

David Cameron, la Crescita di un Leader (David Cameron, the Progress of a Leader)

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Translation of 'David Cameron, la Crescita di un Leader' in Alessandro Campi and Angelo Mellone (eds.), La Destra Nuova: Modelli di Partito, Leader e Politiche in Francia, Gran Bretagna e Svezia, Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2009, 111-130

Abstract: David Cameron, leader of the British Conservative Party, has tried to bring the Conservative Party to a more centrist position, improving its image while also producing a conservative post-Thatcher ideological position. His position has been helped by poor mid-term electoral performance by the Labour government of Gordon Brown. However, support for Cameron's programme is thin, and depends on success in polls and elections. Consideration (1) of the Conservatives' recovery in comparison with that of the Labour Party between 1979-97, (2) of electoral geography and (3) of the relation between Cameron's ideology and policy, together suggest that a victory in the next General Election will be hard, and that in that case Cameron's position will be precarious. But given the task ahead of the Conservatives, it may be that tolerance of failure would be sensible.

Introduction

In this paper I will estimate the prospects for the British Conservative Party as David Cameron tries to engineer its electoral recovery. Following three consecutive heavy defeats, under Cameron, the Conservatives have undertaken a modernisation programme to try to regain voter support and trust. This resulted in further resurgence, and an opinion poll lead was sustained until Gordon Brown replaced Blair as Labour leader and Prime Minister, but many of the measures proposed by Cameron, and much of his rhetoric, have proved unpopular within the party. As I have argued in my 2008 book (written with Andrew Denham) *Democratising Conservative Leadership Selection: From Grey Suits to Grass Roots*, Cameron's mandate crucially depends on his demonstrating electoral success. In the Spring of 2008, Cameron began to make inroads into the Labour government's position, building large opinion poll leads, putting in a good performance in the local elections, and winning a by-election in May in impressive style. This short period of dominance has helped secure his position, but by raising expectations may make it hard for him in the future, especially if Labour engineers a recovery.

After the 2005 election, a report commissioned by Michael Ashcroft, *Wake Up and Smell the Coffee*, laid out the Conservatives' negative poll ratings in detail. The Conservatives were no longer liked, and although they had strong and loyal support, their core voters were no longer numerous enough to deliver an election victory. The coalition assembled by Margaret Thatcher in the 80s had fallen apart, and needed to

be reassembled. Cameron won a leadership election with 68% of the votes of party members, against David Davis, a more robust politician with strong right wing credentials. This was widely perceived as an important step in the Conservatives' recovery process. However, the process of change soon came under attack from the right of the party.

Cameron's aim is to move the party to the political centre ground. He has always conceived of this as a three stage process. First of all, the party should be shown to be "nice". Secondly, an ideological position needed to be marked out. Thirdly, this position should then be fleshed out with policy. At the time of writing, stage 3 was under way, with a wide-ranging policy development process being coordinated by Oliver Letwin.

The Conservatives have moved to the right since the end of their period of office. This has left a great deal of space between them and the centre ground, which has allowed Labour to build up a formidable coalition of centrist voters, while the Liberal Democrats have been able to pursue a strategy of appealing to voters to the left of Labour (e.g. with opposition to the Iraq War), while also wooing the wealthy middle class (e.g. opposing tuition fees for university students). Since 1992, there has been a pattern of tactical voting, where Labour and Liberal Democrat voters have been voting not according to preference, but to ensure the defeat of the Conservative candidate. Under the first past the post system (FPTP), this is an important extra hurdle for the Conservatives.

Indeed, electoral geography is currently bad for the Conservatives. They are strong in the South East of England, but weaker elsewhere where they find it difficult to win. Labour does well where constituencies are small and shrinking, such as the inner cities and Scotland, while Conservative constituencies tend to be larger, in rural and suburban areas (whose populations are growing). Turnout in Labour seats tends to be smaller. All of these factors mean that more votes are required, on average, to elect a Conservative than a Labour MP; the Conservatives therefore require an unusually large swing from Labour to win the next Election. This is a serious obstacle to the Cameron recovery programme.

In this paper, I will argue that despite the Labour government's mid-term blues Cameron is in a difficult position. First, I shall measure the Conservatives' progress as measured against Labour's recovery between 1979 and 1997. Second, I shall examine the depth of support for Cameron's programme of change. Third, I shall examine internal problems with his ideological programme.

