Section 2 - Differing Views and Tensions Within Conservatism

Fundamentally, conservatism is a mindset of opposition. In stark contrast to the progressive character of liberalism and the rationalist direction of socialist thought, conservatism is borne out of a reactionary state of mind. The character of conservatism depends to a significant degree upon the ideology it is reacting against. Historically, conservatism came into existence as a critique of the French Revolution and by the nineteenth century conservatism was opposed to liberal individualism. More recently, modern conservatives have stood firm against the process of European integration. Taken together, it is clearly in the nature of conservatism to curb what they identify as the excesses of ideologues from all corners of the political spectrum.

Conservatives are often labelled by their critics as reactionary. However, most conservatives are proud of their scepticism towards utopian ideals. Ideology contains with it words of mass destruction and the seeds of social unrest, whereas tradition and custom offers us the pathway to social harmony. By tradition, conservatives are referring to both institutions (such as the constitution and the church) and values (such as established social mores). Tradition also helps to ensure that the people retain a sense of comforting security and continuity with the past. Each generation thereby holds onto a lasting set of values in an ever-changing world. In contrast, ideologies in search of heaven on Earth invariably unleash a hellish nightmare. In one of the most perceptive insights into the conservative mind, the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1991) points out that “to be a Conservative is to prefer the tried to the untried.” One might also consider Samuel Johnson’s oft-quoted comment that “hell is paved with good intentions.”

Opposition amongst conservatives towards ideology is firmly grounded in their negative view of human nature. In the words of the philosophe Roger Scruton, this most reactionary of mindsets begins from “the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created.” The argument that an ideology offers a scientific method to improve mankind (particularly Marxism) or create a better society is completely alien to a conservative - we must be very cautious about what human beings are capable of. History shows us that revolutionary action can no more change human nature than a mythical magic wand. All conservatives would concur with the German theorist Immanuel Kant’s sage remark that “from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.” The conservative mindset is also captured by the Anglo-Irish satirist Jonathon Swift who believed that the life of reason is not suited to humankind. The expectation that the world will ever be inhabited by anything other than lesser mortals is nothing more than a delusion.

Whilst these issues bind conservatives together, there are ‘shades of grey’ within the interpretation of those issues.

Key terminology

Noblesse oblige

The essentials:
Conservatives claim that those born of a high social status have a duty or responsibility to help those less fortunate within society. This is known by the French term noblesse oblige. According to conservatives, it is inevitable that an elite will arise within any given society. All societies adopt a structure that best serves its needs. For instance, within a closed society an elite emerges from the hereditary principle. Historically, this was the basis of feudalism. In a more open society, an elite will surface based upon their talent and effort. As a consequence, our relative position within society is aligned to our achieved status rather than the circumstances of our birth.

Extension material and application:
Unlike liberals, conservatives are not opposed to the **hereditary principle**. For conservatives, the basis of hierarchy is largely insignificant. Whereas a liberal always favours a more open and meritocratic society, conservatives merely believe that the source of social stratification must suit the broader needs of society. Unlike liberals, conservatives are therefore supportive of a Royal Family because they encapsulate traditional values. In order to back up this argument, one could highlight the level of public support for (and interest in) the Windsors alongside the negligible appeal of republican feeling within the UK.

Conservatives also believe that **inequality is inevitable**. We are all born with different abilities and different aptitudes for work. This reflects a traditional mindset amongst conservatives that inequality is sanctioned by divine providence. In addition, the distribution of life chances within a society will always be uneven regardless of whatever the government does to even them out. Consistent with the conservative mindset, an elite will always exist regardless of the ideological foundation of that society. This makes the notion of an elite acting in a benevolent manner a stabilising factor.

**Soft and hard paternalism**

The essentials:

Paternalism is a term which derives from the Greek word for “father” and is conventionally categorised into soft paternalism and hard paternalism. The former entails a paternal attitude towards those whose actions are **insufficiently voluntary** to be their own (such as children and the elderly) whereas the latter concerns those who actions are **sufficiently voluntary** to be their own (e.g. laws to ensure drivers wear seat-belts). This is an important distinction to make with practical implications from a legislative perspective.

Paternalism is also based upon the aforementioned sense of duty amongst the elite. In contractual terms, paternalism implies that the ruling elite should care for those in a less advantageous position. This may consist of providing a degree of state assistance. It is also the duty of the state to offer protection and guidance in order to prevent the worst aspects of human nature from undermining social stability. This is based firmly upon the **negative view of human nature** that is the very hallmark of the conservative mindset. Paternalism can therefore be said to emphasise **duties** and provide some degree of justification for a hierarchal social structure.

