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# The 'New Right' and its legacy for British conservatism

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## ABSTRACT

New Right theories have had a major impact on British politics since the emergence of Thatcherism and the end of the so-called 'years of consensus' in the mid-1970s. In radically rejecting the conventions of postwar politics in terms of the management of both economic and social policies, the ideas of the New Right initially came to significantly shape the policies of the Thatcher government (1979–90), and indeed have continued to wield influence over other administrations in subsequent years. However, to what degree this influence has been retained as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century is a matter of conjecture, specifically in the wake of Conservative Party 'modernization', as well as the advent of major crises such as the 2007/8 economic crash and the Covid-19 pandemic. Within this context, this article seeks to assess and analyse the ongoing legacy of the New Right and its impact on British Conservatism over this sustained historical period.

## Introduction

This article aims to explain the development and evolution of 'New Right' ideology as a key variant and influence on contemporary Conservative political thought, and its consequent impact on the modern-day Conservative Party's socio-economic policy agenda. As an economic and political tradition that gained momentum and traction as the postwar era progressed, New Right theories aspired to revive the individualistic values of the liberal 'free market' environment that had prevailed for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while in the process dismantling and restructuring what its advocates viewed as the failing post-1945 welfare settlement. This neoliberal economic outlook subsequently established itself as an unerring influence within British Conservatism during the 1980s in particular, and in the process discarded much of the party's postwar paternalistic and occasional collectivist tendencies.

In therefore analysing precisely what the key principles and subsequent impact of this specific brand of Conservatism have been, it is necessary to address its origins, its development as a political concept, and how it subsequently attached itself onto the policy-making agenda of Margaret Thatcher's political leadership from 1975 onwards. Particular attention is therefore required as to the extent of the New Right's ideological thrust in shaping the policy agenda of the Thatcher administration between 1979 and

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1990, and how it potentially continues to cast its influence over party policy (and in turn wider British politics) beyond the Thatcher era and into the early twenty-first century. This ongoing impact of the New Right is specifically analysed in a more contemporary sense in the context of an initially gradual and then concerted ‘modernization’ process pursued by the Conservative Party since the late 1990s, as well as the challenges for governance created by the global economic crash of 2007–8 and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

## The origins of the New Right

The growing theoretical influence of the New Right reached its zenith in a sustained period of political hegemony for the Conservative Party during the 1980s, a development initially moulded by the dynamism of its own agenda, but further fuelled by the apparent failures of the postwar ‘social-democratic’ political settlement. The Thatcher government was evidently influenced and intellectually bolstered by the neoliberal theories of economists of the New Right such as Milton Friedman and F.A Hayek; Friedman being associated with the ‘Chicago School’ (University of Chicago), with Hayek attached in academic terms to the ‘Austrian School’. While both Friedman and Hayek were highly critical of the Keynesian postwar economic settlement that had been consolidated across much of the western world for approximately three decades, they did not wholly agree on specific solutions. Hayek had initially expounded his warning of escalating ‘statism’ in his 1944 seminal text ‘The Road to Serfdom’, while Friedman was a more contemporary figure who became US President Ronald Reagan’s economic adviser and who has been referred to as the founding father of monetarist theory; which primarily advocated that a government’s key responsibility in terms of economic management ‘was to ensure that the currency was sound’,<sup>1</sup> which practically entailed limiting the money supply, reducing state intervention/public spending, and also adhering to the ‘monetarist axiom’<sup>2</sup> of restricting borrowing. A further underlying influence on the moulding of New Right thought into practice was Maurice Cowling, a conservative Cambridge historian who emphasized the value of individual freedom (notably from the state) as one of the emerging strands of this ideological movement, notably ‘the sort of freedom that will maintain existing inequalities or restore lost ones’.<sup>3</sup> At a basic level, these varying key influences on New Right thought shared major concerns about the escalating ‘statist’ tendencies of many western liberal democracies, concluding that the postwar ‘social-democratic’ model of the state represented an unjustified ‘source of coercion’<sup>4</sup> regarding the autonomy of individual citizens.

As another example of a specific variation within New Right thought, the emerging theory of ‘supply-side economics’ also represented a further distinct element of the New Right economic model. This variant primarily emphasized the need for lower taxes, free trade and deregulation as means of tackling surging inflation, but as a distinctive theory it was less fiscally conservative and deflationary in nature than Friedman’s monetarist approach, and which again highlights variable inherent elements and traditions contained within the broader New Right political narrative. Such influences nevertheless came to gradually fuse together in broader economic policy terms, generating some degree of eventual coherence in advocating more explicit de-regulation of the economy, the promotion of ‘free market’ popular capitalism, while encouraging a culture of

enhanced economic liberalism and personal freedoms (via reduced taxation in particular); all of which came to be emblematic features of the New Right's agenda and perspective.

The works of Friedman and Hayek in particular consequently contributed to shaping Margaret Thatcher's personal ideological convictions, and in turn provided the intellectual basis for her government to decisively overturn the postwar consensus. Thatcher was further bolstered by contemporary domestic political mentors such as Enoch Powell, whose prominent critique of the statist postwar settlement was increasingly proclaimed during the 1950s and 60s, as well as bodies such as the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA, founded in 1955 under the considerable influence of Hayek), and which sought to explicitly and forcefully challenge the basis of the Keynesian postwar settlement. This was followed by the emergence the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) in 1974, co-founded by other key mentors such as Sir Keith Joseph and Alfred Sherman, along with Thatcher herself. They collectively sought to utilize it as 'an institutional base for the dissemination of (their) revisionist agenda'<sup>5</sup> to promote a free market-oriented policy programme.

Such bodies and their advocacy of economic liberalism would challenge the established model of the British welfare state and its associated policies with considerable vigour, specifically as the financial implications of its cost became increasingly evident during an era of growing economic strain. Powell's 'revisionist' economic rhetoric, alongside the various publications and literature of both the IEA and CPS during the 1960s and 70s, subsequently helped to set the scene for the emergence of 'Thatcherism' as the embodiment of New Right theory in action. Such variable influences of this New Right agenda therefore fused together to formulate a revived philosophical strand of both British and international (notably American) conservative thought that rejected the inherent structure of the postwar consensus, in particular the extent of the state's intervention and regulation of the mixed economy, along with associated high taxation and corporatist trade union power. As a diametric alternative to the era of consensus, New Right theory confidently claimed that a smaller 'neoliberal state'<sup>6</sup> would maximize economic output more efficiently, although such output would not be shared more equally across society, arising from the principles of the so-called 'trickle-down effect', which entailed that by prioritizing the economic opportunities and prosperity of the wealthiest and the employer/business classes, such wealth would then spread downwards 'to the rest of society . . . . (to) generate employment and finance welfare provision'.<sup>7</sup> However, such a concept of wealth 'benevolently' trickling down the social spectrum fuelled by the dynamics of the free market has been heavily criticized by the egalitarian left in terms of both its efficacy and social justice implications in subsequent years.