The Conservative recovery measured against the Labour recovery 1979-97

The Conservatives' problems are not unprecedented. The Labour government of James Callaghan was defeated by Thatcher in 1979, and the Labour Party was seen as chaotic, extreme and out of touch. Its immediate reaction to defeat was to move further left, under new leader Michael Foot, while Tony Benn pressed for an even greater shift. They fought the 1983 Election with a manifesto called by a Labour MP "the longest suicide note in history", and fell to the heaviest defeat of any party since 1945.

Under its next leader, Neil Kinnock, the party explicitly decided to move back to the political centre. A key moment, in 1985, was Kinnock's Party Conference speech,

which included an attack on Liverpool City Council, nominally Labour but run by a group of Trotskyist entryists of the so-called Militant Tendency. This was controversial, but following the speech Labour's vote began to recover. Its position improved a little after the 1987 Election, and it reached rough parity with the Conservatives at the April 1992 Election, where the Conservative majority was slashed to 21. In September 1992, John Major's Conservative government was forced to withdraw the pound sterling from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, an event that destroyed the Conservatives' reputation for economic competence. By October, Labour had established a permanent opinion poll lead. Finally, in 1997, came Labour's ultimate triumph, a landslide with a post-war record majority of 179 seats.

There are several things to notice here. First, it took three leaders with different qualities (Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair) to bring Labour to the centre. Second, between Kinnock's attack on Liverpool Council and Blair's regaining power, Labour suffered two further Election defeats. After the 1987 defeat (with a Conservative majority of 102), there were no senior resignations; Kinnock and Bryan Gould, who masterminded electoral strategy, continued in post. Defeat was tolerated, because the impossibility of winning was understood.

In all, if we date Labour's recovery from Kinnock's 1985 speech, it took 7 years (and a major Conservative policy failure) for them to overtake the Conservatives, and 12 years to return to power.

The 1997-2005 period for the Conservatives is analogous to 1979-85 for Labour, wasted time in which the failure of the strategy of appealing to core voters was repeatedly exposed. William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard all began by attempting to move the party to the centre, but felt pressurised when they could not engineer a recovery in poll ratings, even while alienating traditional members. They all reacted by moving back to the right, with Hague symbolically fighting European Monetary Union, Duncan Smith opposing the repeal of an unused anti-homosexuality law, and Howard attacking illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers.

The strategy was not altogether misguided. Commentators have been misled by the use of the medical term 'flatlining' (when medical instruments register the vital signs of a dead patient as a flat line, and a constant sonic tone) as a metaphor to describe the Conservatives being stuck at about 30% in the polls. In medical flatlining, the patient is dead; it doesn't get any worse. But in politics, a 30% poll rating *can* get worse, and failure to attract new voters from the centre, while shedding angry supporters to the right, could actually produce a temporary or permanent fall even from that low position. Hence the "core vote strategy", as Hague's team called it – ceasing to target the recalcitrant voters of the centre, and reconnecting with the right. This strategy, repeatedly used between 1997 and 2005, naturally ensured that the Conservatives did not lose more voters, but equally did not gain any either. Though the Conservatives' position had improved by 2005, they were still worse off than Labour were in 1983, in terms of the number of their MPs (though not in terms of votes). Victory for the Conservatives in 2010 would clearly be a turn-around even greater, because in a shorter time, than that managed by Labour.

Cameron has clearly, and wisely, studied Blair's style as Leader of the Opposition in 1994-7, but Blair's position was obviously better than Cameron's currently is in a number of respects. First, in the 1990s, there was no serious party to Labour's left, so

Blair could effectively ignore left-wing voters, whose vote had nowhere else to go. However, to the right of the Conservatives there is the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the anti-immigration British National Party, who between them received about 800,000 votes in 2005 (about 3% of votes cast), and each of which is attractive to some disaffected right-wing Conservatives. Cameron has already lost one MP and three peers to UKIP.

Second, in 1994-7, Blair could promise to win the next General Election, so far ahead in the polls was he. In contrast, Cameron cannot make, and will not be able to make, any such promise. His mid-term dominance of the polls is of course a great help, but it should be noted that it dates only from March 2008, and that electoral volatility is such that his leadership was being written off in October 2007 when it was thought by many that Gordon Brown would call a snap General Election. Brown's retention of the power to set the date of the General Election improves his prospects dramatically.

