THE CONSERVATIVES SINCE 1945
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The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change

TIM BALE
‘The truth is rarely pure and never simple.’

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, Act I
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To Andrew Gamble—a fine scholar and a huge influence.
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>ACP</td>
<td>Advisory Committee on Policy</td>
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<td>ACPPE</td>
<td>Advisory Committee on Policy and Political Education</td>
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<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<td>BME</td>
<td>Black and Minority Ethnic</td>
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<td>BMRB</td>
<td>British Market Research Bureau</td>
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<td>CAP</td>
<td>Common Agricultural Policy</td>
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<td>CBI</td>
<td>Confederation of British Industry</td>
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<td>CCO</td>
<td>Conservative Central Office</td>
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<td>CDU</td>
<td>Christian Democratic Union</td>
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<td>CPC</td>
<td>Conservative Political Centre</td>
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<td>CPPPI</td>
<td>Council on Prices, Productivity and Incomes</td>
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<td>CPRS</td>
<td>Central Policy Review Staff</td>
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<td>CPV</td>
<td>Colman, Prentis and Varley</td>
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<td>CRD</td>
<td>Conservative Research Department</td>
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<td>CTU</td>
<td>Conservative Trade Unionists’ Organisation</td>
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<td>EFTA</td>
<td>European Free Trade Association</td>
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<td>ERG</td>
<td>Economic Reconstruction Group</td>
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<td>ERM</td>
<td>Exchange Rate Mechanism</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federation of British Industry</td>
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<td>FCS</td>
<td>Federation of Conservative Students</td>
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<td>GCHQ</td>
<td>Government Communications Headquarters</td>
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<td>GNU</td>
<td>Government of National Unity</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEA</td>
<td>Institute of Economic Affairs</td>
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<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<td>NAFF</td>
<td>National Association for Freedom</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation</td>
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<td>NEDC</td>
<td>National Economic Development Council</td>
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<td>NIC</td>
<td>National Incomes Commission</td>
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<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
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<td>NOP</td>
<td>National Opinion Polls</td>
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Abbreviations

NUGPC National Union General Purposes Committee
NUM National Union of Mineworkers
OIL Office of Industrial Liaison
ORC Opinion Research Centre
PACE Police and Criminal Evidence Act
PEB Party Election Broadcast
PESC Public Expenditure Survey Committee
PORD Public Opinion Research Department
PPB Party Political Broadcast
PPS Principal Private Secretary
PSBR Public Sector Borrowing Requirement
PSRU Public Sector Research Unit
PTA Popular Television Association
PWPCC Post-War Problems Central Committee
QMV Qualified Majority Voting
RPM Resale Price Maintenance
SACC Standing Advisory Committee on Candidates
SDP Social Democratic Party
SEA Single European Act
SNP Scottish National Party
SERPS State Earnings Related Pension Scheme
TGWU Transport and General Workers’ Union
TUC Trades Union Congress
TUNAC Trade Unionists’ National Advisory Committee
UCS Upper Clyde Shipbuilders
VAT Value Added Tax
WNAC Women’s National Advisory Committee
YCs Young Conservatives
After losing the 1997 general election, the British Conservative Party failed miserably to live up to its worldwide reputation as an outfit willing and able do whatever it took to return to office as rapidly as possible. The legendary will to power that allowed the Party to overcome occasional reverses quickly and so dominate British politics in the twentieth century appeared to have somehow deserted it. Instead of driving it to adapt, the defeat inflicted upon it by Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ in 1997 seemed to drive it still deeper into the mire. It lost not only that general election but the one after that—and the one after that. The Party seemed unable and unwilling to get itself out of the Thatcherite policy groove into which it had first fallen some two decades previously, although the story was rather different when it came to organisation—a topic which admittedly interests political scientists more than it does the public or, indeed, most politicians. Under William Hague, a former management consultant elected to lead the Party not long after Labour’s landslide win in 1997, the Conservatives made what were arguably fundamental changes. Hague’s so-called ‘Fresh Future’ reforms brought together the Party’s voluntary, professional, and parliamentary components into a unified structure for the first time, giving those at the centre new rights to intervene (especially where things were going wrong) at constituency level. In exchange for this, and for constituency associations giving Central Office more information about their finances, ordinary members (or at least their representatives on the new ‘National Convention’) were granted what was sold as a greater say in the higher councils of the Party via a new Policy Forum and a Party Board which would exercise greater control over its finances. Most significantly of all, they would finally be given the chance to elect the Party’s leader, although their role was to be restricted to choosing between two candidates pre-selected by the votes of Tory Members of Parliament (MPs).