### **Context: the collapse of the postwar consensus**

The Thatcher leadership from 1975 (initially in political opposition) sought to practically develop and blend such influences into a socio-economic blueprint geared towards steering Britain in a distinctly different political direction, offering a stark contrast to the bulk of the historical period since 1945. The postwar era was essentially one that had been entrenched in the supposed certainties of the Keynesian 'mixed economy', albeit one skewed to the political left but broadly accepted by many pragmatic and moderate 'One Nation' Conservatives. However, such certainties had become distorted and

undermined by major global and domestic economic problems that steadily gained momentum throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and Thatcher was willing to further challenge them with her own brand of 'conviction' and ideology-driven political beliefs.<sup>8</sup> However, such ideological conviction was not always explicitly present from the outset of her leadership and would develop further as her confidence and political power grew as the 1980s progressed. She was nevertheless guided by some fundamental founding principles that would remain consistent and shape her political legacy, having ruefully concluded that the Conservative Party she inherited was 'barely distinguishable from . . . post-war Labour governments', with the country having 'lost its economic dynamism, resulting in a negative mood of 'decline and dependency'<sup>9</sup> emerging.

Within a distinctly British political context therefore, the New Right movement ultimately evolved as a vigorous political force in a circumstantial manner, with its emerging prominence less of an ideological necessity and arguably 'more a response to events'.<sup>10</sup> This circumstantial narrative and contextual emphasis has been echoed by various sources, with academics such as Letwin claiming that 'Thatcherite policies did not spring out of nothing', but were rather shaped 'by a confluence of ideas, activities and circumstances'.<sup>11</sup> The specific circumstances and 'events' that the British New Right variant sought to respond to represented the tumultuous climax of the sustained epoch of consensus from 1945; which was reaching crisis point as the 1970s progressed, and which had effectively collapsed by the end of this decade. A growing mood was therefore emerging that postwar British governments had ultimately failed in this consensual approach, and that administrations of all political persuasions broadly taxed and spent too much, had evidently not addressed Britain's postwar economic decline and industrial inefficiencies, and that the corporatist nature of trade union power was excessive and insufficiently controlled. This led some on the political right to label the country as 'the sick man of Europe'<sup>12</sup> and such matters came to a shattering crescendo in the winter of 1978/79, when rampant trade unionism triggered the 'Winter of Discontent' and the apparent destabilization of functioning government, with even high-profile figures of the political left such as Harold Wilson acknowledging the increasing alienation of public opinion from the Labour administration of James Callaghan.<sup>13</sup>

Critics of the Keynesian settlement from the political right ultimately claimed that it had served its immediate purpose in promoting a short-term stimulus to encourage postwar recovery, but in the long term it had simply generated increased levels of taxation, inflation, and public spending as an overall percentage of GDP, which collectively restricted long-term national economic growth. As a consequence, by the advent of the 1970s Britain's postwar economic performance was increasingly sluggish compared to other western nations (a phenomenon often referred to as 'stagflation').<sup>14</sup> Such economic strains and pressures were certainly evident in the gradual reduction of the scale of public expenditure under the administrations of Wilson and Callaghan (1974–9), particularly during the twilight phase of Labour in government following the significant cutbacks imposed by the IMF's dramatic intervention in 1976. This period has been said by some observers to mark the end of the so-called 'Golden Age' of economic growth<sup>15</sup> and was initially sparked by the 1973 global oil crisis; subsequently featuring rising unemployment, surging inflation and increased demands for significant reductions in UK public expenditure. This scenario inexorably culminated in the aforementioned and iconic 'Winter of Discontent', which proved to be the ultimate catalyst for thrusting New

Right theories into the frontline of political debate. This chaotic socio-political environment appeared to vindicate the alternative political and economic agenda being increasingly espoused by the New Right's most pro-active contemporary political figureheads such as Keith Joseph, and as a consequence of such sustained industrial and economic disruption, a significant public backlash was evident in the 1979 General Election, where Labour was seemingly punished for its association with 'tax and spend' policies and trade union power, and this appeared to confirm the definitive collapse of the postwar consensus.

### **The ethos and principles of the New Right political model**

The specific political priorities of the incoming government after 1979 were therefore focused on instigating a long-term restructuring of the British model of government from its traditional postwar collectivist appearance, and to instil a more individualist socio-political framework and culture. Yet despite having consequently gained some notable influence over the Conservative Party's political direction, it would be a significant challenge for New Right ideology to maintain this role and to shape both the structure of government and various key policies, particularly as its ideological vanguard formed only a minority clique within the wider parliamentary Conservative Party at the time.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the New Right viewpoint came to increasingly influence the party's sustained spell in political office from 1979, pushing the Thatcher administration of the 1980s in a more explicitly ideological direction compared to the conventional pragmatism that many observers had associated with the Conservative Party's approach to governance for much of the twentieth century. The 1980s therefore witnessed the ideological edge of the New Right in operation in British politics, and during this era it also became established as a transatlantic political presence, reacting to both international and domestic events with its own proposed policy remedies to address the various socio-economic problems of the time. Consequently, politicians that were aligned with its principles such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher consolidated and entrenched their grip on political power in the USA and Britain, respectively, for most of this decade.

As the postwar consensus collapsed into disarray during the 1970s, a socio-economic vacuum emerged which the New Right sought to enthusiastically replace with a more meritocratic, individualistic, and entrepreneurial model of society. Yet despite its 'free market' emphasis, it did acknowledge the need for some variant of a welfare state to exist, albeit a less vast and bureaucratic one. Under this New Right structural vision, the bloated welfare provision which was perceived to be a drain on national economic resources would be re-shaped and its funding levels reviewed and adapted to the dynamism of a recalibrated neoliberal economy. While this suggested greater organizational efficiency and less bureaucracy, such a blueprint for welfare would also be less comprehensive in its public reach, a potentially negative implication for the more vulnerable members of society inclined to use such services more often. As previously alluded to, the political left has consistently questioned the effectiveness, fairness and 'socially just' implications of such a free market focus and 'trickle-down' approach in the practical provision of effective public services, and have vehemently argued that such neoliberal principles fundamentally conflict with the more egalitarian and Keynesian socio-political model favoured by socialists and social democrats.

The New Right neoliberal ethos has certainly acknowledged that a more egalitarian model of society would never be the practical outcome of its preferred economic structure, but this is viewed as both a natural and desirable outcome of such explicit economic liberalism, as New Right theory perceives inequality as a natural and desirable state of affairs aligned with a specific view of human nature, distinguishing ‘sharply between equality of rights and equality of opportunity . . . and material equality of outcome.’<sup>17</sup> Yet in pursuing the approach to governance that it did, New Right influences formulated some crucial and relatively original policy decisions as Britain reached a critical socio-economic crossroads regarding the sustainability of its levels of taxation, public spending and overall public service and welfare provision. In therefore seeking to move the country on from a historical period increasingly viewed as being stagnant and regressive in its entrenched left-of-centre socio-economic agenda, the New Right’s ideological crusade advocated the formation of an administration and a revised political structure that would revolutionize the culture, direction and emphasis of government policy-making in the UK, and in the process forcefully drag the gravity of British politics towards the right-of-centre from its social-democratic location.

From the vantage point of the New Right’s perspective in national political opposition between 1974 and 79, its profile had indeed been boosted by the activities of Joseph, the IEA and CPS (and similar ideological trends and bodies in the USA), and it would gradually come to wield further influence over the party leadership. The more radical tendencies of New Right theory consequently identified the increasingly expensive welfare state as an area that needed significant reform and retrenchment in the context of the industrial unrest and negative economic growth of the 1970s, and this perspective gained considerable further momentum after Thatcher became Conservative Leader in 1975. The New Right’s emergence on the political scene reflected ‘a major departure from the political consensus’ as well as ‘a fundamental change of direction for the Conservatives’,<sup>18</sup> which as a party had previously supported the welfare state’s inflated bureaucratic existence for the majority of the postwar ‘consensus’ era.