**Anti-permissiveness**

The essentials:

Permissiveness refers to a situation in which behaviour that some people might disapprove of is allowed (often by a change in the law). Therefore, anti-permissiveness refers to a lack of change in the law or society to allow such behaviour. Libertarian conservatives differ from neo-conservatives in their views on many lifestyle issues.

Extension material and application:

There is a particularly sharp distinction between conservatives and liberals over lifestyle issues. Liberalism celebrates the diversity of human life and emphasises tolerance. This even extends to the realm of sexual behaviour. For liberals, the key phrase is that of consenting adults. However, conservatives claim that the increased number of one-parent families, divorce, extra-marital affairs, contraceptive usage and a general decline in social mores undermine the social fabric. Such behaviour is particularly harmful to children; which experience has shown tend to grow and thrive within the security and stability offered by the **conventional nuclear family**. In a modern context, the Tory Party’s argument that Britain was a broken society under New Labour is consistent with this line of argument.
When considering anti-permissiveness, it should also be noted that certain strands of conservatism emphasise lifestyle issues more than others. For instance, libertarian conservatives take a more relaxed approach to such matters whereas neo-conservatives adopt a more traditional approach. This is a feature of American politics and the culture wars that divide the two main parties. Abortion has been described as the last great divide between Republicans and Democrats. Conservatives in the states argue that the pro-choice side of the debate champion the rights of the living over the as yet unclaimed demands of those yet to be born. On a related point, some of those rights for the living have been discovered from penumbras identified by unelected members of an unaccountable and out-of-touch judiciary. This forms part of the broader conservative critique of the ‘liberal’ judiciary.

**Radical**

**The essentials:**

*Radicalism is the belief or expression that there should be significant / extreme political and/or social change. These changes should occur through revolution.* Conservatism is directly opposed to radicalism in any form. The father of modern conservatism (Edmund Burke) famously argued that the abstract notions of equality, fraternity and equality were contrary to the traditions of French society. The result of radicalism would be chaos and social disorder.

**Extension material and application:**

In the modern era, conservatives in the West are deeply opposed to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. This is most notable within the United States; a country in which the conservative movement is coloured by a much greater level of religiosity than the United Kingdom.

Conservatives have always claimed that radicalism is driven by ideologues and seeks to impose a dogmatic vision of life upon society. Throughout history, there have been numerous illustrations of radical groups capturing the apparatus of the state and imposing their ‘truth’ upon others. The result has often been characterised by destruction rather than conservation. Indeed, it is difficult to envisage anything as contrary to the conservative mindset as that of radicalism. Conservatives are, by nature and temperament; supporters of the status quo and opponents of dramatic upheaval driven by ideologues. Radicalism is simply not part of conservative language.

**Human imperfection**

**The essentials:**

According to the conservative mindset, human nature is imperfect and unchangeable. We are flawed creatures and we must simply recognise that. Any ideology that works against the grain of human nature in order to establish a utopia will inevitably end in dystopia. By recognising the limitations of human beings, one can avoid the unnecessary destruction and death that arises from attempts to perfect humanity.

**Extension material:**

Conservatives reject the view that is implicit within radical movements that human nature is somehow perfectible, because the conservative view is that humans are inevitably flawed and unchangeable. This applies to radicals from both sides of the political spectrum. Those on the left have sought to impose a communist system in which class conflict would end, the state would wither away and human nature would achieve perfectibility. Those on the far-right have adopted fascist ideology in order to create a new man shaped by romanticist notions. The same observation applies to religious fundamentalists, although it is harder to place them with accuracy along the political spectrum.
How the differing views and tensions within conservatism relate to human nature, the state, society or the economy

**Traditional conservative**

- commitment to hierarchic and paternalistic values

There are various strands of thought within all ideological movements. With regards to conservatism, the main division is that between the one-nation perspective and the New Right. Traditional conservatism is relatively insignificant within the field of British politics. As the term clearly implies, traditional conservatism is the oldest format of conservative thought. Traditional conservatism is associated strongly with the concept of hierarchy. In order for society to function effectively, there must be some form of hierarchy. Individuals within society need to be aware of their place within and accept their duties accordingly. For instance, those who hold the highest status have a responsibility to look after those further down the social scale. Such ideas later developed into the concept of noblesse oblige, one of the fundamental ideas within the mindset of conservatism.

Traditional conservatism is rooted in a time when very few people had the vote. The ideas and values associated with traditional conservatives gradually evolved in order to respond to an expanding franchise. This led to the emergence of the one-nation school of thought. The key figure to consider here is Benjamin Disraeli; a man who did much to develop the party and ensure that it could reach out towards those enfranchised as a result of the Great Reform Act. Disraeli also did much to recast the party and broaden its appeal towards the rapidly-emerging bourgeois capitalists, a constituency that remains loyal to the Tories.