It wasn’t long before the Party’s grass-roots got to use their new powers for the first time. Hague’s failure in 2001 to make even the slightest dent in Labour’s massive majority led to his immediate resignation and a leadership contest. Its outcome, however, proved disastrous: the hapless Iain Duncan Smith lasted less than two years in the leadership before he was replaced by the
equally Thatcherite but considerably more competent Michael Howard in November 2003. On that occasion, ordinary members were denied a vote by MPs agreeing that Howard would be the only candidate. In 2005, after he lost the general election held in May of that year, moves were once again made to restrict the right to choose the Party leader to MPs. But those moves were part of a bigger package of organisational reforms that was ultimately rejected, so when David Cameron was elected Leader in December 2005 it was with the votes of the wider membership as well as of his MPs. This time they got it right. Some eight years after Blair had beaten John Major, Margaret Thatcher’s unfortunate successor as Conservative Prime Minister back in 1990, the Party finally began to make the kind of alterations to policies which stood some chance of signalling to a sceptical public that a party was genuinely changing its tune. In the event, those changes were still insufficient to secure the Party an overall majority at the general election fought in the spring of 2010, obliging Cameron to form a coalition with the apparently more left-leaning Liberal Democrats.

The reasons why the Conservative Party got so stuck after 1997, and then why it was able, relatively rapidly, to change after 2005, have already been picked over in considerable detail, not least by the present author, and are not therefore examined at any length in the present volume. They none the less raise some interesting general questions, both about what we mean when we say a political party has changed and about what really causes that change—questions which this book tries to answer by looking at how, between 1945 and 1997, the Conservative Party went about organising itself, making policy, and presenting itself to the electorate via its candidates, its leaders, and other prominent personalities.

### WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT PARTY CHANGE

This book does not go about that task, however, without being forearmed—in this case with a conception of what constitutes and drives change gleaned from the work of political scientists working not on British politics but in a comparative tradition of work on political parties first begun by pioneers like Michels, Ostrogorski, and Duverger and carried on since then in both continental Europe and in the United States. The book aims, then, not just to discover what really happened but to evaluate the utility of the approach to party change suggested by that tradition, essentially by subjecting it to a historically grounded and therefore robust examination. It puts the expectations and the assumptions of that approach through their paces in a real-world, over-time scenario, in order to suggest where they fall down, where they come through, and how they might be modified and supplemented. Do
the parsimonious explanations of party change to which political scientists aspire fall apart when we confront them with ‘the facts’ or do they capture enough—maybe just enough—of the hazy, holistic, and historical reality to make them worth while pursuing?4

There is today a global community of political scientists working on political parties.5 Yet party change—as opposed to the much-debated evolution of party types (cadre, mass, catch-all, cartel, franchise)—is still not that well understood. Two or three seminal attempts to do so are routinely cited.6 But there have been only limited attempts to check whether their ideas work in the real world—in other words to test their theories empirically on particular parties or groups of parties. This could be because the case studies required to conduct those tests are so labour-intensive and so historical. It is sorely tempting, especially in an era of all-you-can-eat data, to stay at one’s desk and crunch the numbers based on standard accounts of what-happened-when rather than trawl through the memoirs, memos, and minutes which might contradict or qualify those standard accounts. Or it could be because many political scientists are, rightly or wrongly, doubtful anyway that case studies are well suited to disconfirming, let alone confirming, what are put forward as generalisable frameworks—an attitude that always risks locking us into a cycle wherein ambitious approaches are occasionally put forward, frequently nodded to, but never properly wrestled with.7

This book aims, in its own small way, to break out of that cycle. But before it can do that it needs to ask and answer a few questions. First: what constitutes change for a political party? ‘We know it when we see it’ is never a great answer. Yet coming up with a satisfying definition is challenging. As the late Peter Mair, one of the foremost party scholars of his (indeed of any) generation, put it some time ago, ‘the essence is elusive, and whether a party actually has changed . . . is difficult to ascertain’.8 Since then, however, it is fair to say that a working consensus has emerged on what constitutes change (the dependent variable if you like) or at least where to look for it. In their seminal work on the issue written almost two decades ago, Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda set the tone by defining party change as ‘alteration or modification in how parties are organised, what human and material resources they can draw upon, what they stand for and what they do’.9 This alteration or modification is, as Janda had earlier noted, ‘detected only through measurement over time’, although it is surely a moot point whether the difference between ‘time t and t + 1’ is normally a matter of years, as he claims, rather than days, weeks, or months.10 Indeed, recent cross-national research on changes in parties’ policy platforms suggests that the inertia or ‘friction’ to which most organisations are prone means that such changes can often occur very suddenly, as parties which have neglected the need for change for years finally wake up to the fact that ‘something must be done’—a ‘punctuated’
pattern which can see them overreact and make more extensive alterations than they really need to.\textsuperscript{11} 

