

Conservatism

Conservatism aims to conserve society in its existing form and conservatives are wary of change. They prefer pragmatism to ideological thinking and they attempt to adapt conservatism's core ideas and principles gradually over time, in line with changes in society. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, new-right conservative thinking challenged many of the key elements of traditional conservatism.

In this section you will learn about:

- the core ideas and principles of conservatism
- the differing views and tensions within conservatism
- key conservative thinkers and their ideas.

1.1 Core ideas and principles

Pragmatism

Arguably, the key core value of conservatism is pragmatism, an idea usually associated with conservative thinkers such as **Edmund Burke** (1729–97) and **Michael Oakeshott** (1901–90). In political terms, pragmatism rejects theory and ideology in favour of practical experience: the approach to society should be flexible, with decisions made on the basis of what works. This central point was neatly summarised by Oakeshott: 'To be a Conservative is to prefer the tried to the untried.' Pragmatism also implies a flexible approach to politics that considers what is in the best interests of the people, what is acceptable to the public and what will maintain social stability and cohesion.

Conservatives' preference for pragmatism is strongly linked to their view of human rationality. They contend that humans lack the intellectual ability and powers of reasoning to fully comprehend the complex realities of the world. As a result, conservatives tend to dismiss abstract ideas, theories and ideologies that claim to 'explain' or 'improve' human life and development. Principles and ideas such as 'human rights', 'a classless society' and 'equality' are dangerous because they can promote a radical reordering of society (often through revolution) that leads to worse rather than better conditions. Conservatives try to avoid a rigid ideological approach to issues, preferring to act in a pragmatic way that emphasises caution, moderation and a sense of historical continuity.

Critics argue that pragmatism reveals a lack of political principle and encourages politicians to follow rather than lead public opinion. In practice, political behaviour or action cannot be wholly separated from ideological or theoretical considerations.

Traditional and one-nation conservatism are the two strands of conservative thinking usually linked to pragmatism. For traditional conservatives, such as Edmund Burke, pragmatism was an essential element in facilitating 'natural' or inevitable change within a state or society. This type of change, he argued, should not be opposed because a state 'without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation' – for the state to keep going, it would have to adapt to some extent. Burke's conservatism maintained that cautious pragmatism would bring about necessary change peacefully, through evolution, whereas the unbending pursuit of revolution or reaction would lead to conflict and chaos. The key features of society – such as order, property,

Link

For more on **Edmund Burke**, see Section 1.3.

For more on **Michael Oakeshott**, see Section 1.3.

Link

For more on **traditional conservatism**, see Section 1.2.

For more on **one-nation conservatism**, see Section 1.2.

Key term**Change to conserve**

the idea that society should adapt to changing circumstances by introducing moderate reforms, rather than reject change outright and risk rebellion or revolution.

tradition and established institutions – can only be preserved through a pragmatic policy that takes into account shifting circumstances and recognises occasions when it is necessary to ‘**change to conserve**’.

One-nation conservatives hold similar attitudes to social reform. However, more recently they have also adopted a pragmatic ‘middle way’ approach to the economy that combines market competition with government regulation. These conservatives argue that this moderate economic course promotes growth and social harmony by encouraging wealth creation through private enterprise and generating the funding for state welfare programmes.

Case study: Conservative administrations 1951–64

Perhaps the clearest example of one-nation conservative pragmatism occurred in the years 1951–64 when a series of moderate Conservative administrations governed the UK. In opposition, the Conservative Party had opposed many aspects of the Labour government’s domestic reform programme between 1945 and 1951. However, once back in power the Conservatives made no concerted attempt to reverse Labour’s nationalisation of British industry or to dismantle the newly created welfare state. Aware that these initiatives were popular and, apparently, working well, successive Conservative governments took a pragmatic decision to retain Labour’s reforms.

Question

- Were the Conservative governments of 1951–64 motivated purely by pragmatism?

Tradition

Another important core value of conservatism is its attachment to tradition: the institutions, customs and practices of a society that have developed over time. Originally, the conservative justification for tradition had religious roots. Conservatives who believed that the world was created by a divine being saw society’s institutions and practices of society as ‘God-given’. Humans who attempt to alter these longstanding social arrangements are challenging the will of God and consequently are likely to undermine society, rather than improve it.

Although religious fundamentalists still put forward this argument for tradition, this divine justification has been severely weakened by the impact of Enlightenment thinking (with its emphasis on rationalism and anti-clericalism) from the 18th century and the incorporation of obviously man-made innovations over time, such as representative democracy.

Nowadays, most conservatives offer two secular (or non-religious) arguments for the value of tradition.

First, drawing on the ideas of Edmund Burke and the writer G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936), conservatives maintain that tradition constitutes the accumulated wisdom of the past. According to this view, the institutions, customs and practices of the past (such as the monarchy, the constitution, the nuclear family and heterosexual marriage) have demonstrated their value to earlier societies as they have proved ‘fit for purpose’ over time and survived. For this reason, they should be preserved so that current and future generations can also benefit from them. For example, the monarchy has promoted a sense of national unity and pride over the centuries, seen most recently at the 2011 royal wedding. Thus, tradition establishes continuity and social stability.

This was Burke’s point when he famously stated that society was a ‘partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born’. Each generation has a solemn duty to safeguard and pass on the accumulated wisdom of tradition to the next generation.

This view of tradition clearly influences the conservative attitude to change. According to conservatives, reform or change can only be justified if it takes place organically by evolving naturally in a peaceful, gradual way in order to strengthen existing institutions, customs and practices. Conservatives argue that, by seeking to destroy all traditional political and social institutions, the French in 1789 and the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 were cutting themselves off from their past and paving the way for regimes that were more tyrannical (such as the Terror of 1793–94, the Napoleonic Empire and the Stalinist dictatorship) than the ones they had toppled.

Secondly, conservatives champion tradition because, in their view, it provides society and the individual with a strong sense of identity. Long-established institutions, customs and practices are familiar and provide individuals with a historically based sense of belonging to a particular society.

Tradition fosters social cohesion and security because it offers humans a reassuring collective sense of who they are, and establishes powerful ties between people and specific societies. Conservatives claim that any attempt to implement radical, wide-ranging changes will cut people off from the 'traditional' basis of society and inevitably lead to instability, anxiety and insecurity.

Such arguments were used by Conservative opponents of the New Labour government's constitutional changes in the late 1990s. They asserted that innovations such as devolved assemblies and House of Lords reform would undermine the constitutional stability of the UK and create a mood of public uncertainty.

Human imperfection

Conservatives have a pessimistic view of human nature, arguing that people are flawed and incapable of reaching a state of perfection. Conservatism also asserts that human nature is immutable (remains constant). **Human imperfection** has to be kept in check due to the human capacity for evil.

Following from this, conservatives stress that:

- a tough stance on law and order is required, to deter criminal behaviour
- as human nature cannot be transformed, foreign policy has to be based on national security rather than 'liberal' notions of international co-operation and harmony
- human behaviour is competitive, so any successful political system will recognise that self-interest is a more powerful motivator than altruism.

For conservatives, humans are flawed in three ways: psychologically, morally and intellectually.

Organic society or state

Given that conservatives regard humans as dependent and security-seeking, it follows that people cannot exist separately from society as a whole or from social groups, such as the family or the local community. Society and social groups provide individuals with a sense of security and purpose, and prevent the development of **anomie**: a condition of instability affecting individuals and societies, produced by a breakdown in social standards and values or by a lack of purpose or ideals.

In turn, humans accept the duties, responsibilities and bonds that go with belonging to society or social groups, such as being a caring parent, a considerate neighbour, or a respectful son or daughter. For conservatives, this represents true freedom – the willing acceptance of the value of social obligations and ties. If people did not acknowledge and act on these responsibilities and bonds, human society would lack social cohesion and descend into **atomism**.

Key terms

Human imperfection
the traditional conservative belief that humans are flawed in a number of ways, which makes them incapable of making good decisions for themselves.

Atomism
the idea that society is made up of self-interested and self-sufficient individuals (also known as egotistical individualism). Can also describe increasing social breakdown and isolation.

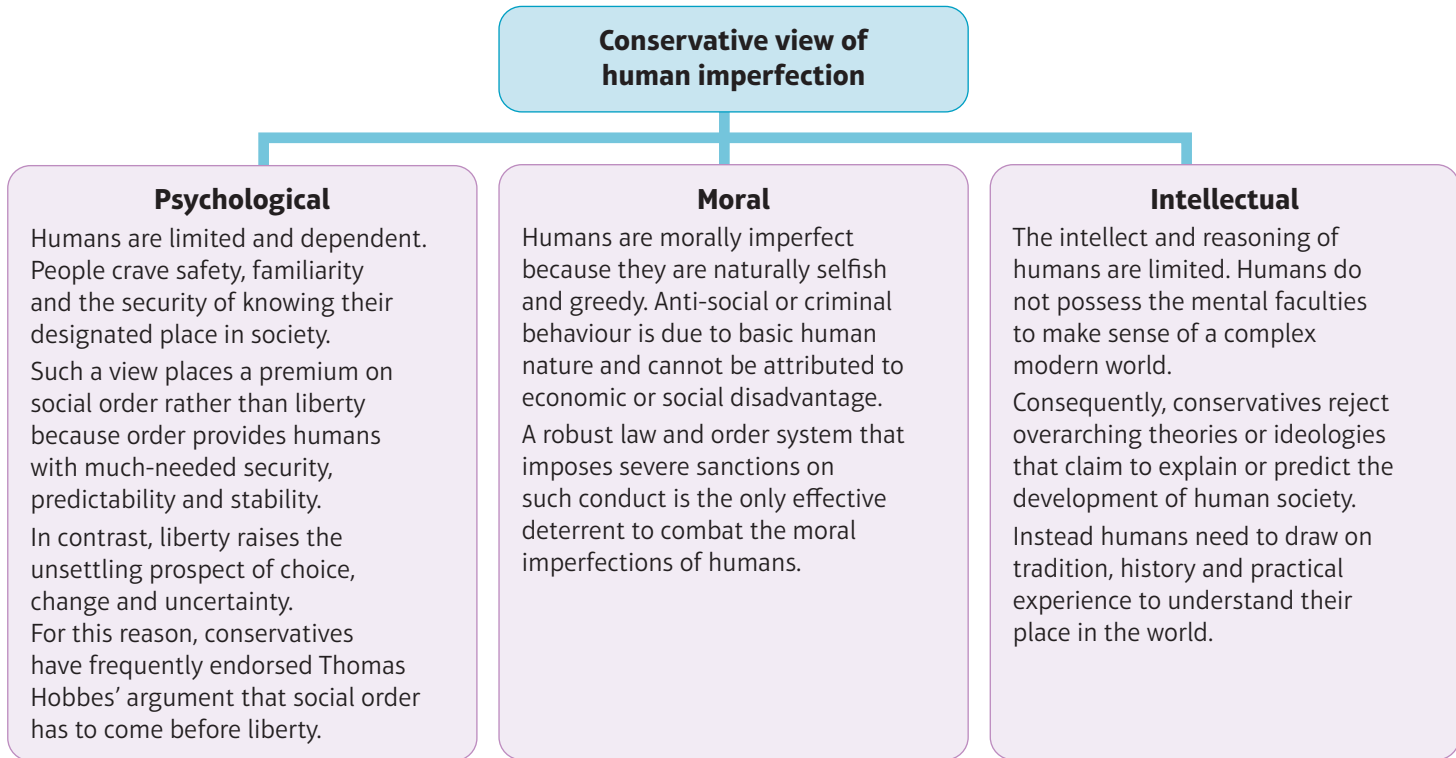


Figure 1.1: The three aspects of human imperfection

These assumptions lead conservatives to endorse organicism: the idea of an organic society or state. This perspective views society as a living organism, with all its parts working together in harmony, to ensure that the 'body' remains healthy.