**One-nation conservative**

- updating of traditional conservatism in response to the emergence of capitalism

As mentioned previously, the one-nation school of thought dates back to the work of the nineteenth century statesman Benjamin Disraeli. In his novel ‘Sybil’ (1845) Disraeli examined the gap between the wealthy elite and the working-classes. He laments that they were “as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were ... inhabitants of different planets.” Disraeli argued that it was in the interests of the ruling elite to adopt a stance of paternalism towards those less fortunate. For instance, the provision of a safety net for the unemployed would alleviate the most acute forms of poverty. More importantly, it would prevent the emergence of revolutionary consciousness amongst the disaffected.

Disraeli was a consummate politician who argued persuasively that the one-nation outlook would enable the Conservatives to reach out towards all sections of the electorate. With the benefit of hindsight, this proved to be a highly effective electoral strategy. Paternalism has enabled the Tories to present themselves in a positive light to those with very little wealth to actually conserve (the term conservative stems from the Latin “com servare” – to preserve). In doing so, one-nation ideas have allowed the Conservative Party to claim a mandate to govern on behalf of society. Partly because of paternalism, the Tories are the most electorally successful party in the UK with a sizeable level of support amongst working-class voters. Throughout their history, the Conservatives have often appealed to a wide swathe of the electorate due to their ‘catch-all’ nature.

In ideological terms, the one-nation school of thought is firmly opposed to the state dictating the lives of its citizens. Whilst the state must be strong enough to deliver the smack of firm government, it must never seek to supress the individual. To do so would be contrary against everything Britain stands for. Based on this line of argument, one-nation think tanks like the Tory Reform Group favour the defence of individual liberty. Even during the Second World War, Winston Churchill opposed the introduction of ID cards. He argued that such a scheme was associated with totalitarian regimes and therefore incompatible with our national character.
Under the Tory-Lib Dem coalition, the government scrapped Labour’s ID cards programme soon after gaining office.

**New-right conservative**

- the marriage of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideas, and include elements of both neo-liberal and neo-conservative

The New Right is both **economically libertarian** and **socially authoritarian**. There are few better illustrations of this contradiction than Margaret Thatcher herself. She was firmly committed to a reduction in the role of the state within economic affairs. In order to achieve this, Thatcher implemented a range of policies such as privatisation, deregulation and the sale of council houses. However, she was more willing to use the ‘agents of the state’ against those forces that opposed her than Tory leaders in the one-nation mould. Thatcher chose to confront left-wing unions and local councils whereas figures from the one-nation perspective cautioned against such moves.

In terms of lifestyle issues, she was no libertarian either. A salient example to consider is Clause (or section) 28 which prevented local authorities from promoting homosexuality or presenting it within schools as an acceptable family unit. Clause 28 sought to uphold traditional moral values against the moral pollution that emerged from the permissive society of the 60s and 70s. Marriage is sanctioned by God as a union between man and woman for the procreation of a child, whereas homosexuality is contrary to such teachings. According to the New Right, the role of the state is to guide people towards the correct way to live.

Under David Cameron’s leadership the Tories tried to rebrand themselves as a more socially inclusive party. Most notably, the Tory-led coalition government introduced same-sex marriage in 2012. This clearly reflects a social liberal stance on lifestyle issues. However, the Conservatives have also shown their traditionally authoritarian approach towards law and order. It is worth noting that Cameron called for “exemplary punishment” for those who committed offences during the 2011 riots. Moreover, since gaining an outright majority the Tory Party has introduced a number of anti-terrorism measures which have been labelled as draconian by civil liberties groups. In terms of its pragmatism, the government has even sought to reduce the level of public spending on the police as part of its broader austerity programme.

**Neo-liberal**

- principally concerned with free-market economics and atomistic individualism

The distinction between neo-liberalism and the New Right is relatively straight-forward. As the term implies, **neo-liberalism** represents a modernised form of the classical liberal tradition. In contrast, the New Right school of thought belongs within the ideology of conservatism. To some extent, a relationship exists between neo-liberalism and the New Right due to their shared common ground.

This is most notable in the field of economic policy, with both schools of thought highly supportive of **laissez-faire capitalism**. Frankly, there is no discernible difference in terms of the economic policies advocated by neo-liberals and the New Right. Indeed, during the 2010-15 coalition government, right-wingers within the Tory Cabinet and Orange Bookers in the Liberal Democrats co-operated over austerity measures and the need for a flexible labour market. There is also strong opposition amongst neo-liberals and the New Right towards egalitarian measures. Both strands of thought claim that socialism represents the sacrifice of the individual for collectivist goals. They claim that Britain is over-governed via state intervention within the economy and the nanny state within the personal realm. The former Conservative Minister Keith Joseph succinctly encapsulated this view when he argued that “inequality of income can only be eliminated at the cost of freedom.”
Having said this, there are major differences between neo-liberals and the New Right. Such divisions reflect the traditional points of departure between liberals and conservatives such as law and order, multiculturalism, constitutional reform and morality. A liberal society is built upon mutual tolerance of diverse lifestyles, and all liberals (including neo-liberals) adopt a position of moral relativism. Liberalism represents an atomistic society and will always oppose the stifling conformity of social mores. In stark contrast, conservatism adopts a stance of moral absolutism.