There is, however, less uniformity when it comes to operationalisation. Harmel and Janda recommend paying particular attention to ‘all self-imposed changes in party rules, structures, policies, strategies or tactics’ and, in their subsequent work, subject written secondary and primary sources to ‘judgmental coding procedures’ covering a large number (twenty-six to be precise) of organisational variables and scarcely fewer issue variables covering party stances on particular policies.\textsuperscript{12} It may come as no surprise, then, to find that those who cite their work do not replicate their (comparative and ultimately quantitative) method. Instead they attempt to bring their ideas to bear either on a handful of key variables and/or on qualitative case studies, some covering only a relatively short period of time.\textsuperscript{13}

And what about the causes of change? For a start, there is widespread agreement that parties—especially big, old parties—have to change (and possibly only do so) when they run into trouble.\textsuperscript{14} As one recent case study, employing the evolutionary trope that is commonplace in the literature, puts it:

\begin{quote}
Adaptation, clearly, is the dividing line between . . . decline (either by rapid incineration or slow decay) and rebound (either through strategic recovery or a total reformation or rebirth). . . . Adaptation requires a party first to survive . . . defeat and then to embrace a strategy enabling it to return to power (or at least stay in the game).\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

But scholars in the field also agree that adaptation, however necessary, is difficult ‘either because of entrenched interests or because of the weight of historical legacy’ that affects all complex organisations, or simply because politicians tend to live, indeed prefer to live, in what amounts to an ideological comfort zone.\textsuperscript{16} Consequently, as Harmel and Janda put it, change doesn’t ‘just happen’ but must be driven by something.

As to what that something might be, there is also widespread agreement. This is perhaps surprising, given the long list of factors, environmental and otherwise, that could feasibly impact, either directly or indirectly, on change. One of the earliest efforts to outline them, for instance, was at pains to insist that ‘there is no single source of party transformation’ and even the limited list that it provided contained items that many would consider too fuzzy, at least in the sense of their being capable of capture and measurement: ‘socioeconomic change, political culture, constitutional or institutional change, change in the terms of party competition, and the impact of party leaders or reformers’.\textsuperscript{17} The apparent willingness in the literature to focus on just a few suspects, however, almost certainly has to do with a practical acknowledgement that, while ‘scores of variables would be needed to explain party change fully’, ‘the function of a theory in the social sciences . . . is less to account for all possible sources of variation than to impose intellectual order
on the major factors in a situation of multicausality.\textsuperscript{18} Thus the most commonly cited independent variables or drivers of change, derived from the framework elaborated by Harmel and Janda, are: (i) external shock (essentially, electoral defeat or loss of office); (ii) a change of leader; and (iii) change in the dominant faction (or coalition) that, to a greater or lesser extent, runs the party.

More recent cross-national research has tended to concentrate on the first driver, folding into it public opinion as measured not just by election results but polls, the growing sophistication and importance of which arguably mean that what used to be seen as a big difference between economic and political markets (namely the relatively sporadic nature of feedback that characterised the latter) is eroding over time.\textsuperscript{19} This focus on the first driver of change does not necessarily come about because those doing such research assume electoral and opinion shifts are pre-eminent. James Adams and colleagues, for example, also investigate the impact of economic conditions as well as public opinion on parties’ policy changes.\textsuperscript{20} They also, incidentally, take account of the ideological tradition in which parties sit, in so doing discovering that those on the (centre) right—less constrained by memberships and formal links with interest groups and ultimately more interested in power than in policy—adjust more than those on the left. That said, electoral and opinion shifts have two fairly obvious advantages for scholars looking for causes. First, they are tractable; and secondly, they dovetail with normative concerns about parties’ capacity and willingness to listen to, and therefore represent, voters. Moreover, it would appear that, in focusing on them, researchers can be fairly sure that they are not peering up a blind alley. The very latest cross-national, quantitative research suggests that parties—particularly large, mainstream parties—do seem to shift their policy positions towards the preferences of voters in general rather than those of their own supporters.\textsuperscript{21} It also suggests that they shift their positions in search of votes after an election in which they have lost support and are less inclined to do so when they have gained it, even if, as memories of the election fade and are replaced by more up-to-date measures of public opinion, the effect weakens over time.\textsuperscript{22} Parties also make those shifts even though there is precious little evidence that they have much direct effect on voters, whose perceptions of what parties stand for, while important, bear surprisingly little relationship to the policies actually on offer from the parties or at the very least take a long time to catch up with any changes that parties make.\textsuperscript{23}