Here, two considerations are important.

- The internal elements of an organic society or state cannot be randomly reconfigured. Like a living creature, an organic society is maintained by a delicate set of relationships between these elements. If this careful balance is disturbed, the society will be undermined and possibly destroyed. For this reason, say conservatives, an organic society represents more than a collection of individual elements.
- An organic society is based on natural needs and instincts such as affection, security and concern, rather than an ideological blueprint devised by political theorists. Such a view of society – where its component parts have been moulded by natural forces beyond human control – suggests that its members should sustain this careful balance of interacting elements. In particular, long-standing institutions have played a key role in preserving the 'health' of society and should not be changed or removed.

Underpinning the idea of an organic society is the conservative belief in **hierarchy** and **authority**. Traditionally, conservatism has argued that society is naturally hierarchical – it is based on fixed social ranks and inequalities. This is partly to do with the fact, say conservatives, that individuals vary in terms of their talents, intellect, skills and work rate. However, conservatism maintains that an organic society must rest on inequality, not just because of individual differences but also because different classes and groups (like different limbs and organs) have to perform specific roles. For example, some have to provide political leadership or manage commercial enterprises, while others have to perform routine manual or non-manual work, or raise children at home. Consequently, an organic society produces natural inequalities in terms of financial rewards and social status.

Key term

Hierarchy

the conservative belief that society is naturally organised in fixed and unequal tiers, where one's social position or status is not based on individual ability.

Authority

for conservatives, the idea that people in higher positions in society are best able to make decisions on behalf of other people or society as a whole; authority comes naturally from above and rests on an accepted obligation from below to obey.

Such an arrangement, according to conservatives, can be justified because the most advantaged also bear the heaviest social responsibilities. Managers and employers enjoy higher living standards than their workers, but they carry the burden of protecting the jobs and economic well-being of their workforces. In this sense, a hierarchical organic society encourages **paternalism** as a means to ensure social cohesion.

For conservatives, the hierarchical structure of organic society is reinforced by authority. Conservatism contends that authority develops naturally or organically in much the same way as society. This form of authority operates in a top-down manner, shapes relations between the different social groups, and permeates all social institutions. Authority therefore resides with political leaders, employers, managers, teachers, parents, and so on.

Conservatives argue that authority performs a vital and positive function by providing humans with security, direction and support. Authority also promotes social cohesion by giving people a clear sense of how they 'fit in' and what they are expected to do. The leadership exercised by those in authority not only offers discipline, but also an example to be admired, respected and accepted.

Most conservatives assert that the actions of people holding such authority are limited by the natural responsibilities that accompany their privileged position. Employers, for example, have authority over their workers but this does not give them the right to abuse employees.

Paternalism

In conservative thought, paternalism is the idea of government by people who are best equipped to lead by virtue of their birth, inheritance and upbringing. Conservatives' belief in paternalism is inextricably linked to their views on hierarchy, order and the organic society. Traditional conservatives, such as Burke, argued that the 'natural aristocracy' presided over society much like a father did over his family: the social elite provides leadership because of its innate or hereditary abilities, just as a father exercises authority, ensures protection and provides guidance. Its skills and talents cannot be obtained by hard work or self-improvement. Those at the top of society have a duty to care for the lower social ranks. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, some conservative aristocrats acted in a paternalistic fashion by improving material conditions for their tenants and employees, and by involving themselves in charitable and philanthropic works.

The wisdom and experience of paternalistic leaders confer natural authority, because they 'know what is best' for the rest of society. Traditionally, these leaders were drawn from the aristocratic elite that had been educated in the values of social obligation and public service, and had provided the senior political decision-makers for generations. The Cecil family (Marquesses of Salisbury) and the Stanley family (Earls of Derby) are good examples of high-born paternalistic Conservative political leaders. More recently, one-nation paternalistic conservatism has relied on government regulation of the economy and social welfare measures to improve conditions for the poorest in society. David Cameron, the UK Conservative Prime Minister (2010–16), also drew on paternalism when he called for 'compassionate conservatism'.

Paternalism can take two forms:

- soft – in the sense that those who are the recipients give their consent
- hard – when paternalism is imposed, regardless of consent or opposition, in a more authoritarian manner.

The origins of one-nation paternalistic conservatism are usually traced back to the works of Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81), who served as Conservative Prime Minister from 1874 to 1880. In his novels *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), Disraeli warned that Britain was dividing into two

Link



There is more on **paternalism** later in this section.

nations – the rich and the poor – and that this increased the likelihood of social revolution. For Disraeli, such a situation could be averted only by the privileged in society recognising their social obligation and duty to look after the less fortunate. The better-off would preserve their advantages, but they would also alleviate the hardships faced by the lower orders and strengthen the social cohesion and stability of the nation. In this way, Disraeli's one-nation paternalism blended self-interest with principle. As Prime Minister, Disraeli translated this idea of paternalism into practice to a certain extent by passing a series of limited social reforms.

By the mid-20th century, 'one-nation' conservatism had added a 'middle way' economic approach to social reform in its pursuit of paternalistic policies. The moderate UK Conservative governments of the 1950s and 1960s steered a central course between free-market economics and state planning, on the grounds that the former led to social fragmentation and failed to protect the poorest, while the latter stifled individual initiative and entrepreneurial flair. Economic policy combined government regulation and market completion to produce, in the words of Harold Macmillan – Conservative prime minister in the UK between 1957 and 1963 – 'private enterprise without selfishness'. This effectively meant that one-nation Conservatives fully accepted that the state had an obligation to intervene in the economy and maintain the welfare state to combat poverty and deprivation. Nevertheless, there were limits to paternalism, in the sense that improving conditions for poorer groups was principally motivated by a desire to strengthen the hierarchical nature of society by removing threats to the social order.

Link

For more on **neoliberalism**, see Section 1.2.

Link

For more on the **New Right**, see Section 1.2.

In contrast, the neoliberal wing of the **New Right** completely rejects the idea of paternalism. Based partly on free-market economics, **neoliberalism** aims to reduce the size of the state so that the unregulated market can generate a more dynamic and efficient economy leading to increased growth and prosperity. From this perspective, government intervention in the economy (a key element of the one-nation conservative paternalistic approach) or state control undermines human initiative and enterprise, resulting in economic stagnation. Similarly, the neoliberal faith in individualism also challenges conservative notions of paternalism. By stressing the importance of self-help, individual responsibility and personal initiative, neoliberals view welfare programmes and social reforms negatively. In their view, they promote a dependency culture among poorer people and undermine the free market.

Libertarianism

Libertarianism is a political philosophy that emphasises the rights of individuals to liberty, advocating only minimal state intervention in the lives of citizens. The primary role of the state is to protect individual rights. Libertarianism, with its emphasis on maximum economic freedom and minimal government regulation in social affairs, provides a rival conservative core value to paternalism.

This libertarian idea has been evident in conservative thinking since the late 18th century, influenced by Adam Smith's arguments for economic liberalism. For example, Burke advocated free trade and a market economy on the grounds that such arrangements were efficient, just and 'natural' (due to the human desire for wealth). For conservatives, the operation of the capitalist free market represented a natural law that could not be altered without damaging prosperity and working conditions.

In its modern form, libertarian conservatism is more commonly known as the liberal new right or neoliberalism. Associated with the policies of UK Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) and US Republican President Ronald Reagan (1981–89), neoliberalism rejects state intervention and champions the free-market economy. It fundamentally opposes Keynesian-style demand management and welfare programmes.

According to neoliberal economists, the free market is the only mechanism that can efficiently supply goods and services on the basis of consumer demand. Only the market, not government intervention, can ultimately determine the 'natural' level of unemployment.

Neoliberals consider inflation to be the biggest threat to the market economy. By undermining financial confidence, inflation inhibits all forms of economic and business activity. To combat inflation, neoliberal thinkers call for government spending cuts to control the money supply. Both Thatcher and Reagan adopted this approach during the 1980s.

Neoliberals also dismiss the mixed economy and public ownership on the grounds of expense and inefficiency, while endorsing 'supply side' economics as the path to growth and general prosperity. Government should focus on the 'supply side' to create the conditions to facilitate the highest possible levels of production. In practice, this means that producers' access to key economic resources (including capital, labour and land) has to be unrestricted – so obstacles such as government regulation, high taxation and trade union influence over the labour market must be removed. Underlying this is the assumption that the innovative and dynamic qualities of entrepreneurs and wealth creators can only flourish when freed from these restraints.

Neoliberalism also justifies its opposition to state intervention by calling for individual liberty. Personal freedom can only be guaranteed by 'rolling back' the state, particularly social welfare programmes. The neoliberal objection to state welfare is partly economic (public services are inefficient and increasingly expensive, placing greater burdens on taxpayers) and partly moral, as can be seen in Figure 1.2.

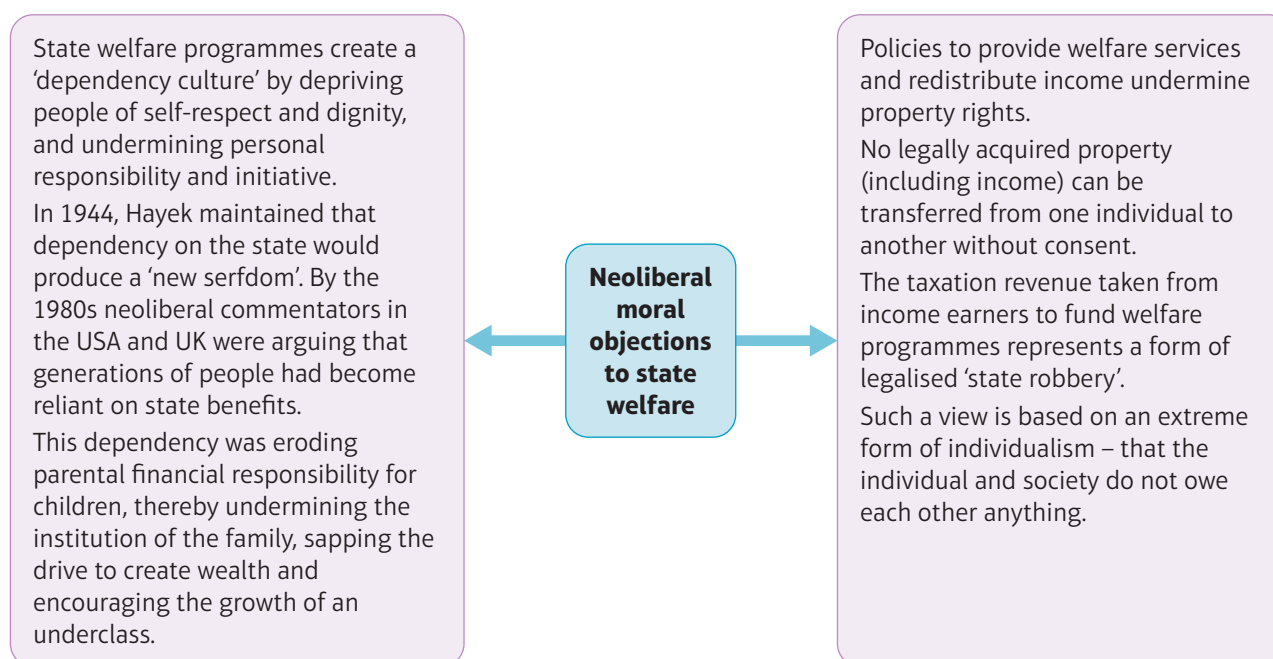


Figure 1.2: Neoliberal moral objections to state welfare

1.2 Differing views and tensions within conservatism

Traditional conservatism

Traditional conservatism originated in the late 18th century, as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This strand of conservative thought is most clearly set out in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790. Broadly speaking, traditional conservatism defends the established order in society based on a commitment to organicism, hierarchy and paternalism. Traditional conservatives regard society as a sort of living or organic entity with complex interconnections and relationships. Any changes to one part will affect all the other parts, possibly in unforeseen and negative ways. Radical or abrupt changes are to be avoided. When change is desirable to adapt to a new situation, an organic society must evolve naturally at its own speed through small, pragmatic reforms to minimise any harmful consequences.