**Neo-conservative**

- principally concerned with the fear of social fragmentation, tough on law and order and public morality

Neo-conservatives are primarily focused upon questions of morality and the need for social order. They adopt a more authoritarian perspective than neo-liberals within the Tory Party. According to neo-conservatives, there is a very clear distinction between right and wrong based upon religious teachings and social traditions. This contrast is more noticeable within the United States, a society with a high level of religious attendance. Neo-conservatives also seek cultural homogeneity and favour an organic society.

There are also clear differences between the two strands of thought within the field of foreign policy. In the US, neo-liberals tend to adopt an isolationist stance based on an ‘America first’ approach. In contrast, neo-conservatives seek to mobilise military resources in order to promote democracy. In American parlance, neo-liberals are called doves whereas those on the New Right are hawks. These divisions between neo-liberals and the New Right over the direction of foreign policy is less pronounced within the UK.

**A comparative overview of the different tensions within conservatism**

**The essentials:**

When considering the differing views and tensions within conservatism, it should be acknowledged that the fundamental tenants of conservatism are broadly the same regardless of the country in question. As such, the ends of conservative parties and pressure groups are constant from one case study to the next. This observation even includes parties and think tanks within the conservative family (such as the UKIP and the Bow Group). However, there is disagreement over the means towards securing and implementing conservative objectives and values.

**Extension material and application:**

Perhaps the most obvious contrast within conservative thinking is that between the UK and the US. British conservatism for instance places less emphasis upon religion than its American counterpart. The Republican Party’s emphasis upon Christian fundamentalism and three F’s strategy (faith, flag and family) does not play well to a more secular British audience. Republicans also adopt an overtly populist streak and celebrate the rugged individualism of the American people than their British counterparts. Moreover, the context of American conservatism is somewhat different. This is most noticeable in terms of support within the Republican Party for the second amendment (the right to bear arms) and tenth amendment (the so-called ‘states rights’ amendment). For obvious reasons, such themes do not translate well to British conservatism.

On the continent, French conservatism is more supportive of protectionist policies than their British counterparts. Gaullist parties are more committed to a form of economic nationalism that protects the interests of French industry. Gaullism is therefore reflective of the one-nation school of thought. In Germany, the conservative CDU-CSU is considerably more pro-European than the British Tories. When a Conservative Prime Minister meets their German counterpart, there is a clear difference of opinion over the process of European integration. It should also be noted that on the continent the dominant form of conservatism is that...
of Christian Democracy. Although not overtly religious, it is an attitude rooted in traditional Christian values and the natural hierarchy and social order of any given society.

Within the UK, the main division is that between the one-nation approach and the New Right. The former has a lengthy history and to this day remains an essential element within the Conservative Party. Its objective is essentially negative, in that it seeks to prevent an outbreak of social unrest. As the name suggests, the aim is to maintain social unity. In order to support this argument, we would only need to remind ourselves how perilously close Britain was to such disaster during the immediate fall-out from the credit crunch. There was a very real possibility that the banks might have literally run out of cash, and the consequences for society would have been the violence and disorder that swept through Argentina during 2001-02.

Unlike the one-nation perspective, the New Right seeks to change the political weather. The term New Right was first coined in the US and is sometimes known as Thatcherism in the UK. It adopted a populist streak that marked a clear departure from the moderate form of conservatism. In ideological terms, the New Right is merely a blend of both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. In terms of the former, the New Right is uncharacteristically conservative in regards to its firm attachment to the free-market. Its neo-conservatism could be seen in the desire to utilise the agents of the state (e.g. police and army) to maintain social order during a turbulent decade of inner-city riots, the Miners’ Strike, the Cold War, the Falklands War and protests against the Poll Tax. The New Right also adopted a neo-conservative stance towards European integration and cultural diversity.

In the United States, conservatism is much more diffuse with a number of strands seeking to influence the political agenda. Neo-conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama seek to export American democracy abroad and are primarily concerned with issues of foreign policy. They adopt a hawkish stance and believe that the US should use its considerable military might to defend freedom. The philosopher Leo Strauss called for the moral regeneration of the states based around strong Christian values. He also perceived the world in Manichean terms with the US on the side of the blessed against godless communism and liberal secularism. Such views can also be applied to the clash of civilisations thesis put forward by the neo-conservative Samuel Huntington. In regard to the economy, neo-conservatives would support protectionist policies if it served the national interest.