

# Conservatism

Conservatism is a political tradition that contains both constant and variable principles. A conservative in politics is one who resists the dominance of fixed political doctrines and ideologies. Conservatism prefers the status quo as long as there are no compelling reasons for radical change. When change is needed, conservatives prefer reform to radical transformation or revolution. The nature of conservative thinking depends upon the dominant political ideas of any age or situation; it is in this sense that its principles are variable. The enduring principles of most conservative movements include respect for tradition, a preference for what *is* over what might be and a tendency towards empiricism – basing future action on experience of the past – rather than fixed principles as a guide to action. Conservative views on the nature of society vary, but all conservatives support individualism, i.e. the pursuit of individual goals and fulfilment. Traditions are important to conservatives because they preserve links with the past, which provide a sense of security. Conservatives are pragmatic, not judging political action on the basis of specific principles, but on what is preferable and acceptable to the people at any given time and under those particular circumstances. Above all, conservatives believe that good social order and security are the most basic of human needs. Order is seen as more important than ideas such as freedom, rights and equality.

## Introduction

The doctrine of conservatism is perhaps one of the most difficult to pin down. This is because conservatism is, by its nature, a reactionary movement. Its character depends upon what it is reacting against at any particular time. For example, during much of the nineteenth century, conservatism appeared as an antidote to the individualist liberalism that had become dominant in the USA and Europe. By the second half of the twentieth century, conservatives were principally concerned with the progress of socialism. In both cases, the nature of the conservative reaction inevitably varied. In contrast to liberalism, conservatives stressed the collective, organic nature of society. By the 1980s, when collectivist forms of economic and social policy had become popular, conservatives such

as Margaret Thatcher were stressing the importance of individualism.

Conservatism has, however, included a number of constant and enduring principles. These provide a degree of continuity that enables us to differentiate between conservatism and other political movements. Nationalism, opposition to rigid ideology, respect for traditions and a paternalistic view of democracy are all examples of conservative constants.

We must be careful to distinguish between conservatism as a specifically political movement, and a mere state of mind. We often speak of people having conservative tastes in fashion, the arts, food and design. These are merely personal attributes and do not necessarily relate to political principles. We can, also, identify

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conservative elements in any political movement. For example, Stalinism is often described as a conservative form of communism, and Tony Blair and his close followers are characterised as conservatives within the New Labour movement. This chapter is not concerned with these two types of conservatism, but with a political tradition that has enduring political significance.

One final word of caution: the British Conservative Party is not the same thing as conservatism in general. Naturally most members of the party have been conservatives, but the party has experienced many changes in character and has contained many individuals whose views have been considered un-conservative in nature. Conservatism is an international phenomenon with varying characteristics in different parts of the world. For example, US conservatism tends to have a strong religious element, French conservatives are intensely nationalist, while British conservatives have often been liberal in their outlook. We are therefore justified in considering national variations in conservatism, and should beware of identifying the tradition too closely with particular parties.

### The origins of conservatism

The basic nature of conservatism depends upon its reaction to other ideologies. Its origins can therefore be identified in the origins of ideology itself. This approach places the dawning of conservatism, as we understand it today, in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Before that, there were no true ideological movements for it to react against.

The period roughly corresponding to the eighteenth century is now known as the 'Age of Reason' or the 'Enlightenment'. It was an age when many previously held certainties were being challenged by new rational modes of thought. The Enlightenment spread through virtually all aspects of human existence: not only religion, ethics and politics were affected, but also the physical sciences, mathematics, the arts and

architecture. Names that are familiar to us today were part of this dramatic new age – Isaac Newton (1642–1727) in science, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91) in music, Robert Adam (1728–92) in architecture and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in philosophy.

In terms of the development of conservatism, however, developments in philosophy, ideology, religion and politics are the most significant. It is useful to consider the ways in which new thinking affected these four fields.