For traditional conservatives, an organic society is founded on tried and tested institutions (such as the family, the church and the monarchy) that in various ways confer privileges, authority, responsibilities and obligations. These social arrangements are held in place by custom and tradition – the accumulated wisdom and experience of the past – to maintain a society bound together by powerful bonds of loyalty, affection and duty. Any changes that are introduced must preserve the best features of society and reconcile them to new circumstances. Reform has to be pragmatic, drawing on the lessons of history and tradition to establish practical, effective solutions.

Traditional conservatives also argue that the implementation of ideological blueprints and abstract theory to bring about an ideal society can only lead to disaster, as the example of the Jacobins in the French Revolution demonstrates. Such an approach is not based on previous human experience and introduces drastic and swift changes that lead to social breakdown and destruction.

In order to sustain itself, say traditional conservatives, the organic society has to be organised as a hierarchy for two main reasons.

Key term

Noblesse oblige

a French phrase that encapsulates the idea that nobility and privilege bring with them social responsibilities, notably the duty and obligation to care for those less fortunate.

- People do not have the same abilities, talents and energy, so it is 'natural' that society should reflect this and 'artificial' that all humans should be considered equal.
- A hierarchy is a functional necessity because different people have to do different jobs and are rewarded differently (in pay and status) depending on the contribution they make. Hierarchy ensures that everyone works together harmoniously for the overall health of the social body.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the leadership of society was assumed by the aristocracy. Traditional conservatives at the time justified this form of elite rule on the grounds that it was natural since, for generations, the upper class had been raised to govern at all levels and had also been educated in the values of social obligation and public service. Another contemporary conservative justification put forward for aristocratic leadership was paternalism or **noblesse oblige**. The longstanding practice of elite rule ensured that those in positions of authority could draw on class and family traditions of leadership, duty and social responsibility, and this meant that they were best placed to make decisions on behalf of (and for the good of) society as a whole. Traditional conservatives would consider this to be a form of **soft paternalism** since, in their view, other social groups within an organic society accept (and thus give their consent) that the 'natural' leaders are uniquely equipped to act in the best interests of all.

Link

For more on **soft paternalism**, see Section 1.1.

One-nation conservatism

One-nation conservatism, an updated version of traditional conservatism, emerged in response to the development of laissez-faire capitalism and industrialisation in the 19th century. Its central figure, Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81) felt that capitalism encouraged a self-interested individualism that undermined the idea of social responsibility, and threatened to split Britain into two nations – the rich and the poor. If left unaddressed, he argued, this division would lead to class conflict, a declining sense of community and national identity, and possibly revolution.

To remedy this situation, Disraeli called for conservatism to renew its commitment to the concepts of reform and social obligation. His motives were both pragmatic and principled. Reforms to improve conditions for the poorest in society would reduce the likelihood of large-scale social discontent, preserving the position of the upper classes. Such measures would probably increase working class support for the Conservative Party too. Disraeli also maintained that the wealthiest and most privileged social groups had a moral duty to help the poor. Organic society depended not only on ‘top down’ authority, but also on the governing elite’s acceptance of social responsibility for less fortunate people. In an industrialised capitalist society, Disraeli concluded, conservative paternalism should now embrace social reform or ‘welfarism’ to strengthen national unity and thus preserve ‘one nation’. Table 2.1 shows the main features of Disraeli’s one-nation conservatism.

Maintenance of traditional institutions	Imperialism	Reforms to improve conditions for the working class
In speeches at Manchester and Crystal Palace in 1872, Disraeli signalled his determination to uphold traditional British institutions, such as the monarchy and the Church of England. This was based on the ‘one nation’ view that such institutions had proved themselves over time, provided stability and offered a focus for national loyalty and identity across the classes. Disraeli’s ‘defence’ of these institutions included creating the title ‘Empress of India’ in 1876 for Queen Victoria, to link the monarch with Britain’s sense of imperial pride.	At Manchester and Crystal Palace (1872), Disraeli also praised imperialism, arguing that the British Empire was not only a source of great national pride but also allowed Britain to play an influential role on the world stage. Disraeli’s support for imperialism was an important element in ‘one nation’ thinking because the theme of empire appealed to all classes and linked conservative values to the ‘mass politics’ that was beginning to emerge in Britain from the late 1860s.	Social and other reforms were introduced to forge an alliance between the traditional ruling class and the workers, and to offset the negative effects of laissez-faire capitalism and remove the possibility of revolution. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artisans’ Dwellings Act (1875) • Sale of Food and Drugs Act (1875) • Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act (1875) • Second Reform Act (1867)

Table 2.1: Main features of Disraeli’s one-nation conservatism

Disraeli’s conception and pursuit of one-nation conservatism had a powerful influence on the development of conservative thinking. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, prominent Conservative politicians including Lord Randolph Churchill, Joseph Chamberlain and Neville Chamberlain adopted ‘one-nation’ values by stressing the importance of the governing elite’s social obligations to the poor, the extension of political rights and the provision of some state welfare.

One-nation conservatism was most dominant in the years just after the Second World War. Between 1951 and 1964, successive Conservative governments in the UK based their policies on the

one-nation perspective. They adopted Keynesian economic management techniques to maintain high employment, accepted the mixed economy and supported an expanded welfare state.

This ‘middle way’ approach tried to navigate a path between unbridled liberalism (free-market economics and individualism) and socialist collectivism (extensive state planning and control). Harold Macmillan, the UK Conservative Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, first coined the term ‘the middle way’ in 1938, in his book advocating a form of planned capitalism. For Macmillan, this was to be ‘a mixed system’ that combined ‘state ownership, regulation or control of certain aspects of economic activity with the drive and initiative of private enterprise’. There was a clear link between the one-nation conservatism of mid-20th century Britain and Disraeli’s original thinking. Another ‘one-nation’ Conservative minister during the 1950s and 1960s, R.A. Butler, argued that government policy at that time was focused on ‘bringing together what Disraeli called the Two Nations into a single social entity’.

Proponents of the one-nation tradition within the Conservative Party opposed the New Right policies of Margaret Thatcher’s governments (1979–90). Among these critics were prominent Conservative politicians, including Michael Heseltine, Kenneth Clarke, Ian Gilmour and Francis Pym, who were mocked as ‘wet’ by the Thatcherites in the party. The ‘wets’ feared that the new individualist and free-market policies of the 1980s would divide the UK into two nations once more.

In recent years, the one-nation approach has continued to influence aspects of Conservative Party thinking and policy. David Cameron, the former Conservative Prime Minister (2010–16), drew on this legacy when he argued that a new ‘compassionate conservatism’ would underpin his government. His successor Theresa May did much the same thing in early 2017 when she called for the creation of a ‘shared society’ that would focus ‘rather more on the responsibilities we have to one another’ and respect ‘the bonds of family, community, citizenship and strong institutions that we share as a union of people and nations’.

The New Right

The New Right strand of conservatism gathered momentum from the mid-1970s as a rival to one-nation conservatism. New Right conservatism is founded on two distinct but, in certain respects, seemingly opposed ideological traditions:

- neoliberalism or the liberal New Right – a modernised version of classical liberalism, based on a commitment to the free-market economy, the minimal state, and individual freedom and responsibility
- neoconservatism or the conservative New Right – an updated form of traditional conservative social thinking, based on a commitment to order, traditional values and public morality.

By amalgamating these neoliberal and neoconservative ideas, the New Right contains **radical**, traditional and reactionary elements. Its determination to abandon government interventionism in economic and social affairs, and attack ‘permissive’ social attitudes is clear evidence of the New Right’s radicalism. At the same time, neoconservatives stress the benefits of traditional values. New Right conservatism also exhibits reactionary tendencies: both neoliberals and neoconservatives often appear to want to turn the clock back to the 1800s, which they regard as a mythical age of economic liberty and moral responsibility.

During the mid-1970s, Western governments using orthodox interventionist policies (based on Keynesianism and welfarism) were unable to combat ‘stagflation’ in their economies – a mixture of persistent inflation combined with high unemployment and stagnating demand. New Right thinking exerted a powerful influence in the USA and the UK where it became popularly associated

Key term

Radical

a term used to describe beliefs, ideas or attitudes that favour drastic political, economic and social change.

with President Ronald Reagan (1981–89) and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–90). The terms ‘Reaganism’ and ‘Thatcherism’ became political labels for this New Right perspective, which also proved influential in Australia and other parts of Europe.

Neoliberalism

The economic problems affecting the West in the 1970s appeared to discredit Keynesianism and helped create a more receptive environment for neoliberal thinking. Liberal New Right ideas call for:

- a minimal state
- self-reliant individuals capable of making rational decisions in their own interests
- the rejection of collectivism and
- the elimination of government intervention.

Neoliberalism, promoted by the work of economists such as Milton Friedman and Frederick von Hayek, principally champions the free-market economy. It sees the free market as the only mechanism that can meet consumer demand for goods and services efficiently and widely, maximise the use of resources, and achieve the greatest overall prosperity. Neoliberals argue that government intervention cannot solve economic problems (such as rising unemployment and inflation in the 1970s) or properly allocate resources within a developed economy. Government involvement merely causes these economic problems or makes them worse.

The liberal New Right maintains that the operation of the free market has to be protected against three main threats: monopolies, inflation and government intervention. Industrial or business monopolies, in their view, reduce economic competition, leading to distorted prices and consumer choice. Neoliberals also contend that inflation is the ‘great evil’ in the market economy because any fall in the value of money discourages economic activity and investment, and breaks the relationship between price level and demand. Overcoming inflation, they argue, is the one vital role government can play in the economy.

Friedman asserted that Keynesian policies to stimulate demand create inflation by encouraging governments to print too much money or provide too much credit. His solution, known as ‘monetarism’, is for the government to reduce inflation by controlling the money supply through cuts in public spending. Both Thatcher and Reagan pursued monetarist policies to tackle inflation in the 1980s, convinced that the market would address the problem of mounting unemployment. The overall neoliberal approach to economic policy is known as ‘supply side’ economics, to distinguish it from the Keynesian focus on demand.

The liberal New Right regards government intervention in the economy as the most potent threat to the free market. State planning, nationalisation and high taxation are all rejected on the grounds that they distort the market and contribute to, rather than alleviate, economic problems. Margaret Thatcher embarked on an extensive privatisation policy in the 1980s that transferred state-owned industries to the private sector. Thatcher’s justification was that nationalised industries were inefficient and lacked the dynamism associated with the private sector’s need to generate profits. Similar neoliberal reservations apply to state welfare provision. In this view, welfare and social programmes expand, irrespective of demand, due to the vested interests of the professionals concerned (such as doctors, teachers and administrators) and politicians (who promise increased government spending on these services in order to secure votes at election time). The end result is higher taxation, rising inflation, and increasingly inefficient and bloated state services artificially protected from free-market competition. Consequently, many neoliberals maintain that to improve

efficiency, public services and other government agencies should be exposed to the competitive forces of the market economy.

Finally, neoliberalism advocates atomistic individualism (the idea that individuals are rational, self-interested and self-sufficient) – which is clearly linked to the liberal New Right belief in free-market economics. According to the liberal New Right, the freedom of the market is the guarantee of individual freedom. Neoliberals view freedom in negative terms, stressing the need to remove external constraints or limitations on the individual. Individual freedom can only be preserved by opposing collectivism and ‘rolling back’ the state. In this context, neoliberals criticise state welfare policies for creating a dependency culture and infringing property rights by imposing high taxes on individuals to fund benefit payments, see Section 1.1. Such a system, in their view, actually institutionalises poverty and unemployment, and undermines atomistic individualism. If people no longer face government intervention and interference, they will be free to deal with each other without restrictions. These unhindered human interactions will create a ‘natural’ order vastly superior to any imposed model because it is based on everyone’s consent.