However, the adoption of this revised strategic approach aligned with Thatcher’s evident ‘dislike of political consensus between the parties’<sup>19</sup> that had prevailed for much of the post-1945 period.<sup>20</sup> Within this context, the New Right agenda and proposed political structure can be viewed as ‘a libertarian project bent on destroying the “liberal consensus”’<sup>21</sup> within the British political system, and as a notably different agenda it aspired to re-shape what it perceived as a dormant period of postwar governance by pursuing a contrasting governmental ethos that aligned ‘the notion of conviction with the metaphor of movement and direction’.<sup>22</sup> This was an energetic political image cultivated by the prominent analysis of Shirley Letwin in particular, which sought to emphasize the notion of the ‘vigorous virtues’<sup>23</sup> as being an essential component of Thatcherism, while also seeking to clarify the connections between the liberal (Hayekian) aspects of the New Right with the more traditional conservative elements that would blend together to form the crux of Thatcherism. Such an emphasis appeared to instil the necessary dynamism and distinctive appeal into the Conservative Party’s political programme from 1979 onwards, which contrasted sharply with the tired and stale image of Labour in office, while also generating significant media support and advocacy, and in turn steadily growing levels of public appeal, as became apparent in the 1979 electoral outcome when the Conservatives were victorious on a larger than average swing.<sup>24</sup>



As a further response to global socio-economic developments and trends that were increasingly evident as the 1970s progressed and the mood of consensus faded away, the New Right's advocates in government came to enthusiastically promote the perceived merits of monetarist theory (as espoused by its founding father Friedman), whereby they endorsed tighter control of the money supply, opposition to unnecessary government 'interference' (as evident in excessive 'welfarism'), and the eventual desired outcome of reduced levels of public expenditure. This more explicitly ideological approach would also later influence the policy of 'denationalization' of British state-run industries, an approach that became more commonly referred to as privatization as the 1980s progressed. In espousing a less 'statist' outlook and a greater emphasis on 'marketization', the incoming Thatcher government proposed what has been summarized as a 'neo-liberal ideological assault on the post-war settlement',<sup>25</sup> and this New Right perspective also argued that instead of targeting zero unemployment (as the prevailing postwar social-democratic model of governance had done), the market would determine a natural rate of unemployment, and inflation would instead be prioritized. Within such a context, the advocacy of Friedman's monetarist doctrine was therefore justified on the premise that it rejected interventionist and ultimately futile attempts 'to push unemployment to zero (which would) no longer trigger inflationary spirals'.<sup>26</sup> Such sentiments appeared to be shared with varying degrees of enthusiasm by both moderate Labour politicians as well as neoliberal theorists and economists, which seemed to affirm the bleak implications for the long-term sustainability of the postwar political consensus and its supporting bureaucratic structure by the mid to late 1970s.

As already highlighted, between 1945 and the mid-1970s broad bipartisan agreement had existed regarding the levels of public spending and investment in social policies and public services, and from a longer-term perspective, this period witnessed the state taking on a gradually increased degree of social responsibility for British citizens, with progressively enhanced welfare provision and a more equal society developing 'as the gap between richest and poorest closed',<sup>27</sup> albeit at substantial public cost. Yet as an apparently negative economic consequence of such egalitarian trends, UK government expenditure as a percentage of GDP during this specific historical period reached the historically high level of 48.9% in 1975,<sup>28</sup> although this appeared to be an initial short-term legacy of the 1974–75 recession (with a similar inflationary trend notable after the 2008 economic slump), and this heightened percentage could also be partly explained by the fact that the country's overall GDP had shrunk. Nevertheless, such generally rising trends of government expenditure culminated in intervention from the IMF in 1976, provoking the Labour government of James Callaghan (1976–79) to publicly acknowledge that Keynesian economics linked to an ever-growing state, its associated bureaucratic structure, and range of generous and costly social policies was no longer economically viable or sustainable for the foreseeable future,<sup>29</sup> even before the practical advent of Thatcherism in office.

### **The Thatcher government, its diagnosis, and impact (1979-90)**

Within such a context, after coming to power in 1979 with a sturdy and fairly broad coalition of both media and public opinion on its side, the thrust of Conservative policy-making consequently prioritized the issues it had an explicit mandate to tackle, aligned



with a greater economic as opposed to social focus, although there were direct social and welfare policy implications. The newly elected Thatcher administration was therefore evidently influenced by what at times appeared to be a New Right ideology evolving in coherence, albeit one with ongoing varying strands of underlying influence as have been highlighted. Indeed, there has been considerable subsequent debate as to what degree it had a fully formed ideological purpose on taking office, or whether its inherent values evolved over various phases into what became known as ‘Thatcherism’ over the next decade.<sup>30</sup> For example, while Hayek and Friedman were ostensibly seen as the principal intellectual architects of much of the emerging radical policy agenda, they were not wholly united in their proposed political and economic remedies, and Hayek himself did not actually support the implementation of monetarist policy and the way it was employed. Both he and similar-minded scholars concluded it did not work as envisaged (even before it was quietly discarded as the 1980s progressed), on the fundamental premise that they viewed it as a mere technical fix that distracted from the more fundamental task of re-creating the conditions for a pure free market structural order, as espoused in the 1970s by the likes of Robert Nozick and his concept of the ‘minimal state’<sup>31</sup> (yet which was perhaps not practically possible in a country with such an entrenched social-democratic legacy). This would support the argument that the New Right was actually a spectrum of ideas with some unifying common themes, but which often disagreed on objectives and policy instruments.

Nevertheless, general monetarist influences were initially evident in the Thatcher government’s focus on addressing deep-rooted structural problems within the British economy that were a side-effect of the generous postwar model of welfare provision. A particular initial policy focus was to address the unerring scourge of inflation (as previously alluded to), and the new Prime Minister was said to have had a ‘moral hatred of inflation’<sup>32</sup> and its impact on everyday prices, which perhaps reflected her frugal background as the ‘Grocer’s daughter’.<sup>33</sup> After inflation had spiralled upwards and peaked at 26% during the mid-1970s, the Thatcherite analysis argued that this was primarily due to decades of inefficient postwar public expenditure and state intervention, with the government subsidizing failing nationalized industries and surplus jobs in the name of maintaining social harmony, often in defiance of the demands of the ‘iron laws’ of the free market. Such an interpretation appeared to have been digested by various senior figures within the Thatcher administration from an early stage of its existence, as a significant number were seen to have been ‘emboldened intellectually’ by New Right theory and influences, whose analysis had identified various economic problems of the 1970s being ostensibly caused by ‘successive post-war governments . . . not allowing “the market” to function freely’.<sup>34</sup>

This focus on tackling inflation could therefore be viewed as the principal economic priority from the outset for the Thatcher government, which notably diverged from focusing on the maintenance of high employment levels as had been prioritized for much of the postwar era of consensus. Yet such a focus would be severely tested in the fall-out from the sharply rising number of job losses during the early 1980s, resulting in mass unemployment amidst an initial mood of political and economic crisis, although in politically beneficial terms it would in the longer-term result in the restructuring of the British economy and the eventual weakening of trade union power. As another policy example, the New Right emphasis on fiscally conservative economics was also clearly

evident in early bold cuts in income tax in the 1979 budget,<sup>35</sup> which implied less government expenditure. In addition, one of Thatcher's initial forays into social policy saw her government abolish the link between pensions and earnings in 1980, a move that appeared to be primarily motivated by economic motives and specifically securing further reductions in public spending.