### Philosophy

As early as the seventeenth century, René Descartes (1596–1650) proposed that man was capable of rational thought – and indeed was capable of leading a life based on reason. It had previously been taken for granted that man was driven by his physical appetites and emotions. Descartes' proposition had a profound influence on political and religious thought, both of which had been based on the pre-Cartesian view of man. Thinkers such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau converted these rationalistic ideas into political principles, structures and aspirations.

### Ideology

Several prominent ideologies owe their conception to Enlightenment thinking. Liberalism and socialism, in particular, were the products of the belief that society and politics could be ordered in a rational way so as to produce predictable and desirable outcomes. Marxism, anarchism and even early feminism can be included among those ideologies that were made possible by rationalism.

### Religion

Roman Catholicism had dominated religious thought in Europe for many centuries before the Enlightenment. Leaving aside purely spiritual matters, Roman Catholic Christianity incorporated ideas such as obedience, divine authority, hierarchy and, perhaps above all, the fundamental belief that humankind

carried the burden of original sin. This last principle was to become a key aspect of conservative thought in the nineteenth century. Original sin proposes a pessimistic view of human nature, suggesting that each of us is born with a flawed personality and is incapable of throwing this off completely, however well we try to lead our lives.

Rationalism rejected this notion and asserted that human beings are able to order their lives on a moral, rational basis. Enlightenment thought also challenged the traditional, purely spiritual authority of the Roman Catholic Church in general. It opened the door to radical ideas such as free will and individualism and a generally more optimistic view of human nature. The new religious movements that emerged in the sixteenth century became known collectively as 'Protestantism'. To some extent, Protestantism can be seen as a rational form of Christianity. It was strongly linked to liberalism and capitalism, which were both born out of Enlightenment thought. By the eighteenth century, the Protestant creed in various forms had become dominant in northern Europe, significantly in those areas where the Industrial Revolution was also dawning.

In discarding the previously unquestioned ideas that human society naturally falls into an ordered hierarchy and that the traditional authority of monarch and church should be obeyed in all circumstances, political thought and spiritual life were liberated.

### Politics

The practical application of the new philosophies and religious thinking arrived in two main stages. The first was the challenge to the traditional or divine authority of absolute monarchy. This occurred as early as the 1640s with the English Civil War, but achieved more permanent forms in the French and American revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. The second stage was the creation of representative forms of government to replace monarchical authority.

Principles such as government by consent, constitutional government, individual rights and, eventually, universal suffrage naturally followed.

### Reaction

So radical was the nature of Enlightenment thinking that it was almost inevitable there would be a reaction. It was the representatives of the social class whose power was threatened by the new order – the aristocracy and landed gentry – who led the way. They owed their economic and political power to the Church and monarchy. When these institutions were threatened, so too was their social dominance.

The conservative reaction, however, was not only self-interested and defensive. As we shall see below, there were principled and pragmatic objections to the new philosophies. It was these empirical and moral objections that created modern conservatism.

### Class and conservatism

As is shown above, conservatism, at least in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, was associated with class interest. As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace and the economic power of the new capitalist middle classes grew, the landed classes found their position increasingly threatened. Conservatives therefore found themselves in the position of 'conserving' the interests of a particular class. As it became clear that this was merely a cynical exercise in self-interest, conservatives had to develop a more rigorous and justifiable theory of class. Furthermore, the power of the aristocratic ruling class needed more justification than mere tradition. It was the great Tory prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81), who expressed this most successfully, developing a quasi-political theory of class known as 'neo-feudalism'. Since the original feudal system had maintained an ordered society for centuries, it was therefore logical that a modern structured class system could continue to maintain that sense of order.

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### Key Terms

#### Tory and Toryism

The expression 'Tory' originated in Ireland. It was a term of abuse for a certain type of travelling vagabond or criminal. The early Whigs in England in the late seventeenth century adopted it to describe the royalists, their political opponents. It came into common usage in the nineteenth century as a description of conservatives in general and thus began to lose most of its negative implications.