The liberal New Right concludes that, although humans may be selfish, they are rational and entitled to pursue their own interests in their own way, as long as they accept others can do the same. This approach to individualism, claim neoliberals, releases human potential and creates natural harmony through free relations between people.

Neoconservatism

The other element of the New Right, known as neoconservatism, can be seen as a mild type of authoritarianism. The development of neoconservatism (or the conservative New Right) in the USA during the 1970s was a reaction against the reforms, ideas and permissive attitudes of the so-called ‘liberal’ 1960s. For neoconservatives, these unwelcome changes threatened society with social fragmentation, which could only be stopped by strong political leadership and authority. Unlike the neoliberals, here the conservative New Right were driven primarily by political considerations.

Nevertheless, both components of the New Right agree on the necessity of reducing the state’s role in the economy. The neoconservative stress on authority and the need to preserve society shows that the conservative New Right is influenced to some extent by traditional conservative notions of organicism. However, neoconservatism is much more authoritarian than one-nation conservatism, because it seeks to strengthen society by reasserting authority and social discipline, rather than through social reform and welfare measures.

Neoconservatives focus mainly on the need to uphold social order and protect public morality. The conservative New Right maintains that since the 1960s authority and respect have declined in Western nations, leading to higher crime figures and increased rates of anti-social behaviour. Neoconservatives have argued for the re-imposition of authority and discipline at every level of society, to restore the authority of traditional social structures such as the family with its ‘natural’ internal relationships based on hierarchy and patriarchy. In addition, the conservative New Right promotes the ‘strong state’ or state authoritarianism, with increased police powers and harsher punishments, to tackle crime and public disorder. Both Thatcher and Reagan adopted a tough stance on law and order in the 1980s, believing that prison sentences had to provide ‘hard lessons’ for those convicted of offences.

The neoconservatives reject permissiveness, which is the belief that people should make their own moral choices, suggesting there is no objective right and wrong. This **anti-permissiveness** and concern with public morality also stem from the emergence of a ‘free-for-all’ or ‘anything

Key term

Anti-permissiveness

a rejection of permissiveness, which is the belief that people should make their own moral choices.

goes' culture in some Western countries during the 1960s. The 'permissive society' of that era was roundly condemned by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, who advocated 'Victorian values', and organisations such as the Moral Majority in the USA that campaigned for traditional values. From the conservative New Right standpoint, there are two problems if a person is free to adopt their own moral code or lifestyle.

- The individual concerned may opt for an 'immoral' lifestyle – particularly unacceptable to religious elements within the neoconservative ranks in the USA.
- People should not be free to choose different moral positions because this prevents the development of common moral standards, undermining social cohesion. For similar reasons, the conservative New Right is critical of multiculturalism which, in their view, threatens social and national unity by dividing society along ethnic, racial and religious lines.

1.3 Conservative thinkers and ideas

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Key ideas

- An ordered society should balance the human need to lead a free life.
- Humans are needy, vulnerable and easily led astray in attempts to understand the world around them.

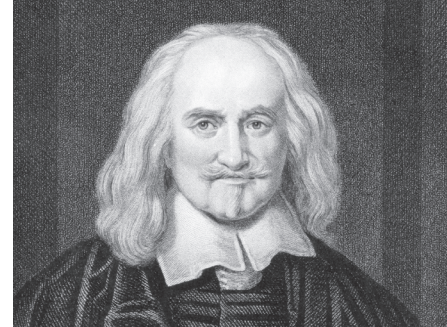
Thomas Hobbes, arguably the most celebrated English political philosopher, made important contributions to conservative thought. In his most famous work, *Leviathan* (1651), he argued for almost total obedience to absolute government, as the only alternative was chaos.

According to Hobbes, freedom without order and authority would have disastrous consequences for human society. He created a hypothetical situation known as the ‘state of nature’ where people were equal and free, and did not have to answer to any form of higher authority. Hobbes argued that, under such circumstances, humans would exhibit a ‘restless desire’ for power, leading to conflict and turning the state of nature into a ‘war of every man against every man’. In his view, the state of nature would become a state of war and life would become ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. Fearful, self-interested and rational people would choose to sacrifice many of their rights and freedoms in return for order and security. They would enter into a social contract to establish political authority, surrendering all but one of their natural rights (the right to self-defence) to the individual or group to whom they grant authority. In this way, Hobbes argued, government is established by the consent of the people, who authorise those in power to do everything necessary to preserve order and peace. Thus, the people jointly submit to the absolute authority of the state (what Hobbes terms ‘Leviathan’) which represents ‘a common power to keep them all in awe’.

Hobbes’ arguments about the state of nature and the need for political authority are clearly shaped by his views on human nature:

- **Humans are needy and vulnerable** People will compete violently to get the basic necessities of life and other material gains, will challenge others and fight out of fear to ensure their personal safety, and will seek reputation, both for its own sake and so that others will be too afraid to challenge them.
- **Humans are easily led astray in their attempts to understand the world around them** The human capacity to reason is fragile, and people’s attempts to interpret the world around them tend to be distorted by self-interest and the concerns of the moment.

Unsurprisingly, Hobbes concludes that the best people hope for is a peaceful life under strong government authority to guarantee order and security. The alternative is to accept the ‘natural condition of mankind’ with its violence, insecurity and constant threats.



Thomas Hobbes: ‘How could a state be governed, or protected in its foreign relations if every individual remained free to obey or not to obey the law according to his private opinion?’

Edmund Burke (1729–97)

Key ideas

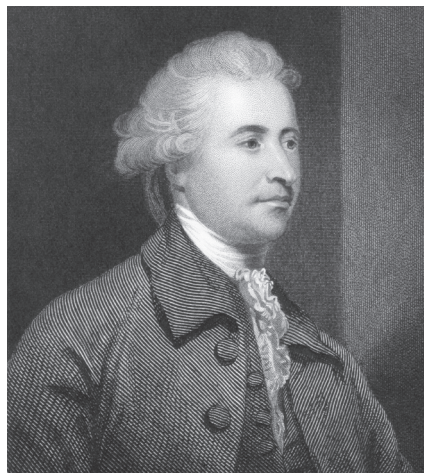
- Change has to be undertaken with great caution, mindful of the delicate balance inherent in an organic society.
- Tradition and **empiricism** should be respected because they represent practices passed down from one generation to the next.

The Irish-born politician and writer, Edmund Burke, is commonly regarded as a founder of modern conservatism. His reputation rests largely on his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in which he criticised the French Revolution and developed a number of key conservative arguments.

For Burke, the fundamental problem with the French Revolution was that it represented an attempt to create a new society and system of government based on abstract principles (such as liberty and equality) rather than the lessons of the past. Since these principles were not well established in France, he argued, such drastic changes could only end in chaos or tyranny. In Burke's view, the state resembled a living organism like a plant that may be changed when necessary through gentle 'pruning' or 'grafting' to preserve the political stability and social harmony. Reform should be limited and cautious, take account of the past, and be based on empiricism and tradition. Revolutionary change threatened to cut off society's 'roots' (such as its institutions and customs), leading to complete social and political breakdown.

Burke's endorsement of the value of tradition and **empiricism** is clearly linked to his attitude towards **organic, gradual change**. In his view, tradition and empiricism represent the accumulated and 'tested' wisdom of the past residing in society's longstanding institutions, customs and practices, and so they should be respected. As he explained: 'We procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle which Nature teaches us to revere individual men: on account of their age, and on account of those from whom they are descended.'

According to Burke, continuing respect for tradition and empiricism promotes social continuity and stability. It also establishes an obligation or duty for each generation to protect and hand on the accumulated wisdom of tradition and empiricism to their successors. Furthermore, Burke advocated respect for tradition and empiricism on the grounds that they provide society and the individual with a strong sense of historical identity, offering people a sense of being 'rooted' in, and tied to, their particular society.



Edmund Burke: 'It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having the model and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.'

Key term

Empiricism

the idea that knowledge comes from real experience and not from abstract theories.

Link

For more on **organicism**, see Section 1.1.

Michael Oakeshott (1901–90)

Key ideas

- People’s actions should be guided by pragmatism, rather than by ideology.
- Theories and ideologies oversimplify complex situations.

Michael Oakeshott, the British political philosopher, made a significant contribution to conservative thinking on human imperfection and pragmatism in works such as *Rationalism in Politics* (1962) and *On Human Conduct* (1975).

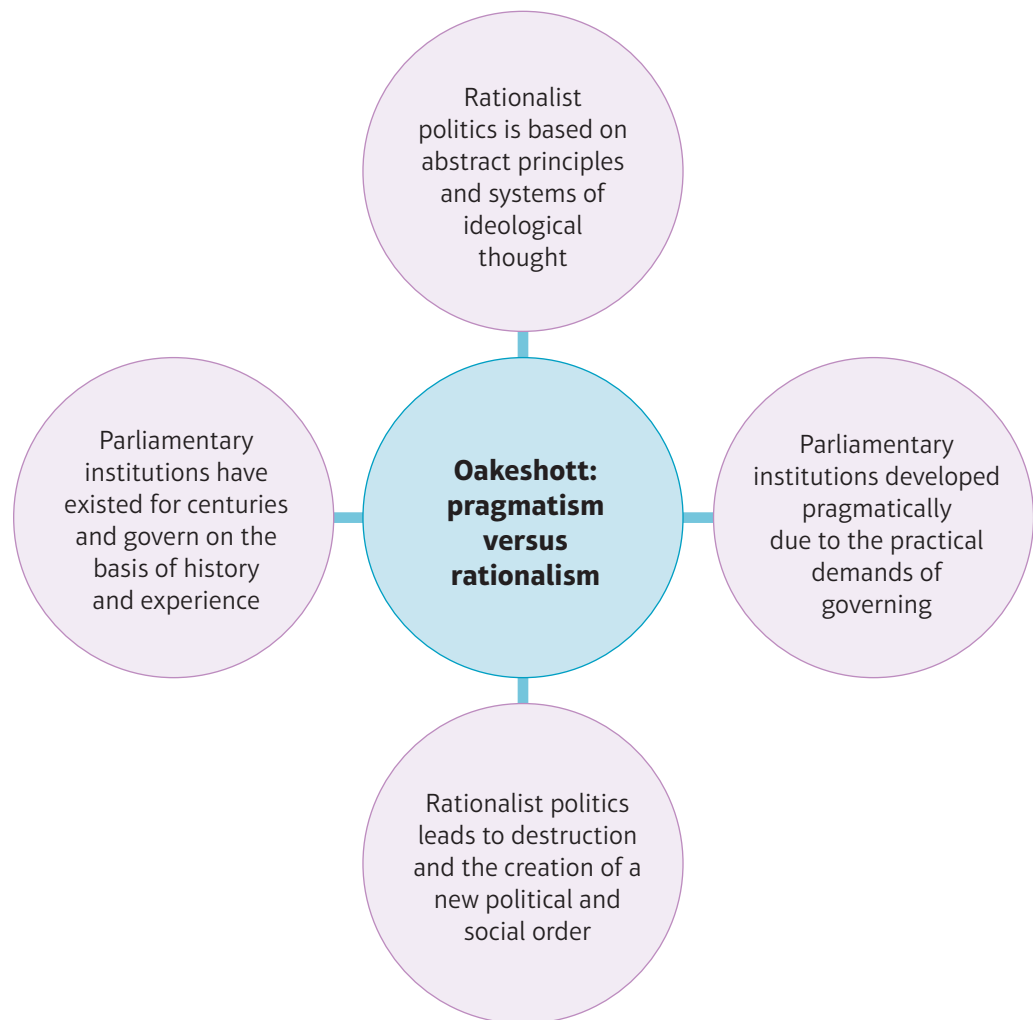
According to Oakeshott, modern society is both unpredictable and complex. Consequently, it cannot be understood in terms of abstract principles or theories. ‘Rational’ attempts to make sense of society’s behaviour inevitably distort and simplify the facts – a problem compounded by human imperfection, because people do not have the mental faculties to make sense of a complex modern world. Also, the ‘rationalist’ political leader’s impulse is to act solely on the ‘authority of his own reason’ rather than practical experience. This encourages the dangerous idea that the leader fully understands society and knows how it should be changed. Oakeshott considered that the brutal fascist and communist regimes established in the 20th century were clear examples of this misguided human rationalism in politics. He also concluded that parliamentary government in Britain had developed pragmatically over time, and had not followed a rationalist or ideological path, as shown in Figure 3.1.

