



BONUS CASE STUDY: CONSERVATIVE PARTY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Events

David Cameron was elected Conservative Party leader in December 2005. However, Cameron took over the leadership at a particularly difficult time. Having been the dominant force in UK politics throughout the twentieth century, the Conservatives had fallen on hard times. Party membership had fallen steadily. Business funding that the Conservatives could once have relied upon had seeped away to the Labour Party. Most importantly, the party had become electoral poison. Not only had the Conservatives lost the three previous general elections, it had lost them badly.

Significance

David Cameron on taking over wanted to rebrand the Conservative party and detoxify its image as the 'nasty party', as Theresa May noted, due to the perceived social costs of Thatcherism. For Cameron, this involved embracing social liberalism rather than neo-conservatism, with an emphasis on the tolerance of difference, in terms of race and different family relationships, on the environment and a commitment to promoting equal opportunities and helping individuals to help themselves, although this approach was controversial within the party. Cameron also harked back to One Nation ideals, by laying out a vision of the 'Big Society', which would encourage the wider community to tackle social problems and provide social services. However, in the post-2008 economic crisis, much of this language gave way to a more Thatcherite economic vision with the party's main focus on 'austerity', which involved

cutting public spending to cut the UK's debt and to focus on tax cuts to trigger economic growth. The final strand running through the Cameron years was a growing Euroscepticism in the party, that traced its origin back to Margaret Thatcher, particularly in light of the economic and migrant crises within the EU. Following Cameron's resignation after the EU referendum result, Theresa May became leader and quickly moved to distance the party from the economics of austerity, by removing David Cameron's Chancellor George Osborne. Theresa May wanted the party to take a more One Nation approach, where the state would serve the people by helping out the JAMs (Just about managing) and play a vital role in strengthening the 'bonds and obligations' that tie communities together while at the same time moving to the right socially with its emphasis on restricting immigration and leaving the EU to protect national sovereignty. Theresa May challenged business, talking of the 'worst excesses of capitalism', using language reminiscent of Ted Heath's in the early 1970s. However, this project was more talk than policy action, as her time in office was dominated by the transformation of the Conservative Party into a wholeheartedly Eurosceptical party. May spent her time as leader dealing with the growing division within the party between the hard Brexiteers, who saw no deal as the best way to promote British interest abroad by turning the UK's eyes from Europe to the wider world, and the soft Brexiteers, who favoured a closer deal with the EU. In the end, this internal party contradiction proved unresolvable and led to her resignation and Boris Johnson becoming leader of the party and PM.