The Thatcher administration therefore advocated a return to liberal economics of the 'Victorian era', stemming from her 'Methodist' upbringing and associated sympathies with Victorian social and economic values of thrift and self-help, and in doing so represented an ideological backlash against the prevailing socio-economic conditions that had driven the dominant social democratic model of government for postwar Britain. This new approach could be seen as justified given what has been described as the UK's apparently 'perilous state . . . prior to Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979',<sup>36</sup> and this proposed solution has been succinctly described as representing the reformulation of 'free economy and a strong state', notably within Andrew Gamble's prominent analysis of the New Right's policy approach and its legacy,<sup>37</sup> and particular its distinctive fusion of economic liberalism and social conservatism. In similar vein, according to Letwin and her similarly noteworthy analysis of the core features of the Thatcher government, this did not mean that Thatcherism was only about economics, but was rather 'more precisely, a way of not doing economic policy'.<sup>38</sup> Such a distinctive change of government direction offered a contrasting political outlook from what had gone before and triggered a clear shift towards fiscal retrenchment, the marketization and streamlining of public services, and an intense focus on reduced government spending commitments.

Academic scholars such as Gamble have emphasized that a variation of a 'strong state' was required to instil the necessary structural framework to allow the Thatcher government to impose both its moral values and political direction, while simultaneously allowing capitalism to flourish by seeking to actively 'unwind the coils of social democracy and welfarism that had fastened around the free economy'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this interpretation of the New Right's key aims indicates that an appropriate governmental architecture was seen as an essential factor for capitalism to function at its most beneficial and efficient, and for a 'strong state' to break the resistance of more conventional/conservative social forces that were resistant to free market dynamics; as espoused by the concept of 'ordoliberalism'<sup>40</sup> that envisages at least a role for the state as an instigator to ensure the appropriate conditions for a liberal (free market) economic order. This would serve to ideally produce an economic system that according to Gamble was 'dynamic and productive' yet still reliant 'upon institutions that the market itself cannot generate spontaneously'.<sup>41</sup> Such an emphasis arose from the Thatcherite perspective that the postwar model of social democratic government was skewed towards statist solutions that were fundamentally flawed, arising from the premise that 'Keynesianism was anathema',<sup>42</sup> and the most radical Thatcherite analysis advocated that the basic foundations of the British welfare model required dismantling and re-structuring in a wholly new guise.

Michael Moran has described this reformist and revamped recipe of New Right broader public service provision as representing 'the new regulatory state' or 'reregulation',<sup>43</sup> as opposed to the more conventional term of deregulation, arguing that during the Thatcher era the power of independent professions and 'club'

government was destroyed and replaced by internal markets, purchaser/provider splits, compulsory competitive tendering and other hallmarks of a redefined regulatory state. In short, it could be argued that one set of normative regulations were replaced by another set, albeit of a type more suited to the Thatcher style of government and its free market ethos. It was in such a context that the 1980s witnessed 'concerted attempts. . . . to refashion the welfare state',<sup>44</sup> although without always reducing spending, and it was within this innovative context that from 1979 onwards the Thatcher government and its New Right influences evidently sought to radically revise the distinctly Keynesian legacy it had inherited.

By the start of the 1980s, the immediate short-term social consequences of such an austere approach to reducing the cost and scope of public expenditure and associated welfare provision were fairly harsh in terms of the specific social unrest that the Thatcher administration faced. Therefore, when such primary economic imperatives of cuts in both direct taxation and public spending led to a practical 'rolling back' of the state and subsequent reductions of industrial subsidies as well as welfare and social policies, there were serious and destabilizing social repercussions. Subsequently, in the aftermath of Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe's controversial 1981 'retrenchment' Budget, featuring significant cuts in both borrowing and spending that have been described as 'severe',<sup>45</sup> and the extent of such discord that followed saw various inner-cities such as Liverpool, Manchester and London erupting in violent protest. As notable areas of multi-ethnicity, deprivation and high unemployment, this created a backdrop of extreme and destructive rioting and divisive social unrest among poorer social groups disproportionately impacted by such sharp reductions in government expenditure. Accordingly, more moderate 'One Nation' Conservative Party figures such as Gilmour, Heseltine, Prior and Pym were alarmed at such brutal social implications of Thatcherism, claiming that on two fronts, 'economically and socially, the government was steering for the rocks'.<sup>46</sup> Such fears of widening social unrest contrasted sharply with the views of the more avowedly Thatcherite ministers within government, most prominently Norman Tebbit, who in the midst of such escalating unemployment and social disharmony somewhat infamously referred to growing up 'in the '30s with an unemployed father', while adding that 'he didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking 'til he found it'.<sup>47</sup> This less sympathetic Thatcherite reaction to such social unrest therefore contrasted sharply with the 'One Nation' Conservative viewpoint, and such differences reflected a notable fracture within the Conservative Party of this period, and indeed beyond it.

This more explicit economy-focused approach of the 1980s therefore created conditions for further episodes of broader social disharmony throughout the decade; evident not only in the inner-city riots of 1981, but also in the Miners' Strike of 1984–5 and the poll tax protests of 1989–90. In the wake of such recurring socio-economic unrest, debate ensued both then and since as to whether the Conservative government after 1979 merited more failure than success (on various levels), and political commentators and academics ranging from David Willetts to Shirley Letwin have specifically identified the first term of Thatcher's Conservative administration as further evident proof that the government was explicitly and determinedly pursuing a New Right themed policy programme that was 'above all, economic'<sup>48</sup> in its core emphasis. As a consequence, expansive social policy and broader welfare reform became relatively neglected and even expendable in some cases, being subservient to the fundamental aim of balancing the

books and achieving greater long-term economic stability, dynamism, and efficiency. As Letwin argued in her allusion to the ‘vigorous virtues’ of Thatcherism in practice, such an emphasis on dynamic economic liberalism grew in its boldness the longer Thatcher was in power, and it was particularly during her second term (1983–87) that her policy agenda asserted an even more explicit economic emphasis, with flagship populist policies such as privatization and further cuts in direct taxation (most notably in the 1988 budget) flourishing in ideological vigour. The consequent perceived prioritization of the individual over social matters is often epitomized by the infamous comments that Thatcher made in a ‘Woman’s Own’ magazine interview following her third electoral victory in 1987 that ‘There is no such thing as society . . . There are individual men and women and there are families’,<sup>49</sup> a phrase often used out of its full context but which nevertheless appeared to reflect her emphasis on economic and atomistic individualism rather than a communitarian, social outlook.