Oakeshott maintained that politics can only be successfully conducted if it accommodates existing traditions, practices and prejudices. This pragmatic approach:

- can deliver what is in the best interests of the people without overstepping the limits of public acceptance
- maintains social stability and cohesion by emphasising moderation, cautious change where necessary, and a sense of historical continuity
- is flexible, reflecting complex and shifting social realities, unlike rigid theories and ideologies which encourage dogmatic decision-making.



Michael Oakeshott: ‘The office of government is not to impose other beliefs and activities upon its subjects, not to tutor or educate them, not to make them better or happier in another way, not to direct them, to galvanize them into action, to lead them or co-ordinate their activities... the office of government is merely to rule.’



Ayn Rand (1905–82)

Key ideas

- People should pursue their own happiness as their highest moral aim.
- People should work hard to achieve a life of purpose and productiveness.

The rise of fascism and communism in the 20th century led many thinkers in the West to reconsider the role of the state in the lives of individuals. The Russian-born American philosopher, novelist and conservative, Ayn Rand (1905–82), was one of them. Rand's response was objectivism, a libertarian philosophical system that advocates the virtues of rational self-interest and maintains that individual freedom supports a pure, **laissez-faire** capitalist economy. These ideas were publicised chiefly through Rand's novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

Objectivism was Rand's most important contribution to political thought. She claimed that it offered a set of principles covering all aspects of human life, including politics, economics, culture and human relationships. In her view, reason provided the fundamental basis of human life and this led her to endorse a form of ethical individualism that claimed that the rational pursuit of self-interest was morally right. Rand's justification for this position, which she called 'the virtue of selfishness', is shown Figure 3.2.

Any attempt, said Rand, to control or regulate an individual's actions corrupted the capacity of that person to work freely as a productive member of society, mainly by undermining his or her practical use of reason. For example, she rejected government welfare and wealth redistribution programmes because the state, in her view, relies on the implicit threat of force, to ensure that people contribute to such schemes through taxation. Rand referred to this opposition to external coercion of the individual as the 'nonaggression principle'. Rand also condemned all forms of personal altruism (the idea that an individual should put the well-being of others first) because such acts created an 'artificial' sense of obligation and expectation, and did not accord with an individual's rational self-interest.

A self-proclaimed 'radical for capitalism', Rand argued that the unrestricted expression of human rationality was entirely compatible with the free market. She called for 'a full, pure, uncontrolled, unregulated laissez-faire' economy, maintaining that this was morally superior to the rest because it fully respects the individual's pursuit of rational self-interest and is fully consistent with the nonaggression principle. Under such economic arrangements, free individuals can use their time, money, and other resources as they see fit, and can interact and trade voluntarily with others to their mutual advantage. For these reasons, she concluded, libertarian conservatives 'must fight for capitalism, not as a practical issue, not as an economic issue, but, with the most righteous pride, as a moral issue'.



Ayn Rand: 'The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.'

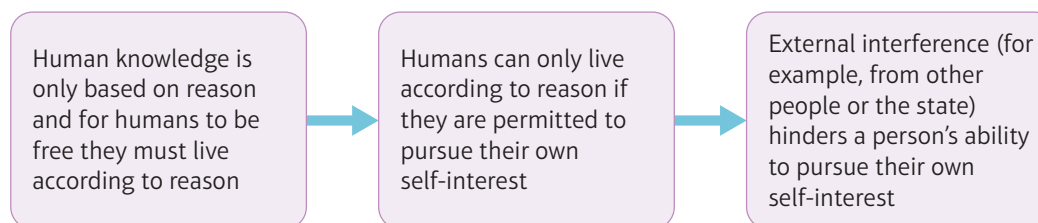


Figure 3.2: Rand's 'virtue of selfishness'

Key term

Laissez-faire
minimal government intervention in business and the state by the government.

Robert Nozick (1938–2002)

Key ideas

- Individuals in society cannot be treated as a thing, or used against their will as a resource.
- Individuals own their bodies, talents, abilities and labour.

Robert Nozick, the US philosopher and right-wing libertarian, was one of the most important intellectual figures in the development of the New Right. In his major work *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), Nozick argued for a rights-based libertarian system and a minimal state.



Robert Nozick: 'Individuals have rights and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights).'

Nozick's libertarianism was partly based on Kant's moral principle that humans should be treated 'always as an end and never as a means only'. By this, Kant meant that since humans are rational, self-aware beings with free will, they should not be treated as mere things, or used against their will as resources. The assumption that individuals are inviolable ends-in-themselves, Nozick argued, gives them rights to their lives, liberty and the rewards resulting from their labour. According to Nozick, these rights act as 'side-constraints' on the actions of others by setting limits on how a person may be treated. For example, an individual cannot be forced against his or her will to work for another person's purposes (even if those purposes are good).

From this, Nozick reached the radical conclusion that the taxes levied to fund state welfare programmes are immoral because:

- they amount to a type of forced labour imposed on the individual by the state
- they treat individuals as a means or resource to further the goals of equality and social justice and, in so doing, violate the principle that humans should be seen as better ends in themselves.

The only type of state that can be morally justified is a minimal or 'night-watchman' state with powers limited to those necessary to protect people against violence, theft, and fraud.

Nozick also used the concept of self-ownership to support this right-wing libertarian position. Dating back at least to the liberal political philosopher John **Locke** (1632–1704), self-ownership is based on the idea that individuals own themselves – their bodies, talents, abilities and labour, and the rewards or products created by their talents, abilities and labour. Nozick maintained that self-ownership gives the individual the right to determine what can be done with the 'possession'. Self-ownership gives a person rights to the various elements that make up one's self. For these reasons, Nozick asserted, self-ownership also opposes taxation to fund welfare programmes and supports the minimal state. Viewed from this perspective, such taxation is a form of slavery: in effect, the state gives others an entitlement (in the form of welfare benefits) to part of the rewards of an individual's labour. Citizens entitled to benefits become partial owners of the individual since they have partial property rights over his or her labour. In this way, Nozick argued, the principle of self-ownership is undermined. Similarly, anything more extensive than the minimal state also compromises self-ownership. For example, a state that regulates what people eat, drink, or smoke interferes with their right to use their self-owned bodies as they want.

Link

For more on **Locke**, see Section 2.3 of Democracy and Participation.

Assessment support: 1.2.1 Conservatism

Question 3 on A-Level Paper 1 gives you a choice of two 24-mark questions. Pick the question you feel most confident about and complete your answer in approximately 30 minutes.

To what extent do different conservatives agree on the importance of paternalism? [24 marks]

You must use appropriate thinkers you have studied to support your answer.

These questions require an essay-style answer. They test all three Assessment Objectives, with 8 marks available for each. The highest level (20 to 24 marks) requires in-depth knowledge and understanding, supporting strong skills of analysis and evaluation. The mark scheme stresses that you must also offer a focused and justified conclusion: in this case, on the extent to which different conservatives agree on the importance of paternalism.

- Begin with a brief introduction in which you outline your argument. You need to set out a minimum of two key points on each side (in agreement and disagreement) of the question, to develop later.
- Typically, you will write four main paragraphs – one for each major point – and round off with a conclusion.
- You are asked to review and make a substantiated judgement about the extent of conservative agreement on the importance of paternalism. Begin with the ‘agree’ arguments, but you must then provide balance by dealing with the ‘disagree’ arguments. Each argument should be supported with accurate and relevant evidence, such as key thinkers and policies.
- In your conclusion, review the balance between the two sides, then reach a substantiated judgement. Your conclusion should not contain new factual material. Your judgement should emerge naturally from the way in which you have constructed your argument.

Here is an example of a main ‘disagree’ paragraph from a student’s answer.

Although traditional and one-nation conservatives agree on the importance of paternalism, the neoliberal wing of the New Right completely rejects the concept, viewing it as counterproductive. For instance, neoliberals raise two moral objections to state welfare programmes, a key feature of one-nation conservative paternalism. First, in their view, such welfare provision creates a ‘dependency culture’ rather than a safety net by stripping individuals of their self-respect, dignity, drive and sense of personal responsibility. In 1944, Friedrich Hayek maintained that such dependency on the state would create a ‘new serfdom’. By the 1980s, US and British neoliberals were claiming that extensive reliance on state benefits was eroding parental financial responsibility for children (undermining the institution of the family in the process), draining the motivation to create wealth and promoting the growth of an underclass. Second, neoliberals such as Robert Nozick oppose the paternalistic assumptions underpinning state welfare by defending individual rights. Nozick claims that welfare and redistribution programmes undermine property rights because legally acquired property (including income) cannot be transferred from one person to another without consent. So from a neoliberal perspective, tax revenues taken from income earners to finance welfare measures represent a form of legalised ‘state robbery’. Neoliberals therefore sharply disagree with traditional and one-nation conservatives about the importance of paternalism.

This ‘disagree’ paragraph is effective for the following reasons.

- It is precisely focused on answering the question set.
- It clearly explains why neoliberals reject one-nation conservative paternalism in the form of state welfare.
- The student includes relevant own knowledge to add depth to the analysis – for example, references to Hayek’s ‘new serfdom’ and neoliberal concerns in the 1980s about the growth of a dependent underclass.
- It incorporates relevant information about a thinker (Robert Nozick) to develop and support the argument that neoliberals disagree with other conservatives over the importance of paternalism.

Liberalism

Liberalism has been one of the most widespread political ideologies of the last two centuries. It has influenced most mainstream political parties in the UK and other Western countries. Ideas such as the protection of civil liberties, freedom of choice and equal opportunities are broadly supported across the political spectrum in democratic societies.

This chapter covers:

- the key concepts and values of liberalism
- the various ways in which different types of liberal – older, ‘classical’ liberals and their modern successors – have interpreted these ideas
- the contributions of a number of leading liberal thinkers.

2.1 Core ideas and principles

Liberalism emerged in reaction to the rule of monarchies and aristocratic privilege in the early modern world. It reflected the views of the educated middle classes, who sought wider civil liberties and opportunities to better themselves. Liberalism was part of the Enlightenment, an 18th-century intellectual movement that rejected traditional social, political and religious ideas, and stressed the power of reason and the importance of tolerance and freedom from tyranny. Thinkers who were influenced by this movement believed in abolishing traditional restrictions on the freedom of the individual, whether these were imposed by government or the church. They held that people are born with different potential, but all are equal in rights (though at the time most definitions of this excluded women and ethnic minorities). People should be free to take their own decisions and to make the most of their talents and opportunities.

The classic statement of this outlook was the United States Declaration of Independence (1776), primarily written by the future President, Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration states that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’



The signing of the Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776. Representatives of the former royal colonies in North America stated their intention to govern themselves, rather than continue under British rule.

