016 suggest that mental health spending has been reduced by 8 per cent in real terms since 2010,¹⁹ with an estimated 20 per cent increase in demands for its services within the same period. In 2016/17, local authorities faced cuts of 28% funding cuts for domestic violence programmes, while the charity Refuge, a key provider of domestic violence services, has seen reduced funding affecting 80% of its service contracts since 2011.²⁰ These statistics represent a fundamental critique of May's social policy agenda and how realistic some of its goals are (given her continuous role in government since 2010).

The stagnation of wages for many over the past decade (predicted to worsen after Brexit), alongside high income inequality and a recurring social housing crisis, increases the challenge for any government looking to improve the lives of the vulnerable, poor and 'just about managing'. Conservative modernisers over recent years have argued that the state does not have a monopoly in delivering socially just outcomes, with charities, grassroots organisations and non-governmental agencies important too. Yet some of Cameron's critics,

¹⁸ 'Prime Minister unveils plans to transform mental health support', 9.1.17, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-unveils-plans-to-transform-mental-health-support>.

¹⁹ A.McNicoll, 'Mental health trust funding down 8% from 2010 despite coalition's drive for parity of esteem', Community Care, 20.3.17, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/03/20/mental-health-trust-funding-8-since-2010-despite-coalitions-drive-parity-esteem/>.

²⁰ E.Howard, 'The domestic violence protesters who won't take cuts lying down', *Guardian*, 17.2.16, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/17/domestic-violence-protesters-sisters-uncut-direct-action>.

such as Philip Blond,²¹ have argued that austerity strangled the ‘Big Society’ at birth, and it could be argued that for the ‘Shared Society’ to work effectively it will need to learn lessons from past failures and provide a financial boost and significant state co-ordination, at the very least in its early stages of development and evolution. Prior to the 2017 general election, the Conservatives’ Budget indicated that austerity was likely to remain broadly in place, with Chancellor Philip Hammond suggesting that the creation of a ‘resilient’ economy for post-Brexit Britain was a bigger priority than enhanced levels of social policy spending.²² However, there have been suggestions from some senior Conservatives that austerity may be significantly relaxed in the wake of the 2017 electoral outcome, with an acknowledgment that the public are tired of **the severities and sacrifices associated with it**. Labour’s argument that an end to austerity and raised funding for public services is a vital prerequisite for adequate service provision is gaining ground – **with “anti-austerity” a key and seemingly popular rallying cry at the 2017 General Election**. In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster **in June 2017**, the case for adequate public funding – and strong health and safety and fire regulations – has been shown to be absolutely vital. It ultimately remains to be seen whether May and her Chancellor are prepared to accept that – and to significantly relax the brakes on austerity in the months ahead in order to provide improved funding for key **public and social** services. **If they do not, they will almost certainly fail to deliver on their relatively bold, socially-themed promises.**

A New Social Conservatism?

Despite the Thatcherite ideological interruption, the Conservative Party is historically pragmatic and flexible, and it has an instinct for populism and ultimately power. It also has a long history of social policy innovation and reform dating back to Benjamin Disraeli in the late nineteenth century. **In a historical context therefore, it** has shown an ability to pragmatically embrace the **significant social** reforms of Liberal and Labour governments whom it has succeeded in office. **Contemporary** British politicians face an increasingly unpredictable and

²¹ P.Blond, ‘David Cameron has lost his chance to redefine the Tories’, *Guardian*, 3.10.12, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/03/cameron-one-nation-u-turn-tory-tragedy>.

²² Spring Budget 2017: Philip Hammond's speech, 8.3.17, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spring-budget-2017-philip-hammonds-speech>.

demanding electorate that is increasingly de-aligned from traditional class-based loyalties, and in the immediate future British Conservatism needs to **react and respond** to the surprise outcome of the 2017 General Election. Much of the electorate was less than enthused about the Tory **policy** offer in 2017, and particularly about what the Tories had to say about society, community and equality. May has so far both embraced and aimed to transcend the modernising Cameron approach to social policy matters: she has voiced concern for the most vulnerable in society, while also emphasising a renewed focus on those 'just about managing'. **However, her** attempt to put grammar schools back at the heart of British political debate represented a deviation from the **post-2005** modernizing project, and showed a side of May that is nostalgic for tradition and authority. Her attempts to triangulate – to offer something for everyone in her social policy agenda – seem increasingly vacuous, **and in 2017 her socially-oriented language appeared to harden amidst the strains of election campaigning.** It **does seem increasingly** unlikely that May, hampered by restrictive parliamentary arithmetic and her fractious MPs, constrained by the narrative of the necessity of austerity, and distracted by Brexit, will be able to deliver a coherent social policy that can appeal to a restless electorate hit by ten years of stagnating real wages and living standards. **This scenario therefore provides fertile ground for Labour to offer a critique of such Conservative initiatives, creating the conditions for an alternative approach that would seek to appeal to the unsettled public mood.**

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