There have subsequently been critical and negative interpretations of the Conservative Party’s political record and impact in office during the 1980s, and this has re-enforced an often negative perception that Conservatives of the New Right variant were ‘not interested in society, and were merely concerned with economics’,<sup>50</sup> culminating in the socio-economic criticisms that relative ‘under-funding on public services’ was a key legacy of ‘Conservative social policy in the 1980s and 1990s’.<sup>51</sup> As previously highlighted, there were indeed often negative and unequal social consequences to the economic policies pursued by the Thatcher government that adversely affected poorer members of society, and there were also tensions within the broader New Right family between the economic neoliberals who wanted more radically de-regulated public services, and those of a more authoritarian and socially conservative nature who favoured maintaining the revised, regulatory, and prescriptive features of the ‘strong state’ as alluded to by Andrew Gamble. A range of distinct flagship social policies nevertheless emerged from such ideological tensions, an example being the acceleration of council house sales and the associated reduction in state responsibility (that as a deregulatory policy proved to be electorally popular), while the 1988 Education Reform Act was more neoconservative in its focus, yet which again featured elements of marketization introduced into a core public service. Overall, key welfare and social policies during this historical era were ultimately affected by the government’s desire to shrink the size and scope of both its economic and interventionist footprint (reflecting evident New Right influence), which would set a precedent for future Conservative administrations in their approach to these specific policy spheres.

### **Conservative governance amidst the aftermath of Thatcherism**

In contrast to its perceived neglect and indifference to social policy, during the 1980s the Conservative Party established a sufficient reputation of economic competence as a critical component of the radical New Right agenda and project. Economic credibility and associated growth therefore appeared to be the cornerstone of its political hegemony, and this reputation was a key factor in the party’s impressive achievement of four successive general election victories between 1979 and 1992, with economic credibility perhaps the crucial factor in its success in the particularly closely-fought general election of 1992.<sup>52</sup> This positive image had been steadily cultivated by the New Right’s economically liberal policy agenda that had featured direct taxation cuts,

privatization and explicit anti-inflationary measures pursued throughout the 1980s. However, this reputation was largely decimated following the debacle of 'Black Wednesday' on 16 September 1992, and in the aftermath of this traumatic episode John Major's administration faced the harsh reality that the Conservatives' former superiority on economic policy matters was eradicated by a sudden collapse of public trust on this vital issue. New Labour subsequently eclipsed the Conservatives in terms of perceived economic competence, and the outcome of the 1997 general election was arguably sealed some years beforehand on the basis of such fundamental economic factors affecting electoral fortunes.<sup>53</sup>

Given the electoral devastation of 1997 and further heavy defeats that followed in 2001 and 2005, it was evident that not only had the Conservative Party lost its previously dominant image of economic probity, but of further significance, was also perceived as being out of touch with significant swathes of contemporary British society, particularly regarding various aspects of modern lifestyle attitudes and the associated social policies that had become determinants in many people's patterns of voting behaviour. This perhaps indicated that just as Keynesianism had appeared to have served its purpose as a socio-economic model for governance by the mid-1970s, so arguably had the principles and policies associated with the New Right by the mid-1990s, although various Conservative politicians were often resistant to this inference, given that Thatcherism's roots in the party had gradually grown from its initial minority clique. This went to the heart of the Conservative Party's troubled and uncertain identity in the post-Thatcher period from 1990 onwards, with rival influences grappling for the party's ideological soul, reflecting the divisions that the New Right's socio-economic legacy had impacted on the internal equilibrium of British Conservatism. In some respects, it can therefore be argued that while society appeared to have evolved and developed during the party's eighteen years in power (1979–97), the Conservative hierarchy and its broad attitudes to society had somewhat stagnated and seemingly failed to adapt. This was despite there being evidence of some notable demographic shifts in terms of gender politics, greater sexual diversity, more non-conventional family models and higher levels of multi-ethnicity within an overall more diverse and tolerant British social structure.<sup>54</sup>

Following the previously highlighted episodes of social turmoil in the 1980s, some post-Thatcher Conservatives have been sensitive to comparisons between their socio-economic policy agenda with that of the 1980s variant, specifically regarding perceptions of neglect of poorer, urban areas and their inhabitants who on the whole are reliant on greater levels of state provision and welfare support. However, it remains open to conjecture to what degree the reversion to retrenchment and austerity after 2010 was specifically influenced by the legacy of the New Right-policy agenda or whether this reflected a totally different set of socio-economic circumstances, and was instead a reversion to an older model of fiscal conservatism. Fears of scenes of social unrest in the context of economic cutbacks (commencing from 2010 to deal with the inflated national deficit) became reality with protests over student tuition fees increases in late 2010, followed by extreme social unrest and rioting in summer 2011 (ostensibly linked to the government's austerity agenda). On the basis of such disruptive social events, there is perhaps some potential for a coherent link to be made between the socio-economic approach of the New Right and the model of 'austerity' governance particularly adopted by Cameron's coalition administration between 2010 and 15.

While pessimistic parallels with the 1981 Thatcher/Howe Budget were highlighted by many on the political left amidst the inception of the post-2010 austerity agenda, the New Right interpretation offers the alternative more optimistic historical perspective that on a primarily economic and fiscal level, the 1981 government budget is 'considered the epitome of soundness, an exercise in rigour that laid the foundations for the strong economic recovery'.<sup>55</sup> This budget has therefore been widely viewed as one of the most significant socio-economic historical precedents for later generations to absorb from the New Right's most obvious period of political ascendancy.<sup>56</sup> Despite it provoking some notable internal and external political opposition at the time, it can nevertheless be seen as a benchmark to be adhered to by the 'fiscal' Conservatives of the contemporary era, offering a blueprint for future Conservative administrations in dealing with challenging economic conditions. It has however been noted by various political commentators that David Cameron (from 2005) was the first Conservative Party Leader since 1997 who sought to more explicitly address the social implications of the neoliberal economic model in a way that the more ardent Thatcherites had not, with his focus on much vaunted concepts such as 'The Big Society'<sup>57</sup> and his broader emphasis on social issues whereby he accepted 'that the party had ignored the adverse social consequences'<sup>58</sup> of its New Right agenda.

The definitive electoral development of 1997 provided Conservative modernizers with a significant impetus to reform and explicitly re-align the party's 'post-Thatcher' position in relation to some specific key issues and areas of social policy in particular,<sup>59</sup> yet without necessarily abandoning the momentous impact of the New Right legacy entirely. Therefore, although the Thatcherite emphasis on neoliberal economics, broad deregulation and variable Euroscepticism was largely maintained as key undercurrents of modern Conservative identity, social policy focus had emerged as a revived feature in determining the broader policy agenda and associated electoral priorities and behaviour. By default therefore, social and welfare policy matters arguably required enhanced political attention after being somewhat sidelined by the economic flavour of the 1980s, and exacerbated by associated hostility from parts of the political right to the perceived dependency culture engendered by postwar social and welfare policies. The New Right's economic emphasis of the 1980s had ultimately moved the broader political debate and wider public mood in its favour in the shorter term, but the longer-term and more diverse social trends and developments that arose from this period were less aligned with such neoconservative social values and therefore eroded the Conservative Party's long-term electoral prospects. David Cameron's leadership of the Conservative Party sought to embrace the evolution of contemporary British society as an integral aspect of his strategy to reverse the tide of repeated electoral defeat. Indeed, he personally acknowledged that 'towards the end of the 1980s we did become too much the economics party', having 'won the battle of ideas in political economy', with New Labour's moderate emergence the 'very proof of that'.<sup>60</sup>

Cameron's viewpoint acknowledging the need to offer a refreshed emphasis to social policy echoed those of illustrious political heavyweights who had preceded him in holding prominent party positions following the loss of national power in 1997. As an example, by the late 1990s Michael Portillo, the former Thatcher Cabinet Minister and later Shadow Chancellor (2000–2001) claimed (as part of his transformation from a New Right disciple of Thatcherism to a socially liberal conservative), that the



Conservative Party needed to address the negative perceptions of its approach to welfare, social policy and broader social attitudes. Even William Hague (party leader 1997–2001), and viewed as being less socially liberal than both Cameron and the post-1997 Portillo, accepted that the ‘Tories cannot any longer be just an “economic party”. . . . (and must) open up on . . . welfare and other social issues’.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, despite such ostensible success in re-shaping the country’s long-term economic infrastructure amidst the landmark decade of the 1980s, it appeared that by the early twenty-first century there required a more explicit focus on social issues that had been somewhat neglected during the period of New Right hegemony, and that according to Willetts the Conservative Party had been responsible for ‘shirking responsibility for . . . social issues where it ought to act’.<sup>62</sup> Such apparent neglect and distraction from the social angle of policy-making ultimately appeared to result in the Conservatives becoming dislocated from the mainstream electorate’s general social values and expectations that had arisen from the dramatic socio-economic changes of the 1980s, and which provides one broader explanation for the declining levels of electoral support experienced by the party from the mid-1990s onwards.