Third, Blair inherited a party in a very good position after the efforts of Kinnock and Smith; his task was to maximise the size of an already-inevitable victory. Cameron inherited a party that was around 5% behind in the polls.

Fourth, there was relatively little opposition to Blair's project in the print media, at least with regard to his rehabilitation of the Labour Party. Cameron faces implacable opposition from some quarters, notably from the *Daily Telegraph*, and its columnist Simon Heffer.

Fifth, Labour has had its problems. Blair was effectively forced from office. The Iraq War has been a disaster, felt most keenly by his own supporters. Gordon Brown badly mishandled his decision not to call a General Election in 2007, and compounded the problem by brazenly stealing some of the Tories' flagship policies. He has also presided over some difficulties of policy, including the loss of sensitive data about 25 million people and a botched adjustment of the tax system. Finally, high prices of food and oil have forced the economy into a slowdown. But, although there have been a few isolated calls to replace Brown and backbench MPs are clearly nervous, Labour has not yet (2008) collapsed into incoherence and internal conflict as the Conservatives did in 1992-7.

Sixth, tactical voting meant that Liberal Democrats and Labour supporters would vote for each other to keep the Conservatives out. The results in May 2008 are one of the first pieces of evidence that this pattern of behaviour, which is very entrenched, is breaking down, with Labour voters moving directly to the Conservatives in the by-election at Crewe & Nantwich to squeeze the Liberal Democrat vote.

Seventh, Blair's approach was fresh and exciting in the 90s. However, he was much less trusted in 2007 than he was in 1994, and voters have to an extent rejected the Blair model of government. Cameron's claim to be the 'heir to Blair' is not as potent as it would have been 5 years ago. Poll evidence backs this up: for instance, 45% of voters in a YouGov/Sky News poll of June 2007 thought that being 'heir to Blair' was a bad thing. Fortunately for Cameron, only 15% thought that he was the true 'heir to Blair'.

The lack of depth of support for Cameron's modernisation programme

On the surface, Cameron has a big mandate for change. During the long Conservative leadership election campaign of 2005, Cameron gained the endorsement of over half

the Parliamentary Party, and 68% of the votes of ordinary party members, well ahead of his chief rival David Davis. But appearances can be deceptive. In fact, in the first ballot of Conservative MPs, 104 voted for the right-wing candidates Davis and Liam Fox, while only 94 voted for centrists Cameron and Kenneth Clarke. In the second ballot, after Clarke was eliminated, 90 voted for Cameron, but 108 voted collectively for Davis and Fox. And on the day of the announcement of Cameron's win in the final ballot of party members, a YouGov/*Daily Telegraph* poll revealed that 48% of those members wanted an aggressive right wing agenda, as opposed to 45% who supported a move to the centre. One anonymous right-wing MP was quoted as saying that 'we are looking for someone to get us back into government, and Cameron ticks all the right boxes'. This was much more a vote for Cameron's personal qualities, not his ideological position.

Cameron's centrist project met immediate resistance, coming under serious attack from, for example, Janet Daley in a report for the Centre for Policy Studies, and Lord Tebbit (who compared Cameron, absurdly, to Pol Pot). But he managed to hold the line, arguing in January 2006 that 'well-intentioned cheerleaders on the right [were exerting] a powerful gravitational pull' but 'the alternative to fighting for the centre-ground is irrelevance, defeat and failure.'

The initial struggle was over Cameron's refusal to promise tax cuts well in advance of the next Election; Cameron ultimately succeeded in defusing the issue. He also imposed an 'A-list' of favoured candidates in vacant seats on the party; the A-list was partly designed to make the party more representative and presentable, containing many women and people from ethnic minorities, as well as being generally younger and more articulate than the average Tory candidate. The A-list proved unpopular with the independent local Conservative Associations, but it produced results. Currently, 17% of Conservative MPs are women (in contrast, 16% are called 'David'), but by 2007 about a third of candidates selected to fight the next Election were women, many in target seats. He also experimented with innovative ways of communicating, using the 2006 Party Conference to introduce WebCameron, a blog/podcast site.

