CPS PERSPECTIVE

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What does modernisation mean?

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second of two Perspectives based on a series of discussions held at the Centre for Policy Studies over the last six months of 2005. Participants in these discussions included MPs from almost all factions and persuasions within the Conservative Party, as well as representatives from the think-tanks Civitas, Policy Exchange, Reform, Centre for Social Justice and the CPS itself.

The original intention had been to try to establish common ground between what have been called the "traditionalist" and "modernising" tendencies within the party. Inevitably, discussions during the latter half of the period were influenced by the effect of the party leadership contest and the debate which grew out of it. The final meeting was held days after David Cameron had been elected leader and was dominated by the implications of his modernising programme.

A number of critical questions arose (and remained unanswered) during these sessions about the meaning and impact of the modernisers' intentions, and their consequences for Conservative politics. The initial discussions had produced a consensus on the themes which the party needed to develop: a revival of community responsibility through the encouragement of voluntary activity; the repair of the social fabric by reinforcing stronger families; and the reform of the public services by reducing centralisation and state monopoly provision. There had been agreement that the over-arching Conservative policy objectives should be to restrict the role of the State, reduce welfare dependency and lower taxation whenever possible.

Interestingly, the intensifying leadership campaign made all of these issues more contentious, perhaps because they became more urgent and focused through the personalities of the contestants, or simply because the wide-ranging nature of the public debate seemed to open all previous propositions to examination. Sometimes disagreement was expressed about fundamental issues, such as whether a smaller State was a worthwhile goal at all. At other times, it centred on more superficial aspects of presentation. (Although there was often no clear distinction between the two, which may be symptomatic of a deeper confusion in the party between substantive policy development and mere changes of image.)

The critical question was: could there be a common language acceptable to traditionalists and modernisers, in which future party philosophy and principle could be discussed? It soon became apparent during the later discussions that there was still no clear agreement on whether the modernising agenda was about the language (or presentation) of Conservative politics; or about re-assessing its most basic principles.

Unsurprisingly, think-tank representatives were generally more radical – but not necessarily more right-wing – in their views than MPs who believed themselves to be

constrained by the limits of what was electorally prudent. This political caution, or "realism", tended to err on the side of retrenchment from what are often seen as traditional Conservative objectives such as reducing the role of the state. There also seemed to be an assumption among the politicians that, particularly with regard to the public services, talk of a smaller state frightened voters who saw it as a code either for cut-backs in provision or for privatisation. There was little appetite for educating public opinion in the realities of, for example, European models of health care provision which were based on mixed funding or government-regulated social insurance.

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The conflict between policies which research had shown to be both practicable and advisable, and what MPs believed politically possible, was a recurrent theme. To put it bluntly, a large proportion of the Parliamentary Party seems to have lost its nerve over proposing any reform of public services or the tax and benefit system which threatens to cause public alarm – even when that alarm is based on economic illiteracy or practical ignorance. This could mean that the modernising programme of the new leadership is simply a way of pandering to an almost superstitious level of anxiety on the part of the electorate. If this proves to be true, then the chance will have been lost to offer truly progressive solutions to Britain's systemic problems.

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

The topic that generated most heated and apparently implacable disagreement was the Party's future approach to tax and benefit policies on marriage and the family. Several of the think-tank representatives had been involved in research that showed definitive damage to the community, and to children's welfare, as a consequence of family breakdown and the rise of single parenthood. They argued that the outcomes for children raised by lone parents in terms of health, educational attainment, social adjustment and likelihood of criminal offending, were demonstrably poorer than for those raised by two parents. They made the case that the tax and benefit system was heavily prejudiced against two parent families (both married couples and unmarried co-habitees), that it positively incentivised single parent-hood, and was thus directly contributing to many of Britain's most serious social problems.

In spite of accepting the force of these arguments and the validity of the empirical evidence, almost all of the MPs believed that any alteration in the present tax and welfare arrangements – even to make them more neutral in their treatment of one and two-parent households – would be politically unacceptable (or, in other words, would involve too high an electoral risk).

Some MPs countered that the higher level of benefit paid to single mothers could be justified in that it was intended to compensate for the proportionally higher costs of single adult households which do not benefit from the economies of scale available to two adults living under the same roof. (Although such economies could be seen as yet another argument for encouraging couples who have children to live together.) They acknowledged that this produced the perverse effect of encouraging many lone mothers to remain apart from the fathers of their children, and that this had damaging consequences in terms of childhood deprivation and the prevalence of male irresponsibility. Nevertheless, they were adamant that any move on the part of the

Conservatives to alter this state of affairs would be reminiscent of what was seen as the party's "victimising of single mothers". Oddly, at the time that this discussion took place, all of the contenders in the party leadership election (including Kenneth Clarke who had, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, presided over the abolition of the marriage tax allowance) were explicitly advocating changes in the tax and benefit system to support married (or "stable") families. And yet, none of the MPs present at our discussions was prepared to defend such a stance, believing that it would be "unsellable" on the doorstep.