### **The New Right’s impact on twenty-first century conservatism**

Subsequently, while during the 1980s the focused emphasis on radical economic restructuring can be viewed as a direct consequence of New Right influence, social policy remained a comparatively low priority, and there were somewhat accurate predictions during the Major era (1990–97) that the ‘new theme of more fundamental change in Britain’s welfare state. . . . will fall to the younger generation of Conservatives to elaborate’.<sup>63</sup> This line of analysis certainly struck a chord with newly-elected Conservative ‘modernizers’, who having surveyed the wreckage of the 1997 general election defeat, subsequently sought to steer the Party back on the road to electability and broader public appeal in the ensuing years of the early twenty-first century. This focus on the need for a refreshed and more attractive electoral message resulted in a revision of the New Right’s legacy in terms of shaping a new direction for the Conservative Party, which resonated with post-2010 Prime Ministers such as David Cameron and Theresa May in particular. Under the leadership of Cameron between 2005 and 2016, Conservative modernizers energetically sought to address the adverse social implications caused by neoliberal economics and the smaller state that Thatcherism had principally created, yet their efforts seemed to sit incongruously next to the social unrest that engulfed parts of urban Britain by the middle of 2011. While he consistently expressed a ‘One Nation’ style paternalistic concern for poorer members of society, Cameron nevertheless expressed little sympathy for those involved in such unrest and publicly acknowledged the need for significant economic cutbacks that were broadly aligned with the New Right’s general fiscal principles and economic model. There ultimately appeared to be a sense of paradox within the Cameron socio-economic prescription between 2010 and 16, namely in relation to how the circle could be squared between a more ‘compassionate’ social focus, alongside reduced government expenditure, streamlined public services, and the personal hardships and notable social tensions that subsequently entailed for some poorer citizens.



This post-Thatcher legacy ultimately generated a scenario whereby the Conservatives appeared to have become progressively detached from the divergent lifestyle trends and broader social mood of wider society during the final years of the twentieth century, the tail-end of a 100-year period that the party had politically dominated. This tendency was observed by the polling of major Conservative donor Michael Ashcroft after the party's third successive General Election defeat in 2005, when he warned that despite a modest electoral improvement (an increased vote of 0.7%), popular support for the party was effectively 'flatlining' and had risen minimally in eight years (1.7%).<sup>64</sup> Ashcroft's polling subsequently and starkly confirmed that there needed to be urgent 'modernization' and radical reform of the Conservative Party's values and identity if the party was to electorally recover.<sup>65</sup> As already noted, a concerted attempt to reset the party's political balance between its economic and social priorities had become particularly evident during the Cameron leadership, with its 'modernizing' focus on supporting core services such as the NHS instead of cutting taxes, while also being ostensibly 'at ease with modern Britain (as) . . . a multicultural society . . . with people who had different lifestyles and sexual preferences'.<sup>66</sup> This introspective analysis and subsequent desire for a fresh strategic approach was a re-aligned response to external opinions about the Conservative Party image, identity and wider public perception in the aftermath of the dominant New Right era, and specifically the Thatcherite attachment to ostensibly 'old-fashioned' conservative Victorian social attitudes, which could be perceived as being aligned with moralistic intolerance.

Such self-reflection became most pronounced at the 2002 Conservative Party Conference, when Party Chairman Theresa May accepted that the party needed to extend its popular appeal and effectively 'catch up' with the views of British society that had evolved considerably while the party had been in office between 1979 and 1997. In this context, May controversially acknowledged that many individuals and specific socio-economic groups had negative perceptions of the Conservatives and their various social attitudes, remarking that 'our base is too narrow and so, occasionally, are our sympathies. You know what some people call us – the nasty party'.<sup>67</sup> This brutal self-assessment of being the 'nasty party' re-emphasized the fact that in the three consecutive general election defeats between 1997 and 2005, the lingering influence of the individualistic New Right narrative had potentially contributed to the Conservatives' disconnection from contemporary attitudes of modern, multicultural, heterogeneous Britain, and specifically its inherent diversity, communitarianism and socially interventionist instincts. Furthermore, while the Conservatives had been often abruptly and instinctively opposed to the Labour government's 'social liberalism'<sup>68</sup> and its associated bureaucratic, interventionist and statist enabling measures, they had little in terms of a constructive alternative agenda to offer. Thus, the New Right vocabulary and rhetoric that was politically positive during the 1980s now appeared to hinder efforts to articulate a coherent and persuasive Conservative Party programme or image for government in the early twenty-first century.

For example, in echoing the Thatcherite 'Victorian' and moralistic mentality towards social matters, after 1997 the party's mainstream opinion opposed policies such as adoption rights for same-sex couples and repeal of 'Section 28' regarding the teaching

of homosexual lifestyles, while in the economic sphere it initially opposed the minimum wage and also the 'targeted' tax credits aimed at poorer social groups; all of which in turn often created adverse headlines about Conservatism's apparent indifference to an increasingly benevolent and benign public mood. Conservative Party modernizers therefore attempted to distance themselves from the intolerant and moralistic aspect of the New Right's neoconservative legacy, being aware of the party's 'weak standing with the electorate, particularly on health and welfare issues',<sup>69</sup> and subsequently sought to progressively and pragmatically cultivate a more appealing image for moderate and mainstream floating voters. By the start of the twenty-first century this ultimately led to the attempted re-alignment and 'detoxifying' of the Conservative image<sup>70</sup> in relation to various negative features of the New Right's agenda, and an opportunity to address and transcend its 'divided ideological legacy ... (of) economic liberalism (and) social conservatism'.<sup>71</sup> David Cameron in particular sought to eradicate negative perceptions by revising the party's position on some key social and welfare policy issues and therefore made concerted efforts to detach contemporary Conservatism from its 'image as the "nasty" or "uncaring" party. ... (and) to "decontaminate" the brand'.<sup>72</sup> A very prominent and even provocative example of this revised approach was the Cameron-led government's watershed reform of legalizing same-sex marriage in 2013.