Voters generally found Cameron more congenial than his three predecessors, and the poll lead of 5-8% going into the 2007 local elections was primarily due to his personal popularity. The local elections were also a qualified success, with the Conservatives getting a projected 39% of the national vote, although Cameron's characterisation of the results as 'stunning' was clearly an exaggeration. The eighteen months between Cameron becoming leader and Blair's resignation had been fairly successful.

The period between the local elections at the beginning of May and the accession of Gordon Brown at the end of June brought bad news for the Conservatives. There was a shaky performance over a speech made by education spokesman David Willetts where he withdrew the Conservatives' traditional support for grammar schools. The loud protests against this measure seemed to take the front bench by surprise (Cameron had signalled the change in policy many months beforehand), and Cameron unwisely fuelled the flames with a very aggressive response to criticism. The result was that the party looked divided. The result was a decline in the poll ratings, so the Blair era ended with Labour and the Conservatives roughly level in the polls, and Brown's accession resulted in a Labour lead.

Even though this setback was entirely predictable (and indeed the 'Brown bounce' had been predicted for a long time), and not necessarily important in the long term,

Cameron immediately came under pressure from restive back benchers. Edward Leigh, chair of the Public Accounts Committee, and former front-bencher Ann Winterton called for changes in policy, while on the eve of Brown's accession, another former front-bencher, Quentin Davies, quit the Tories for Labour and released a venomous letter to Cameron explaining his reasons.

The year since Brown took over has been, to use a cliché, a 'roller-coaster ride'. A massively successful Summer led to a significant Labour lead in the polls, and rumours about an Autumn election. This backfired – Brown let the rumours spread, and consequently looked weak when he decided not to go to the country. The whole fiasco also undermined Brown's carefully crafted statesmanlike image of the man 'above politics', in that he had clearly encouraged the rumours which were causing the Conservatives problems in planning their own tactics.

Cameron effectively won the leadership of his party during an intense Party Conference in 2005. In 2007, once more the Party Conference was the scene of drama. At the beginning, Cameron was under severe pressure: the headline in the left-wing *Observer* newspaper on September 30th was 'Cameron meltdown as public urge early vote'. An *ad hoc* announcement by Shadow Chancellor George Osborne that a Conservative government would adjust inheritance taxes proved popular enough to make the outcome of an election uncertain, and Brown pulled back from the brink. Cameron had been saved from disaster.

Brown's problems led to a Tory resurgence, but as late as March the Tory lead though constant was small, and right-wing commentators were demanding to know why the Tories were not further ahead, given the government's problems. Cameron was urged to make stronger statements about right-wing hot button issues, particularly tax. He resisted, and since March capitalised on Labour's problems to build a significant lead. The local elections and the victory of Boris Johnson in the London mayoralty election of 2008, and the Crewe and Nantwich by-election shortly afterwards showed, for the first time, that Cameron could win over sufficient voters in the North of Britain to contemplate winning a General Election. By the Spring of 2008, Cameron was sounding notably more confident and aggressive in his treatment of Gordon Brown (somewhat undermining his own claim that he would try to follow a less confrontational politics).

His critics have been quietened as a result of these successes. But not silenced. On the day that it reported the victory in Crewe, the *Daily Telegraph* ran an opinion piece by prominent blogger Iain Dale demanding a commitment to lower taxes. After the excellent local election results, Simon Heffer ran a piece headlined 'David Cameron, prove to me that you're a Tory' which claimed Cameron's success was nothing to do with him, and everything to do with the floundering Labour Party. The attacks from the right, and the claims that, in Heffer's words, "the Conservative Party still stands for very little, and has slogans where it might more profitably have policies," will continue, and increase in volume if Brown's electoral position improves.

Problems with Cameron's ideological positioning

Cameron's task, as I argued in my book *After Blair*, is to establish a centrist position distinct from that of Blair and Brown. To do this, he has ditched many traditional Conservative policies, including unwavering support for tax cuts and grammar schools, and instead has set out a position based roughly on three principles. First, there is an unusual commitment to green thinking, protecting the environment and

combating climate change. Second, there is localism, the devolution of as much power as possible to local communities, non-governmental institutions and the “third sector” of voluntary workers. Third, there is the promotion of social responsibility, including explicit support for the traditional family structure, and corporate social responsibility. This rough position is a departure from the recent Thatcherite mindset, but is, I argued in *After Blair*, consistent with the ‘small-c’ conservative tradition in Britain which can be traced back to Edmund Burke. It also differentiates the Conservatives from New Labour.