Individualism

Liberals stress the importance of the individual over the claims of any social group or collective body. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the German Enlightenment thinker, argued that all individuals are unique and have equal worth; they should always be used as ‘ends’ and never merely as ‘means’. In other words, people should not be treated as instruments to achieve a particular goal, but should be regarded as possessing their own intrinsic value. He described this as a ‘categorical imperative’: an absolute moral requirement to perform an action for its own sake, rather than for any gain.

Individualism can be interpreted in two different ways. Classical liberals believe in ‘egoistical individualism’: the view that people are essentially self-seeking and self-reliant. This view minimises the importance of society, seeing it as little more than a collection of independent individuals. More widely held in the modern world is a version known as ‘**developmental individualism**’: the view that individual freedom is linked to the desire to create a society in which each person can grow and flourish. This concept plays down the pursuit of self-interest, and has been used to justify support for some state intervention in society to help the disadvantaged.

Another idea linked to the importance of the individual is **tolerance**: a willingness to respect values, customs and beliefs with which one disagrees. This is one of the natural rights that liberals believe everyone should have, which should not be taken away against the will of the individual. Originally this referred primarily to tolerance of different religious beliefs, but today it has been extended to a wide range of views and practices. For example, liberals tend to take a relaxed view of sexual matters, supporting measures to put same-sex relationships on the same legal footing as heterosexual relationships, because these are private lifestyle choices.

Pause & reflect

‘A liberal is a person who prioritises the rights of the individual, and would only restrict these rights if someone holds beliefs or acts in a way that endangers others.’

Is this a good working definition of a liberal?

Link

For more on **individualism**, see Section 2.2.

Key terms

Developmental individualism

the idea that individual freedom is linked to human flourishing.

Tolerance

a willingness to accept values, customs and beliefs with which one disagrees.

Freedom or liberty

Freedom is the most important of all liberal values.

Early liberals objected to the way in which authoritarian governments claimed a right to take decisions on behalf of people and attempted to regulate their behaviour. However, they and their successors did recognise that freedom can never be absolute but must be exercised under the law, in order to protect people from interfering with each other’s rights. This is why the early liberal thinker John Locke (1632–1704) argued that ‘the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom... where there is no law, there is no freedom.’

The concept of liberty was central to the work of the early 19th-century school of thought known as **utilitarianism**. Its leading thinker, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), maintained that each individual can decide what is in his or her own interests. He argued that human actions are motivated mainly by a desire to pursue pleasure and to avoid pain. Government should not prevent people from doing what they choose unless their actions threaten others’ ability to do the same for themselves. This was a mechanistic view of human behaviour that saw people as driven by rational self-interest. When applied to society at large it produced the idea of ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’. This could mean that the interests of minorities are overridden by those of the majority.

Link

For more on **Locke**, see Section 2.3.

Link

For more on **Mill**, See Section 2.3.

Key terms

Negative freedom
freedom from interference by other people.

Positive freedom
having the capacity to act on one's free will.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73) was perhaps the most important classical liberal thinker of the 19th century. He began as a follower of Bentham, but came to see the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain as too simplistic. He put forward what became known as the idea of **negative freedom**: individuals should only be subject to external restraint when their actions potentially affect others, not when their actions affect only themselves.

From the late 19th century onwards, many liberals found Mill's concept of liberty too limited because it viewed society as little more than a collection of independent atoms. The Oxford thinker T.H. Green (1836–82) argued that society was an organic whole, in which people pursue the common good as well as their own interests. They are both individual and social in nature. From this came the concept of **positive freedom**: individuals should be able to control their own destiny, to develop personal talents and achieve self-fulfilment. Some limited state intervention was necessary to make this possible.

The state: a 'necessary evil'

There is a complex relationship between liberalism and the state. Liberals accept that the state is needed to avert disorder and to protect the vulnerable from exploitation. However, they mistrust power because they believe that human beings are essentially self-seeking, so may use any position of power to pursue their own interests, probably at the expense of others. Liberals oppose the concentration of political power, fearing that it gives people a greater incentive to benefit themselves and to use other people for their own ends. The classic statement of this was by the Victorian liberal historian Lord Acton (1834–1902): 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

Liberals therefore argue for **limited government**, with checks and balances on the exercise of power. They support the idea of constitutionalism – government in which power is distributed and limited by a system of laws – in order to prevent a concentration of power. Typical features of a liberal constitution include the separation of powers, which means that authority is shared between the three branches of government (the legislature, executive and judiciary). Linked to this is the concept of checks and balances: the branches are given some influence over each other and they act to check abuses of power, as in the United States Constitution. Liberals also favour a bill of rights, which provides a clear statement of citizens' rights and defines the relationship between citizens and the state. In the United States, the first ten amendments to the Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights.

Liberals' suspicion of the concentration of political power often leads them to support its devolution from central government to regional bodies. This occurred in the UK in the late 1990s, with the creation of the Scottish Parliament and assemblies for Wales and Northern Ireland. An alternative is federalism – a system of government like that in the USA or Germany, where a number of states form a union under a central government, while each state retains responsibility for its own internal affairs.

The liberal emphasis on a limited role for the state also has an economic dimension. Liberals of the 18th and 19th centuries believed in **laissez-faire capitalism** – the idea that competition between individuals, seeking their own profit, is beneficial for all, and that government intervention in the economy should be limited. The fullest statement of this idea was by the Scottish economist Adam Smith, one of the most prominent Enlightenment era thinkers, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith emphasised the part played by self-interest in driving economic growth, famously writing: 'It is not from the benevolence [i.e. unselfish goodwill] of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard for their own interest.'

Key term

Limited government
where the role of government is limited by checks and balances, and a separation of powers, because of the corrupting nature of power.

Link

For more on the **US Bill of Rights**, see Section 4.4 of The Supreme Court and Civil Rights.

Key term

Laissez-faire capitalism:
an economic system organised by the market, where goods are produced for exchange and profit, and wealth is privately owned.

Rationalism

At the heart of Enlightenment thinking is a belief in human reason. It holds that individuals should be free to exercise their judgement about their own interests, without needing to be guided by external authorities, such as the state or church leaders. People will not always make correct decisions, but it is better for them to take responsibility for themselves than to take instruction from above. Liberals were encouraged by the development of scientific learning in the 18th and 19th centuries, which pushed back the boundaries of human understanding and liberated people from a blind faith in established authority, tradition and superstition.

Faith in reason is linked to the idea of a progressive society, in which the personal development of the individual promotes wider social advancement.

Rationalism in action

Liberals accept that competition between individuals, groups and nations regrettably will produce conflicts, but they favour the use of reasoned debate and discussion to resolve disputes. Late 19th-century liberals were in the forefront of moves to develop methods of industrial arbitration. This meant that a neutral third party would mediate between employers and trades unions, in an effort to avert costly legal action or strikes. Similarly, in international relations, liberals view war as a last resort, which should be avoided if at all possible. In the early 20th century liberals were in the forefront of campaigns in support of the League of Nations, the forerunner of today's United Nations, which sought to bring countries together to discuss their disputes. Many liberals today support the European Union on the grounds that, by surrendering some of their national sovereignty, member states derive benefits through association with each other, such as access to a large trading area.



Statue in Edinburgh of the Enlightenment economist Adam Smith (1723–90) whose *The Wealth of Nations* argues for a self-regulating economic system, free of the distortions caused by the granting of monopolies and other privileges to different interest groups.

Equality and social justice

Liberals place emphasis on **equality of opportunity**, the idea that each person should have the same chance to rise or fall in society. Liberals accept differing outcomes because people have different abilities and potential. They should be free to reach that potential.

Traditionally liberalism is based on a belief in **foundational equality** – people are born equal. This implies a belief in formal equality: individuals should enjoy the same legal and political rights in society, ensured by **equality before the law** and equal voting rights in free and fair elections.

Socialists criticise liberalism on the grounds that it does not tackle inequality because it is closely linked to the capitalist idea of competition. Instead, socialists aim to achieve equality of outcome by using the power of the state to redistribute wealth. However, classical liberals believe that individuals with different talents should be rewarded differently. The resulting social inequality is beneficial for society because it gives people an incentive to work hard and make the most of their abilities. The good society is a **meritocracy** – one in which social position is determined by ability and effort. For example William Gladstone, the British Liberal Prime Minister, introduced competitive examinations for entry to the civil service in the 1870s, bringing to an end the practice of making appointments on the basis of aristocratic connections.

Until the 20th century liberals did not all extend the same rights to women as to men. The early feminist writer **Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759–97) argued that women were no less rational beings than men, so were entitled to the same rights to pursue a career and to own their own property when married – something the law prohibited at the time. Modern liberals support full civil rights for women and minority groups. For example, US President Barack Obama supported the right of transgender pupils to use bathrooms of their choice at school.

Key terms

Equality of opportunity
the idea that all individuals should have equal chances in life to rise and fall.

Foundational equality
rights that all humans have by virtue of being born, which cannot be taken away.

Key term

Meritocracy
a society organised on the basis that success is based on ability and hard work.

Link

For more about **Mary Wollstonecraft**, see Section 3.2 of Feminism.

Link 

For more about **John Rawls**, see Section 2.3.

There are different views within liberalism on equality. Most modern liberals favour some degree of state intervention to narrow social inequalities. They believe that true equality is not possible without social justice. However, they do not believe that total equality of outcome is either possible or desirable. **John Rawls** (1921–2002), author of *A Theory of Justice* (1971), is known for attempting to reconcile the concepts of liberal individualism with the prevention of excessive inequality.

Liberal democracy

Since the 19th century most liberals have supported the concept of liberal democracy.

This involves:


- free elections to give expression to the will of the people
- limitations on the power of the state, which should act as a neutral arbiter between different interests in society
- respect for civil liberties and toleration of different viewpoints.

The idea that government should be based on the consent of the people is central to liberalism and long pre-dates modern notions of democracy. Liberals argue that, without this foundation, government lacks **legitimacy**. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in his book *Leviathan* (1651) argued that the people should come together to erect a great power over them to guarantee peace and security.

The idea of a **social contract** between the people and their rulers was explained by John Locke in his book *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690). He argued that the people must freely give, and renew, their consent to be governed. They have a right of rebellion if the government breaks the contract.

Liberals support democracy on the grounds that it enables citizens to hold government to account. It also extends popular participation and performs an educational function in society – the concept of **developmental democracy**, promoting the personal development of individuals. Democracy also gives a political voice to different groups and interests. In this way it promotes consensus and underpins political stability, giving equilibrium or balance to the political system.


On the other hand, liberals have feared excessive democracy on the grounds that it may lead to the ‘tyranny of the majority’, suppressing minority rights or individual freedom, or it may create a culture of dull conformism. Mill proposed to allocate more votes to the educated (plural voting) as a way of curbing the influence of the uneducated masses. Modern liberals would not support this idea because it gives undue weight to the views of an elite. They have been generally supportive of democracy, as long as it is limited by a constitutional framework, and individual and group rights are protected. The **electoral college** system used in the USA was devised partly as a buffer against the manipulation of the masses by an unscrupulous campaigner for the post. The people do not directly choose the president; instead this is done by electors corresponding to the number of representatives each state has in Congress.

Key term **Social contract**

an unofficial agreement shared by everyone in a society in which they give up some freedom in return for security.

Link 

For more on the **US electoral college**, see Section 5.1 of US Democracy and Participation.

Pause & reflect 

How far is liberal concern about democracy motivated by fear that the masses cannot be trusted to make the ‘right’ decisions, as viewed by the educated elite? Some commentators of a liberal persuasion gave the impression that they regarded those who voted to leave the EU in Britain’s 2016 referendum in this light. They reacted in a similar way a few months later to the election of the abrasive populist, Donald Trump, as US President.

2.2 Differing views and tensions within liberalism

The two main varieties of liberalism are known as classical and modern liberalism.

