

Review of Peter Dorey, Mark Garnett and Andrew Denham, *From Crisis to Coalition: The Conservative Party 1997-2010*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, ISBN 978-0-230-54238-9, 216 + vii pp.

Kieron O'Hara

*Intelligence, Agents, Multimedia Group
School of Electronics and Computer Science
University of Southampton
Highfield
Southampton SO17 1BJ
United Kingdom
kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk*

Political Studies Review, 10(3), September 2012, 450-451

From Crisis to Coalition describes internal party aspects of the British Conservative Party's recovery from landslide defeat to leading a coalition government. The book, by three significant historians of the Conservatives, provides many nuggets of interest.

The reader should be aware that it is much more narrowly focused than the subtitle and cover blurb suggest. Three-quarters is devoted to Cameron's modernisation project and the 2010 election. Only 23 pages discuss 1997-2005, and a figure as significant as Michael Portillo rates merely a single entry in the index.

The focus on 2005-2010 means that 'modernisation' is taken as equivalent to Cameron's programme, effectively allowing the victor to write the history. Yet Tory modernisation could have been very different. There is no mention of the earlier modernisation drive led by Portillo and Francis Maude, and how (and in what form) that survived Portillo's farcical leadership bid of 2001. What are the (dis)continuities between that and the campaigns of Cameron, Davis and Fox, all of whom presented themselves as modernisers in the 2005 leadership contest? What did their programmes have in common – and what were the contrasts? Why did Cameron's vision win out? Would something like the Post Bureaucratic Age/Big Society have emerged without Cameron, and how does it relate to, say, the transparency programme announced by Cameron in May 2010 (within the book's timescale), which Maude oversees?

The introductory chapter, on 'Statecraft 1997-2005', fails to provide relevant context. A mistitled critique of Jim Bulpitt's thesis about Thatcher's 'political argument hegemony', only 5 of its 27 pages refer to events between 1997 and 2005; most of it deals with 1979-90. The authors effectively and correctly show that Bulpitt failed to account for any significant phenomena, and then inexplicably adopt his framework to analyse the post-1997 party. This analysis is not mentioned again in the book.

The only relevant historical perspective is an account of the development of civic conservatism, originally by David Willetts whose influence on Cameron has been at best marginal. The plausible but untested assumption seems to be that the Big Society equals civic conservatism – but then why do so many Tories find the former so nebulous and unpersuasive?

The book describes the *process* of change after 2005, but leaves room for analysis of the *content* of the victorious ideology, what makes it *modern*, and what pre-2005 factors meant that it *emerged* victorious.