Recent cross-national research on parties’ policy shifts also suggests that parties in general modify their policy towards that of their competitors, presumably because they are concerned about being left behind, becoming uncompetitive and therefore losing elections—a reminder that change in one party, even assuming for the moment that it is mainly electorally-driven, is inevitably affected by what (and how) other parties are doing.\textsuperscript{24} This is a point
well made by Janda and his colleagues in an earlier attempt to look at the impact of elections on parties’ policy changes—one which also stresses, quite rightly, that whether the outcomes of such contests are seen by a party as ‘calamitous’, ‘disappointing’, ‘tolerable’, ‘gratifying’, or ‘triumphal’ also depends not just on the electoral arithmetic or on the performance of competitors but on assumptions about how well the party ‘should have done’ in the circumstances and whether, when the dust settles, they are in or out of office. In other words, if we are looking at elections (or indeed public opinion) as a driver of change, then we need to remember that, at least in part, ‘perception is reality’. By the same token, while it is clearly tempting, not least for the sake of clarity, to divide the drivers of change into categories labelled exogenous (outside the party) and endogenous (inside it), it might be a mistake to insist on too hard and fast a distinction.

Janda and his colleagues also concluded that defeat, while potentially important, was by no means the whole story, thereby leading us back to the second and third drivers, namely a change of leader and a change in the dominant faction that runs the party—both of which are rooted in the organisational approach to parties associated with Panebianco and of course Michels, but also in approaches to parties which stress agency over structure.

One such is Frank L. Wilson’s influential contribution to the party-change literature, in which he almost apologises for the findings of a comparative study of four European social democratic parties, lamenting that ‘In some ways, it is disappointing to conclude that party change is so heavily dependent on the choices and abilities of party leaders. Such a conclusion’, he admits, ‘stresses the idiosyncratic and unpredictable nature of change rather than helps us to discover probabilistic theories of party transformation.’ He none the less argues that there is no way out of stressing ‘the conscious, deliberate and manipulative nature of party change’, and, sees ‘party leaders and reformers as the key intervening variable that determines whether or not parties will, in fact, respond to any of [the] factors that make transformation possible or desirable’, namely socio-economic developments, cultural and attitudinal shifts in the electorate, institutional/constitutional innovations, and the challenges posed by rival parties. It is these factors (all seen as exogenous) that apparently impact (each one more directly than the last) on the leader and, providing that he or she is perceptive and able to overcome internal resistance, engender party change—something that Wilson is not alone, incidentally, in tending to associate with successful adaptation rather than, say, policy, personnel, and procedural reforms that fail to arrest and even accelerate decline.

Aside from potentially plunging us back into a debate about whether we should think in terms of exogenous and endogenous causes, bringing these agency factors back in raises the question of which of the three drivers—electoral performance, and changes in leaders and elites—is the most
important and, of course, how they interact. Indeed, there is a discussion to be
had about the dangers of misspecification in all this: it is not immediately
evident why, other than the fact that it is practical to do so, such developments
should be treated as independent rather than dependent variables—something
that Janda and those working alongside him insist on doing. In fact, one
doesn’t have to think too hard before coming up with examples of where a
change of leader or dominant faction represents not just a cause but a
symptom of change. Nor, perhaps, should it be impossible—despite the
obvious risk of endless recursion—to envisage dealing with the same phenom-
emon as both independent and dependent variable, even if, for simplicity’s
sake, it has to be done in turn rather than simultaneously. But leaving that
aside for the moment, there is no reason to assume that any one of three
drivers either always trumps or necessarily precedes the others. Indeed, that is
precisely the point: pre-eminence and precedence are empirical questions that
we should be looking to answer. Harmel and his colleagues, for example,
conclude that poor electoral performances account for only around a fifth to a
quarter of party change, that change may even be more common after a party
does well at an election, that leadership change is more important, and that the
impact of a change in the dominant faction is difficult to gauge (not least
because such change often coincides with a replacement of the leader) but that
it can boost the impact of a new leader if it results in a cohesive elite taking
charge of the party.

Just because they are difficult to gauge, however, should not mean we
ignore factional shifts, not least because one of the most recent attempts to
explain parties’ policy changes suggests they could be every bit as impor-
tant—if not more important—than electoral results. Setting out what they
call an ‘integrated dynamic theory’ of party change, which they go on to test
(using manifesto data from twenty-four countries), Budge, Ezrow, and
Mcdonald show that policy shifts often result from a seemingly inherent
tendency in parties to oscillate between the strategies favoured by internal
ideological factions, albeit one that is impacted, at least temporarily, by
electoral performance. Whichever faction is in control will determine the
policy direction of the party at the election. If the party is successful at that
election, then that faction stands a greater chance of continuing to drive
policy. However, the willingness of its internal opponents to compromise is
far from infinite: before long (and normally before the next election) they
will be seeking a change of approach. Depending on their relative strength
and the extent to which those currently in charge become associated with
mistakes and scandals, they eventually (re)gain control and drive policy
(back) in the opposite direction. Such an explanation would appear to be
empirically robust, even accounting for the fact that it is more common for
parties to stick to policy directions over the course of a couple of elections
than the theory predicts. Just as importantly, it provides an account of party