There is a danger that, in the area of family policy, the modernising of the party's image could be a cover for political cowardice and a retreat from what MPs personally believe to be right for the well-being of society.

The reluctance to revisit themes that MPs believed to have been politically damaging, even when social conscience, indisputable evidence, and common fairness were at stake, was startling. There is a serious danger that, in this area at least, the "modernising" of the party's image – attempting to bring its attitudes into line with current lifestyle choices – could simply be a cover for political cowardice and a retreat from what elected politicians personally believe to be right for the well-being of society.

GROWING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

There was more agreement in these discussions on the need to encourage the development of community-based voluntary activity: projects that evolved from local activism were widely accepted to be more responsive and effective than centrally-run government initiatives in dealing with, for example, drug addiction, the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders and the protection of communities from anti-social behaviour. A considerable amount of work has already been done in co-operation with such activism by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), and this engagement has been endorsed by the new party leadership as a vital strand in emerging Conservative philosophy.

The concept of social welfare programmes that are enabled – but not provided – by the State, seems to offer a promising direction for new thinking in the party. There will, however, have to be major policy decisions about precisely how such a philosophy could be implemented on a larger scale. Could local programmes of self-help ever come to replace state welfare programmes? Would central government be forced to regulate such activity, and if so, how intrusive would this regulation be? (Would it tend to push out precisely the local, idiosyncratic variations which tend to make these programmes so valuable?) Nonetheless, this model of locally-run, community-based, mutual help is a fruitful one on which future progressive policy could be based, particularly as it seemed to appeal to both traditionalists and modernisers within the party.

"MODERN COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM"

The election of David Cameron as leader placed his own conception of modernisation at the heart of our final discussion. A think-tank representative close to the leadership outlined the initial intentions of the philosophy which was described as "modern compassionate Conservatism". He suggested that this title was intended to imply a synthesis of three elements: the compassion exemplified by the work of the CSJ; a modern approach to presentation and image; and basic Conservative principles (such as a belief in free-market economics, and deregulation). The axioms, "trust people", and "we're all in

it together" were intended to conjoin the notions of self-help with responsibility to the community and the wider society, suggesting that the problems of society required a joint effort from the State and the community.

There would seem to be little difficulty in accepting this as a broad rhetorical thrust for the future. Potential difficulties arise when specific decisions must be made about, for example, the precise limits of government involvement and responsibility. One MP questioned the traditional Conservative assumption that "small government is necessarily a good thing". If government were to be seen as a setter of frameworks for private arrangements, then its role might be less interfering and more facilitating. The key to this could lie in public services that are state-funded but not state-supplied. Tax-funded, de-regulated provision seemed to be a policy direction that appealed widely to all sections of the party.

The party's concern for social justice clearly needs to be differentiated from the sense given to that phrase by Labour – and particularly by the Chancellor – to mean government-directed wealth redistribution. Encouraging local communities, and locally administered private agencies, to take responsibility for themselves (and away from central state monopolies) is a credible and attractive alternative. The details of how such a philosophy could be applied in healthcare, education and social welfare could be a worthwhile endeavour for the think-tanks and policy research bodies with which the party is associated, generating intellectual excitement and reclaiming the true "reforming" spirit which New Labour is attempting to monopolise.

For such research and policy development work to be fruitful, there will have to be a genuine partnership with the leadership: a commitment from the Conservative front bench to be open-minded, seriously engaged with new solutions and prepared to take some political risks. This was presented as the explicit intention in establishing a number of commissions to study and report on policy development. (Unfortunately, in the weeks since these discussions ended, there has been a discouraging tendency for the leadership to announce definitively that some areas of debate and policy direction were being ruled out of consideration, which suggests that the work of these commissions might be pre-empted by short-term political strategy.)

In spite of some areas of disagreement, there did seem to be the beginnings of a unifying philosophy emerging through these meetings but it will require political nerve and coherent argument if it is to survive. If "modernisation" simply means retreat from anything that might conceivably disturb voters by introducing novel solutions, or questioning established (but failing) formulae, then the party will miss what may be the final opportunity to re-invent itself as a truly forward-looking political force.

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