Classical liberalism is the earliest form of the ideology. It is associated with the rise of industrial capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Followers of classical liberalism prized freedom above other values, and believed that freedom could best be achieved by restricting the power of government. In the late 20th century, classical liberalism was reinvented in Britain and the USA as neoliberalism. It was associated with the New Right, an important influence on the British Conservative Party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (1975–90) and her successors.

Modern liberalism emerged in the early 20th century in reaction to the growth of free-market capitalism. It did not wish to abolish capitalism and replace private ownership with state control of the economy, but its adherents did believe in regulating the market in order to counter excessive deprivation and inequality. Modern liberals do not believe that people can be truly free if simply 'left alone' by the state.

Classical and modern liberals take different approaches to two key areas: freedom and the state.

Different views of freedom

Both classical and modern liberals value freedom, but they disagree over its nature. Classical liberals believe in negative freedom, a principle often linked to the idea of freedom of choice or privacy. Freedom can be expanded most clearly by restraining state power. Classical liberals also believe in **egoistical individualism**: that society is composed of rational individuals who can make decisions in their own interest.

The logic of negative freedom leads to the rolling back of the state, to encourage individuals to take more responsibility for themselves. Self-reliance is a key virtue for classical liberals. Dependence on the state is damaging because it undermines the self-respect of the individual and saps the spirit of enterprise on which economic growth depends.

Current debates over the growth of a 'dependency culture' are linked to the ideas of classical liberalism. The idea of the dependency culture has come from the expansion of the UK welfare state since 1945, which has been associated with a loss of personal responsibility, the breakdown of the traditional family and the persistence of unemployment across generations. Neoliberals argue that social welfare should be targeted at those who really need it, and that others should be encouraged to lift themselves out of poverty through their own efforts.

Modern liberals believe that negative freedom is necessary but not sufficient for a good society. It can amount to little more than 'freedom to starve' for those facing disadvantages over which they have no control – for example, working in an occupation prone to periods of unemployment, or suffering an industrial accident. These people need assistance to live truly free and fulfilling lives.

This is why modern liberals support the idea of **positive freedom**. This defines freedom as self-mastery or self-realisation. Freedom can be expanded by qualified state intervention in the economy and society, to widen individual opportunity and liberate citizens from social evils such as poverty. Modern liberals favour developmental individualism – enabling individuals to enjoy personal growth and empowerment.

Link



For more on **neoliberalism**, see Section 1.2 and Section 1.3 of Liberalism.

Key term



Egoistical individualism
the idea that individual freedom is associated with self-interest and self-reliance.

Different views of the state

Classical and modern liberals have some common ground on the nature of the state. Both believe in the decentralisation of government and protection of civil liberties. In the 19th century, Gladstone tried to grant Home Rule or **self-government** to Ireland. In the 20th century this equated to the concept of devolution – the transfer of certain central government functions to elected bodies in the different parts of the UK. This influenced the New Labour governments of 1997–2010, which set up elected bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Liberal reforms of the constitutional framework in the same period included the Human Rights Act and Freedom of Information Act, which guaranteed certain rights for citizens.

Liberals do not revere the state. They differ from conservatives, who attach importance to the accumulated wisdom of the past and view the state as an organic entity whose component parts cannot be rearranged at will. Liberals subscribe to a **mechanistic theory** of the state – they see it as a machine created to serve the individual. Its parts are equal in worth and interchangeable.

However, there are different liberal views of the role that the state should play. Classical liberals believe that the state should merely lay down the conditions for orderly existence and leave other issues in the hands of private individuals and businesses. They support the idea of a **minimal or ‘night watchman’ state**, whose role is to maintain social order, enforce contracts and provide defence against external attack. The state should not interfere in economic and social life more than is strictly necessary, since this would risk undermining individual liberty. Its role is to maintain a stable framework for trade, uphold the value of the currency and generally create an environment within which laissez-faire capitalism can thrive.

In the 19th century, some classical liberals went further and developed what later became known as Social Darwinism. They borrowed from the naturalist Charles Darwin the concept of natural selection, which they applied to human society. They argued that, because individuals differ in their abilities, it is unavoidable that some will succeed and others will fail. Their most important figure was Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), author of the classic text *The Man and the State* (1884), who coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’. He maintained that those who do well are those who adapt most successfully to their economic environment. The logic of this position is that government should not intervene to support people through the provision of social welfare.

By contrast, modern liberals believe in an **enabling state** – a larger role for government in helping individuals to be free and to achieve their potential. They arrived at this position through a growing awareness of the inequality of late 19th-century society, which they linked to low pay, unemployment, slum housing and poor working conditions. Known in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods as ‘New Liberals’, they supported policies of welfare as the way to bring about equality of opportunity. They argued that, if individuals and groups are held back by their social circumstances, the state has a social responsibility to reduce or remove these disadvantages – known as welfare or social liberalism. It was expressed in the reforms of the Liberal governments of H.H. Asquith before the First World War, including the first old-age pensions, National Insurance and labour exchanges, the forerunner of today’s job centres.

Link

For more on **self-government**, see Section 1.3 of The Constitution.

Key terms

Minimal state

the idea that the role of the state must be restricted in order to preserve individual liberty.

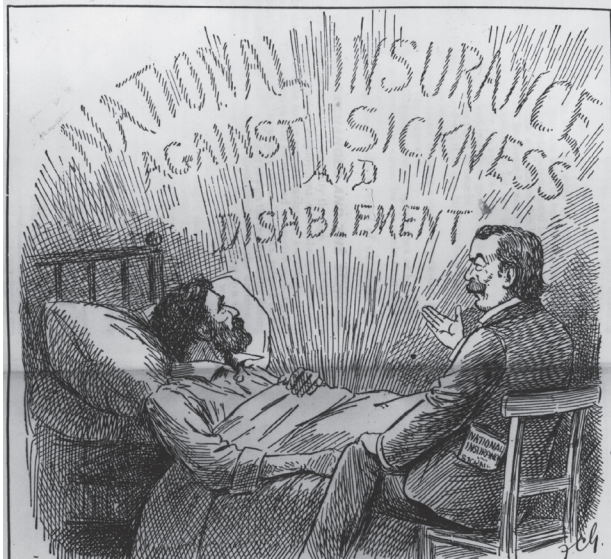
Mechanistic theory

the theory that people created the state to serve them and act in their interests.

Enabling state

a larger state that helps individuals to achieve their potential and be free.

THE DAWN OF HOPE.



Mr. LLOYD GEORGE'S National Health Insurance Bill provides for the insurance of the Worker in case of Sickness.

**Support the Liberal Government
in their policy of
SOCIAL REFORM.**

A poster advertising the social reforms introduced by David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the New Liberal government.

The Beveridge Report

These ideas were taken further in the mid-20th century by Sir William Beveridge, a leading civil servant and academic. He was the author of the influential *Beveridge Report* (1942), the foundation of the post-war British **welfare state**. He argued that liberty should be available equally to all, and this was impossible if part of the population was held back by the 'five giants': poverty, lack of education, ill health, poor living conditions and unemployment. Beveridge's report had a major influence on the post-war Labour government. Comprehensive National Insurance, the National Health Service and improved housing and education were all responses to the challenges he outlined.



A Second World War cartoon depicting Beveridge fighting the 'five giants' threatening people's well-being: Want (poverty), Ignorance (lack of education), Disease, Squalor (poor living conditions) and Idleness (unemployment).

Key term**Keynesianism**

an economic system that requires government involvement to stimulate the economy to achieve full employment and price stability.

Modern liberalism also includes economic management on the lines proposed by the economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946). Keynes argued that the image of a self-regulating free market is a myth, and that government intervention is necessary to ensure that market economies deliver sustainable growth and keep unemployment low. In particular, governments should prevent a slump by managing the level of demand in the economy so that full employment is maintained. In his best-known book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, written during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Keynes argued for a programme of public expenditure to create jobs and stimulate the economy. **Keynesianism** was most influential in the decades immediately after the Second World War, when governments became more willing to act in order to correct the failings of the market.

Is modern liberalism a contradiction or a continuation of classical liberalism?

There is a clear difference between the classical liberal fear of the state and modern liberals' willingness to use its power to promote social justice. In the 19th century, liberals were sceptical of the benefits of state intervention. Gladstone described it as 'construction', a term that to him had negative connotations. He believed that it would take responsibility out of the hands of the individual.

Nevertheless, both classical and modern liberals are concerned in their different ways with expanding the freedom of the individual. Modern liberals see the state as helping individuals to help themselves and they regard state provision of welfare and education as a means to ensure equality of opportunity.

Both types of liberal are anxious to resist the idea of an over-powerful government. They share a commitment to holding government to account, to decentralising power and to protecting the rights of the citizen. Where they differ is in the extent to which they are prepared to use the state to achieve liberal objectives.

Pause & reflect

Are the ideas of classical and modern liberals totally opposed to each other? Make a table that shows the key areas of difference between them, and the areas where they have common ground.

2.3 Liberal thinkers and ideas

This section covers the key ideas of several important liberal thinkers. There will not be questions specifically on any of these figures in the examination, and you do not need detailed biographical information on them. Nor are these the only thinkers to whom you may wish to make reference. However, you should use your knowledge and understanding of them to illustrate your answers to questions on different aspects of liberalism.

John Locke (1632–1704)

Key ideas

- Society, state and government are based on a voluntary agreement or contract.
- Government should be limited and based on consent from below.

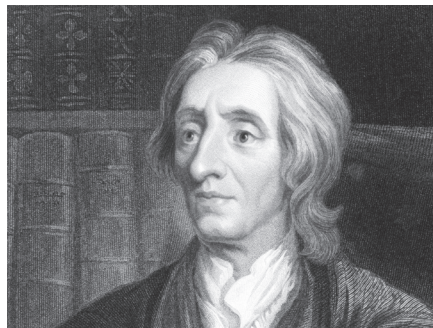
Locke was the leading philosopher of the Whig movement, the forerunner of the Liberal Party. Locke was a supporter of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, which entailed the replacement of the Catholic King James II with his Protestant son-in-law and daughter, William III and Mary II. This was an event of huge importance because it was the foundation of Britain's constitutional monarchy.

Locke's most important work was *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). He was strongly opposed to the exercise of power unrestrained by law. He argued that both the rulers and the people must be subject to law. Without this, the people would be like animals in a farmyard: kept by the farmer from harming each other, but with no guarantee that the farmer will not abuse them. This was the concept of limited government: the power of government should be limited and based on consent from below.

Locke based his philosophy on the doctrine of natural rights and natural laws. People are equal in rights and must respect each other's rights. Government derives its legitimacy from the people and should govern in accordance with natural rights. It does not have an inherent, God-given right to rule over others.

From this came the concept of the social contract: the idea that society, state and government are based on a theoretical voluntary agreement. People should accept the authority of the government as long as it fulfils its part of the contract. This means that government should protect property rights. Indeed Locke wrote that 'the great and chief end of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property'. Government should also exercise tolerance in religious matters and not interfere in the area of private conscience. If government breaks its contract with the people by abusing their natural rights, they are entitled to resist the government and, if necessary, overthrow it.

Locke's philosophy is based on reason. He argued that no rational person would submit to arbitrary rule – a form of government in which the ruler has unlimited power and is not restrained by law – because this would not be in anyone's best interests. This is the classical liberal view that the state should serve the individual. However, Locke did not believe in democracy or political equality in the modern sense. His writings are unclear on whether he believed in the equality of men and women, and he would not extend toleration to atheism. However, he emphasised the importance of civil society, and of basing authority on consent – ideas that have been central to liberalism in later centuries. These ideas make Locke perhaps the most important classical-liberal theorist of government and society.



John Locke: 'It is evident that absolute monarchy... is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all.'