However, the position does bring problems of its own. Although the policy *positions* are popular with voters, they may not be as supportive of the actual *policies* that are produced by the policy review process to be consistent with them. All three of Cameron’s conservative stances are likely to be less popular once the details are made clear. People like green ideas in the abstract, but they are resistant to behavioural modification – will they be happy to pay a carbon tax, or greater prices on air flights? High oil and gas prices (caused by high commodity prices, not green taxes) in 2007 and 2008 caused much discontent. Similarly, the British like localism, until they see the effects of differences in service provision. An obvious corollary of localism is that different localities have different priorities and provide different services, but when this happens in the UK the result is often unpopular – the media code word for such differences is a ‘postcode lottery’. And thirdly, although social responsibility is again popular, people do not like the restrictions that result. Recent headlines complaining about a £75 fine for someone guilty of throwing away an apple core are typical.

Furthermore, Cameron’s message is not getting across as he would like. Poll results are not encouraging. For instance, a YouGov/*Economist* poll of June 2007 showed that only 27% of people thought Cameron would improve the NHS, while 41% thought he would not, and 30% thought he would improve schools against 35% who thought not, even though health and schools have been particular focuses for Cameron. Worryingly, only 28% thought he would take effective action to reduce climate change, while 31% thought he would not. Indeed, 41% did not know, even after the efforts Cameron has made in this direction. Worse, these poll numbers are remarkably similar to Brown’s, even though the whole point of Cameron’s promotion of green thinking was to upstage Brown. On the other hand, 38% think that Cameron will reduce immigration, against 27% who think he won’t, despite the fact that Cameron has constantly avoided this policy area. Many people still associate the Conservative Party with its traditional policy profile. This has been helpful in many respects; more recent polls show that the Conservatives are more trusted on the economy, reversing a long-standing Labour lead.

David Cameron’s position has improved with the decline in Gordon Brown’s fortunes. Senior Labour insiders argue that once Cameron’s policies come under scrutiny, he will be seen as a lightweight, and Brown will gain as a result. Also, Brown will choose the moment of the General Election, which is an important power. At the time of writing, Cameron’s ascendancy, though impressive, has lasted for a few weeks, and it is impossible to extrapolate ahead even a few months. Such is the volatility of the electorate, Cameron’s continued success cannot be guaranteed. In May 2008, his position was better than that of any Conservative leader since Margaret Thatcher’s best days – but only eight months earlier he was being written off. Much uncertainty remains about his policy positions, and it cannot be claimed that voters have taken his ideas to their hearts.

Conclusions

To conclude, electoral geography, history and ideological reflections combine to suggest it is still uncertain that David Cameron will lead the Conservatives to victory at the next General Election. Failure to improve on the 2005 result would be disastrous for Cameron, while victory would be a magnificent achievement. But at the moment it remains very possible that Cameron will dramatically reduce Labour's majority, while leaving Brown as Prime Minister.

That would not be a bad result for Cameron, and we have seen that tolerance for Neil Kinnock's failure to win in 1987 eventually paid dividends for the Labour Party. The next election may be the Conservatives' equivalent of 1987. But as I have argued in this paper, support for Cameron is thin. If he does not win the next election, he will be under severe pressure to go.

In his favour, many candidates from the A-list will be MPs in the next Parliament. Their position will be crucial. The leadership rules of the Conservative Party say that the leader can be challenged if 15% of MPs write to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbenchers demanding a confidence vote. If that happens, a vote is taken which will either cement the leader in his job, or remove him from it. Given that background, Cameron will be pleased if the next Parliamentary Conservative Party is packed with a number of new MPs who in effect owe their position to his attempts to modernise the party.

Against that, the successes of May 2008 have raised expectations of a victory. These high expectations, given the Conservatives' still-precarious position, will be dangerous for Cameron if they are not achieved. Despite the complete lack of evidence that voters are demanding a 'return to Thatcherism', many commentators, and party members, will blame a failure at the next election on Cameron's modernisation programme. In fact, Conservative modernisation is their best hope, but – as often in British politics – the determining factor will be the performance of the Prime Minister. Oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them.

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