In pursuit of the visible 'de-toxification' and 'decontamination' of its own formerly attractive political brand, the Conservative Party of the early twenty-first century has therefore often sought to espouse a more 'compassionate' social tone as opposed to a primarily economic one. In opposition during the first decade of the century, it pragmatically endorsed much of Labour's additional investment in the welfare state and associated increased taxation, which reflected 'New Labour's politics of dominance in the area of public services'<sup>73</sup> and its associated electoral success between 1997 and 2005. This indicated that the contemporary electorate broadly supported New Labour's attention to reviving public services, although the Conservatives consistently demanded greater efficiency and better value for money in the usage of such public finances, which was their key qualification for supporting the associated social and welfare policies that were funded. In responding to such political realities in a more pragmatic and flexible manner, the Conservatives therefore adapted their image and refreshed their policy agenda within this specific sphere. This resulted in a departure from the more ideologically robust and economy-centric agenda of the 1980s, although not always completely departing from the New Right legacy completely.

On this premise, the more socially liberal 'modernizing' tendency within the Conservative Party has notably progressed in influence during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, namely at the expense of the economic neoliberals, a development which stems from the difficult period incorporating both William Hague's leadership (1997–2001), and also the Iain Duncan Smith era (2001–3) in particular.<sup>74</sup> During this specific phase of national opposition (1997–2003), the party seemed somewhat confused about its political identity and reverted its primary focus on shoring up the support of its core supporters and media allies. As a consequence, its popular vote remaining static accordingly, while appearing to increasingly 'shape policy in response to the latest headlines in the Daily Telegraph and Daily Mail'.<sup>75</sup> Yet despite various post-1997 Conservative leaders being publicly intent on gradually broadening the appeal and revising the policy agenda of modern, post-Thatcher Conservatism, after 13

years in opposition the party's level of popular support in 2010 was relatively disappointing, rising less than 6% between the electoral nadir of 1997 and the rather unconvincing return to government in 2010. David Cameron subsequently moved into Number 10 'with a smaller proportion of support from the electorate than any previous Conservative prime minister',<sup>76</sup> which reflected the Conservative Party's ongoing image problems within some sections of society, and which was a cause of concern for the twentieth century's 'natural party of government'. The successive General Elections of 2015, 2017, and 2019 have nevertheless witnessed further evidence of a continuous rising curve of Conservative electoral support (dating back to 2001), and beyond 40% in the latter two cases,<sup>77</sup> but arguably distorted and artificially inflated by the impact of the polarizing Brexit debate, as opposed to genuinely popular domestic policy innovation.

Yet in the aftermath of the 2007–8 financial crisis, the Cameron leadership's decision to embrace the language of retrenchment and to somewhat casually abandon its initial support for Labour's expansive spending plans suggested an opportunistic reverse shift towards the Thatcherite neoliberal agenda of the 1980s. In pragmatically adapting to the crisis economic conditions, Conservative politicians were subsequently emboldened to argue for 'small government', which instilled some marked divisions and differences (or 'clear blue water')<sup>78</sup> between the two main parties regarding both economic and social policy. This approach was seen by some critics as a welcomed opportunity for the Conservatives to re-assert their case for a revised variant of the New Right's agenda of a reduced state and streamlined expenditure on key welfare and social policies, with a prolonged recession and global financial crisis creating the appropriate circumstances to be politically exploited to the Conservatives' own advantage.<sup>79</sup> This strategy appeared to come to fruition when having returned to government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010, significant public spending cuts were subsequently made in the ensuing Emergency Budget. This reflected in economic terms at least, that the party had retained some instinctive Thatcherite principles, particularly regarding a 'scepticism towards public spending'.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, in this revised analysis of his economic policy-making approach, Cameron briskly departed from his previous commitments to adhere to Labour's spending levels, and in doing so 'rediscovered virtues in Margaret Thatcher . . . hitherto largely airbrushed from history in his speeches . . . opening up the biggest divide on economic policy between the parties for more than a decade'.<sup>81</sup>

From one perspective, this development could certainly be seen opportunistic, while nevertheless creating the potential for the Conservative leadership to critically address the spendthrift tendencies of the partially revitalized and centralizing 'social democratic' state after more than a decade of Labour administration. Yet in arguing for reduced debt and deficit levels in the aftermath of such a slump, it gave the possible impression that the previous 'social' emphasis was superficial and lacked substance. On this premise, the New Right's legacy of fiscal conservatism seemed to have re-emerged on the political horizon amidst questionable motives, instilling a further challenging dynamic to the primary aims of party modernizers, who had been actively seeking to redefine the party's approach to the management of the British welfare model in a more compassionate manner. Cameron's modernizing tendency were sensitive to the potential hazards in preserving such a 'compassionate' image for his party while simultaneously focusing on austerity and retrenchment, yet a favourable interpretation of such economic difficulties had been identified by elements of the New Right during the 1970s, as amidst similar economic

turmoil Conservative policies became politically stronger and ‘leadership shifted to those most critical of the post-war consensus on social and economic policy . . . . (who) viewed retrenchment not as a necessary evil but as a necessary good’.<sup>82</sup> The similar suggestion of political opportunism amidst economic uncertainty from 2007/8 was observed in both political and academic circles, and Andrew Gamble has noted that dissident figures on both the left and right of politics in the 1970s who were disillusioned by the postwar consensus and its failings, subsequently ‘welcomed the political space created by the recession . . . for refashioning institutions and redesigning policies in radical ways’.<sup>83</sup> Gamble has referred to such a scenario as representing a ‘crisis of social democracy’<sup>84</sup> which in particular gave the New Right’s thrusting agenda its opportunity to fill a socio-political vacuum created by the left, with a distinctively alternative model of government more aligned with the principles of free market liberal democracy instead, the so-called ‘free economy and a strong state’.

## Discussion and conclusion

The newer and contemporary generation of Conservative political leaders have strived to convince an often-sceptical public audience of their benevolent concern for specific social and welfare policy provision as part of the party’s ‘modernization’ process of the early twenty-first century. This could well prove to be a significant and ongoing challenge given the sentiments from within more recent intakes of Conservative MPs of an appetite ‘for the Thatcherite agenda of tax cuts, continued marketisation and downward pressure on public spending’.<sup>85</sup> In this context it would therefore appear that some elements within the Conservative Party’s ranks have indeed sensed an opportunity or identified a ‘necessary good’ (as was ostensibly so in the 1970s) for further socio-economic restructuring and the resurgence of a Thatcherite ‘rolling back’ of the state as a consequence of economic difficulties faced since approximately 2008 onwards. Broader public opinion towards this approach is often variable, as there has appeared some significant volatility in voters’ attitudes towards taxation and funding core public services, with analysis from the past decade or so indicating some initial basis of support for fiscal retrenchment. This was particularly so in the immediate aftermath of the New Labour administrations of Blair and Brown encompassing the first decade of this century, whose governance broadly coincided with steadily eroding public attitudes regarding ‘tax-funded increases in state provision’ alongside a ‘hardening’<sup>86</sup> approach towards welfare claimants up to and beyond 2010.

Yet following a decade of austerity since 2010, there have been some indications of revived public support for tax increases to fund core public services within the welfare state’s structure.<sup>87</sup> There do, however, remain lingering wider suspicions of Conservative public spending proposals on social and welfare policies, arguably linked to New Right influences of the past; namely its neoliberal economics and its neoconservative social outlook. This has been brought to the fore by the dramatic economic slump and associated employment insecurities of those who have unexpectedly come to rely on various state welfare provisions in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. Such a scenario presents a further significant challenge to the Conservative Party brand under Boris Johnson’s leadership, amidst his somewhat turbulent and unprecedented experiences in power since securing a convincing electoral success in 2019. While adopting an

essentially statist response to the pandemic described by one observer as ‘the greatest expansion of the state in peacetime history’,<sup>88</sup> particularly in the form of Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s distinctly generous and interventionist furlough scheme as a short-term fix, the longer-term approach and motives in tackling the socio-economic fall-out remains less clear.