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97)

Key ideas

- Women are rational, independent beings capable of reason.
- In order to be free, women should enjoy full civil liberties and the opportunity to pursue a career.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an early feminist writer, best known for her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her work represents an extension of liberalism into an area that is now taken for granted, but which in the 18th century made her ahead of her time. She believed that women were no less rational than men, and therefore entitled to the same rights.



Mary Wollstonecraft: 'The divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger.'

Wollstonecraft lived at a time when women lacked legal independence. When they married, their husbands took control of almost every aspect of their lives, including their property, and it was extremely difficult for them to pursue a career outside the home. Wollstonecraft described women as 'slaves... in a political and civil sense'. Wollstonecraft wanted women to have **formal equality**: to enjoy full civil liberties and be allowed to have a career, rather than being economically dependent on men. The key to achieving this, she argued, was education, which would enable a woman to gain self-respect and to realise her potential.

At the same time Wollstonecraft valued marriage as an institution. She herself was married to a radical intellectual, William Godwin, and died soon after giving birth to their daughter, Mary Shelley, best known as the author of *Frankenstein*. Where Wollstonecraft differed from most of her contemporaries was in her insistence that marriage must be a partnership of equals. The tyranny of the male over the female in a marital relationship must be resisted because it prevents people from being good citizens.

However, there were limits to her ambitions for women, which can be explained by the period in which she lived. She recognised that, as a result of biology, women were more likely to opt for marriage and bringing up children. She argued that this was no less virtuous than a career. Essentially she wanted women to be able to choose between these two routes. She therefore exemplifies the liberal concept of equality of opportunity, an idea that she wanted to see extended to both men and women without distinction.

Key term

Formal equality

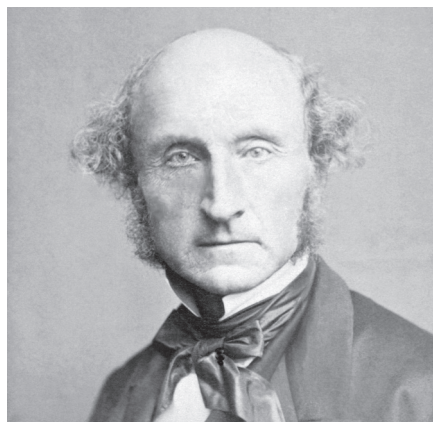
the idea that all individuals have the same legal and political rights in society.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

Key ideas

- Individuals should be free to do anything except harm other individuals.
- It is important to tolerate behaviour or ideas that are different from one's own.

John Stuart Mill was the son of a utilitarian philosopher, James Mill. He was initially influenced by his father and by the founder of the movement, Jeremy Bentham. From the utilitarian movement he derived the idea that individuals are best qualified to judge their own interests. However, he disagreed with their view that the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain was the sole motivation of human beings. He argued that the betterment of human civilisation was no less important as a goal.



John Stuart Mill: 'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.'

Mill's most important contribution to liberal thought, explained in his book *On Liberty* (1859), was the '**harm principle**', from which flowed a strictly limited view of the role of government. He made a distinction between actions that were 'self-regarding' (those that affected only the individual responsible for the action) and those that were 'other-regarding' (behaviour that did affect others). The first category would include, for example, the expression of personal beliefs. Mill believed that government had no business interfering in this kind of area. However, it was entitled to restrict behaviour that adversely affected the freedom of others, such as violent or disorderly conduct.

Later in life Mill modified his limited view of the role of government. He accepted that some degree of state intervention was justified to prevent the poor from enduring injustice. He believed that income should be taxed at a single rate (the so-called 'flat tax'), but he was in favour of inheritance tax, because the transmission of wealth across the generations gave some individuals an advantage over others. In this sense he represents a bridge between classical and modern liberalism.

Mill also upheld the idea of tolerance and the right of people to express a minority view. He believed that just because an opinion was widely held across society, that did not necessarily make it correct. For example, he spent a night in jail for trying to advise the poor on contraception, which in Victorian England was seen as a taboo subject. His private life was unconventional, especially by the standards of his time; he lived for 21 years with the love of his life, Harriet Taylor, and her first husband, marrying her after the latter died. Mill believed in the complete equality of men and women, which was unusual even among radical liberals in his time, and during his brief period as a Liberal MP (1865–68) he unsuccessfully championed votes for women.

Key term

Harm principle
the idea that individuals should be free to do anything except harm other individuals.

John Rawls (1921–2002)

Key ideas

- Society must be just and guarantee each citizen a life worth living.
- A fair society is one in which the difference in outcomes for the richest and the poorest is kept to a minimum.

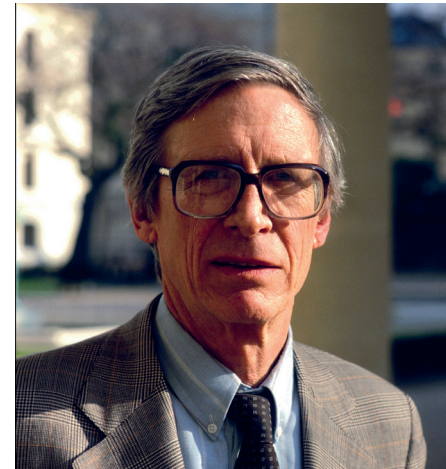
Rawls was an American academic whose best-known work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), attempts to reconcile individual freedom with the avoidance of excessive inequality in society. He rejected utilitarianism because it did not take account of the range of desires and goals pursued by individual people, and some would find their interests ignored. Rawls' starting point was that everyone has an equal entitlement to certain basic rights and liberties. However, it is also important to create a society in which there is economic justice. His ideas are intellectually linked to the social contract, as developed by Locke and other liberal thinkers.

Rawls accepted that there would always be a degree of inequality, but said that a just society should aim to minimise the difference between the outcomes for the best off and the poorest. He envisaged what he called the 'original position' – a hypothetical state of affairs before human society had been formed. People would have to decide on a basis for society that was fair to all, devising it behind a 'veil of ignorance' so it would not be skewed by knowledge of their own class, gender, race, talents or other characteristics. They would not be certain about how successful they would be, so they would need to adopt a low-risk strategy so that if they found themselves at the bottom of society, they would not suffer unduly.

In these circumstances, Rawls argued, people would agree on the importance of equal rights including freedom of speech and the right of assembly. They would also want an accepted minimum standard of living. This 'difference principle' would allow people to enjoy as much freedom as possible, provided that it was not exercised at the expense of others. There would be inequality in such a society, but it would be tolerated only if it did not make those at the bottom worse off.

Rawls rejected the two extremes of communism and unregulated capitalism, instead favouring a 'property-owning democracy', in which ownership is widely distributed and the poorest members of society can be economically independent.

In *Political Liberalism* (1993), Rawls modified his original theory because he realised that, in a pluralist society, not everyone would agree with his model. He therefore envisaged a range of liberal principles, with his two principles of equal rights and economic justice forming just one of a number of options. It would be enough for there to be what he termed an 'overlapping consensus', as opposed to unanimous agreement on the principles of a just society.



John Rawls: 'It may be expedient but it is not just that some should have less in order that others should prosper.'

Betty Friedan (1921–2006)

Key ideas

- Women are as capable as men and oppressive laws and social views must be rejected.
- Women are held back from fulfilling their potential by unfair ideas about the kind of employment they can take up.

Betty Friedan was an American liberal feminist whose most important work was *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. She also helped to found the National Organisation for Women (NOW), which became the largest women's rights organisation in the world. Its aim was to bring women fully into the mainstream of society alongside men and to secure the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws by the federal government.

Friedan's starting point was a belief that conditioning rather than biology led women to become wives and homemakers, rather than seeking to pursue a career. This path was set early, with the family and school, and was reinforced by social, cultural and religious influences. Friedan argued for wider opportunities for women, and for a change of attitudes in favour of greater equality between the sexes. She maintained that, for many women, being confined to a domestic role led to a lack of fulfilment and to deep unhappiness.

Friedan was a liberal because she wanted to make reforms within the existing structure of society, rather than fundamentally transforming it. She accepted that many women do have a deep desire to be wives and mothers, and this was no less valid than following a career. All she wanted was for women to be able to choose between the two. In many ways her work represents a continuation of that of Mary Wollstonecraft; the fact that she was making her case almost two centuries later shows the limited progress made by the feminist movement in the intervening period. Like Wollstonecraft, Friedan's philosophy was grounded in a liberal belief that individuals are of equal worth and therefore are entitled to equal rights. Her main concern was with the creation of a level playing field to enable women to compete equally with men, and not be restricted to a narrow range of what were considered 'acceptable' occupations.



Betty Friedan: 'A girl should not expect special privileges because of her sex but neither should she adjust to prejudice and discrimination.'

Pause & reflect



Can you trace common themes in the work of the five thinkers you have studied? List any areas of agreement, and try to find ways in which the later thinkers have developed ideas in which their predecessors were interested. In particular, look out for common ground on key areas such as:

- freedom of the individual
- equality and rights
- the role of the state.

Assessment support: 1.2.2 Liberalism

Question 3 on A-Level Paper 1 gives you a choice of two 24-mark questions, to be completed in essay form in 30 minutes. This means that one of the core political ideas (Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism) will not appear on the paper. You must ensure that you learn all three!

To what extent do classical and modern liberals agree over individual freedom? [24 marks]

You must use appropriate thinkers you have studied to support your answer.

This kind of question tests all three Assessment Objectives, with marks divided equally between them. Each question will ask about one core political idea. You will not be asked to make comparisons between different ideas – for example, you will not be comparing the liberal and socialist views of the state. Instead, you will be asked to discuss key concepts associated with just one political idea, or tensions within a single idea.

- Questions begin with ‘To what extent’, so you must consider both sides of the argument – in this case you are looking for areas where different types of liberals agree and disagree. If you cover only one side you cannot achieve higher than Level 2 (5 to 9 marks).
- It is worth writing a brief plan to help you organise your ideas and make sure that you do not omit an important feature of your argument. You do not need to write a long introduction; outline the main areas that you will be covering and get started. Aim to write a minimum of three paragraphs, followed by a conclusion in which you draw the threads of the argument together, reflecting both sides presented in the question.
- You should use the ideas of some of the key thinkers from the specification to illustrate your answer, integrating this material into the answer rather than presenting it in a free-standing way. The mark scheme makes it clear that you cannot be awarded a mark higher than Level 2 unless you do so. But you do not need to refer to all five specified thinkers in your answer.

Here is part of a student’s answer to this question.

Classical and modern liberals’ differing views of individual freedom affect their attitudes towards the role of the state. Classical liberals believe that the state is at best a necessary evil and should therefore fulfil only a minimal role. As far as possible matters should be left in the hands of individuals and businesses, in order to avoid the risk of undermining people’s independence. The classic statement of this viewpoint was made by John Stuart Mill in his book ‘On Liberty’. His ‘harm principle’ was based on the idea that the state should intervene only to protect individuals against the abuse of their own freedom by others.

By contrast, modern liberals believe in an enabling state. They argue that without some state intervention, some individuals and groups will remain disadvantaged by their social circumstances and thus not truly free. Freedom to starve is not true freedom. John Rawls, for example, argued that if people were invited to design a society that is just for all citizens, from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’, they would aim for one in which inequality is not too great. This is because, if they do not know what the outcome will be for themselves, they will want to make sure that those at the bottom do not fall below a certain minimum standard. This will give individuals the best chance of realising their potential and enjoying freedom to make decisions about their own lives.

- This is a good piece of analysis that clearly contrasts the views of classical and modern liberals. The coverage of modern liberals is particularly good – the answer could have been improved by briefly explaining what classical liberals mean by a ‘minimal state’, but this is a small omission.
- The answer refers to one thinker for each of the two schools of liberal thought, giving just enough information to make their contribution to the debate clear.