Such simmering public anxieties regarding Conservative social policy intentions have ultimately arisen in the context of how various New Right ideas and theories emerged to radically re-structure various components of the established postwar welfare state in Britain from 1979 onwards, which appeared to represent a destabilizing feature of core public service provision and welfare expenditure during the twentieth century’s final two decades in particular. Yet, the somewhat utopian ideological aspirations of a truly liberalized welfare model remained an uncompleted goal during the New Right’s political ascendancy of the 1980s, primarily because ‘the structural impediments involved (were) . . . immense’<sup>89</sup> and also that ‘a crucial constraint . . . was the sheer popularity of welfare institutions’.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, public opinion, specific events and circumstances, alongside significant bureaucratic impediments, appeared to be the critical factors that ultimately prevented the New Right’s imprint on British society and policy-making from being even deeper during its period of paramount political hegemony. Nonetheless, its legacy has been of major significance for British politics and society in subsequent years, as this article has sought to illustrate. On a broader post-1979 chronological basis therefore, this has been specifically evident in the comparatively less ‘statist’ political approach of successive governments from across the political spectrum, incorporating the three main UK-wide parties.

Yet the so-called New Right ‘settlement’, consolidated for over 40 years, has reached a historical crossroads in the aftermath of further unexpected circumstances, namely the pandemic of 2020 and the sustained and expensive state intervention in response to it. While it is a matter of political conjecture as to whether the New Right’s legacy can practically survive such a tumultuous and unprecedented socio-economic episode, an evident and observable trend to have arisen from the Johnson administration’s management of the pandemic’s impact has been its high-spending and profligate fiscal tendencies (at least in the short-term). This would suggest that an ideological fluidity and sense of pragmatic interventionism has prevailed amidst extreme economic crisis, which appears to have heralded the further relative demise of New Right influence after its sustained period of hegemonic ascendancy.

## Notes

1. Andy McSmith, *No Such Thing As Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London: Constable, 2011), Introduction, p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, Ch. 1, p. 32.
3. Maurice Cowling, *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 9.
4. David C. Green, *The New Right: The Counter-Revolution in Political, Economic and Social Thought* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987), Ch.3, p. 74.
5. Robert M. Page, ‘The Conservative Party and the Welfare State since 1945’, cited in Hugh Bochel (Ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy* (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), Ch. 2, p. 31.
6. See Raymond Plant, *The Neo-Liberal State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

7. Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality* (London: I.B Tauris, 2011), Ch. 1, p. 45–6.
8. See Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography*, Volume One (London: Penguin, 2013), Ch. 12, p. 302, which observes that: ‘Alfred Sherman. . . . developed his theory about Mrs Thatcher’s intellectual character. “She wasn’t a woman of ideas. . . . she was a woman of beliefs”’.
9. Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality* (London: I.B Tauris, 2011), Ch. 1, p.45–6.
10. Norman Barry, ‘New Right’, cited in Kevin Hickson (Ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch. 2, p. 34.
11. Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), Ch. 3, p. 49.
12. See Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper-Collins, 1993), Introduction, p. 7.
13. In his memoirs, Wilson noted government unpopularity due to ‘Garbage piled up and rotted in the streets. . .picketing and closure of schools, and. . .action preventing the burial of the dead’, cited in Harold Wilson, *Final Term: The Labour Government 1974–1976* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979), Epilogue, p. 241.
14. The term ‘stagflation’ was first said to have been used by Conservative frontbencher Iain McLeod, Hansard, House of Commons, 17 November 1965. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1965-11-17/debates/06338c6d-ebdd-4876-a782-59cbd531a28a/EconomicAffairs?highlight=stagflation#contribution-2c3e32e7-7c5b-47b8-bfd3-16c3dbd2a001>
15. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).
16. See Philip Norton, ‘The Lady’s Not For Turning: But What About The Rest?, Margaret Thatcher And The Conservative Party (1979–1989)’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 43 (1990), <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/43/1/41.full.pdf>
17. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), Ch. 12, p. 195.
18. C. Collette & K. Laybourn, *Modern Britain Since 1979* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), Ch.1, p. 8.
19. Stephen J. Lee, *Aspects of British Political History 1914–1995* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), Ch. 15, p. 229.
20. In 1980 Margaret Thatcher made the following comments about ‘consensus’ politics which appeared to typify her views on this matter: ‘To me consensus appears to be: the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies in search of something in which no-one believes’. Speech at Monash University (6 October 1981 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, Melbourne, Australia), cited in Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper-Collins, 1993), Ch. 6, p. 167, see also Margaret Thatcher Foundation: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104712>
21. Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), Ch. 1, p. 23.
22. *Ibid.*, Ch. 2, p. 29.
23. See *Ibid.*, Ch. 2.
24. The electoral swing of 5.2% from Labour to Conservatives was the biggest change in public opinion since 1945 up until this date, suggesting a notable public shift away from the postwar consensus.
25. Nick Ellison, ‘The Conservative Party and Public Expenditure’, Ch. 3, p. 48, cited in Hugh Bochel (Ed.), *The Conservative Party and Social Policy* (The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011).
26. ‘Milton Friedman: An Enduring Legacy’, *The Economist*, 17 November 2006, [http://www.economist.com/node/8190872?story\\_id=8190872](http://www.economist.com/node/8190872?story_id=8190872)
27. Andy McSmith, *No Such Thing As Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London: Constable, 2011), Introduction, p. 5–6.



28. Source: <http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/>
29. At the 1976 Labour Party Conference, Prime Minister James Callaghan said: ‘We used to think that you could spend your way out of recession by cutting taxes and increasing government spending. I tell you in all candour that this option no longer exists’, 28 September 1976, cited in Kevin Hickson, *The IMF crisis of 1976 and British Politics* (London: I.B Tauris, 2005), p. 103.
30. See Stephen Farrall and Colin Hay (Eds.), *The Legacy of Thatcherism: Assessing and Exploring Thatcherite Social and Economic Policies* (Oxford: OUP/British Academy, 2014).
31. See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
32. Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography*, Volume One (London: Penguin, 2013), Ch. 13, p. 344.
33. See *Ibid.*, Ch. 1. See also John Campbell, *The Iron Lady- Margaret Thatcher: From Grocer’s Daughter to Iron Lady* (London: Random House, 2012).
34. Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics And Philosophy Of Inequality* (London: I.B Tauris, 2011), Ch. 3, p. 134.
35. See Geoffrey Howe, House of Commons, *Hansard*, 12 June 1979, Economy: 1979 Budget (Howe 1) | Margaret Thatcher Foundation.
36. Norman Barry, ‘New Right’, cited in Kevin Hickson (Ed.), *The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd edn., 2009), Ch. 2, p. 28.
37. See Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988).
38. Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), Ch. 5, p. 125.
39. Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988), Ch. 2, p. 40.
40. Werner Bonefield, Adam Smith and ordoliberalism: on the political form of market liberty, *Review of International Studies*, 39, no. 2 (April 2013).
41. Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and The Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1988), Ch. 2, p. 44.
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