Today, 'Tory' can have three meanings. First, it is often used, especially by journalists, to refer to any member of the Conservative Party. Second, it can have negative connotations when used by those from the political left. In this sense it suggests a politician who is excessively right wing and out of touch. Third, it can refer to a traditional conservative, as opposed to a modern neo-liberal or neo-conservative. The term 'Toryism' describes the brand of conservatism a traditional conservative would adhere to: one-nationism, inclusiveness, consensus politics and pragmatism.

Disraeli observed that by the 1860s it had become clear that contemporary societies were divided into three great classes. The working class consisted mainly of producers. They could not be expected to exercise power directly, although certainly their interests had to be expressed and represented. The capitalist and commercial classes were the main wealth creators. They could not be entrusted with power since they were self-interested and could not be relied upon to consider the national interest. The landed and aristocrat class was a special case. It enjoyed great privileges and always had done. However, its position now had to be justified; it could not rule simply because it had always done so. It had to accept responsibilities if it were to enjoy privileges. The principle that responsibility comes with power became known as *noblesse oblige*.

Despite this analysis, Disraeli insisted that the traditional ruling class still had a key role to play

in politics. Traditional conservatives continued to support this view right up to the 1960s. The great 'father' of English conservatism, Edmund Burke (1729–97), argued that the power of the ruling class could be justified on a number of grounds:

- The traditional ruling class enjoyed great wealth and had no pressing need to toil for a living, so therefore it could govern the country in a disinterested way. The middle and working classes would govern in a self-interested way since they had so much to gain or lose.
- Having governed the country for centuries, the landed class of gentry and aristocracy had accumulated the wisdom of the past. In other words, the ability to govern well was passed down from one generation to the next, each generation learning from the past and adding something to it.
- In a spiritual way, the ruling class was seen by conservatives as superior to all others. Its wisdom would enable it to understand best how to preserve and increase the welfare of the people. This notion came to be described – often by its opponents – as the exercise of paternalism.

For a century after Disraeli, conservatism continued to cling on to ruling-class philosophy, gradually accepting popular democracy and that the authority to govern had to be earned by election.

Class, however, remained an important issue. Conservative movements throughout Europe and the USA became vehicles for the demands of any class with a vested interest in the status quo, or at least with a reason to oppose the new ideologies. Thus, farming groups, especially the small peasant class on both sides of the Atlantic, have tended to be conservative, as have small business owners in general. In Britain, the middle classes have traditionally been conservative, especially those engaged in private enterprise. They hold an interest in the maintenance of order and oppose any ideological change, such as

socialism, which would threaten their position in society and politics.

The main practical way in which the conservative attachment to the middle classes in the twentieth century manifested itself was in the movement's support for free-market capitalism. While socialists were arguing for increased state involvement in redistributing income from rich to poor, and liberals supported state welfare provision, conservatives usually opposed excessive state activity. This of course suited the middle-class preference for lower taxation and the free operation of capitalism.

By the 1970s, it was clear throughout the more prosperous Western countries that class divisions were breaking down. People had become less concerned with collective class interests and more interested in their own individual progression. This posed a problem for conservatism since it had always presented itself as a class-based movement. It was, therefore, at this time that New Right conservatism emerged as a new philosophy of individualism, led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The close relationship between conservatism and class had finally ended.

### Conservatism and ideology

As we have seen above, conservatism would probably not need to exist if political ideologies did not exist. Ideologies, by their nature, propose social change. Conservatives are fundamentally opposed to such change when it has not arisen out of natural forces. When change is created by political action motivated by ideological beliefs, conservatives become suspicious and usually hostile towards it.

In opposing ideological change, conservatism has changed its own character in order to provide an effective opposition. The following examples illustrate this:

**1** The arrival of liberalism in the nineteenth century gave rise to the protection of individual liberty, human rights, representative democracy and minimal

interference by government in the economy or welfare issues. Conservatives responded by stressing the importance of social unity and the need for welfare to combat the divisive effects of free-market individualism. In Britain, this was promoted by Disraeli and became known as 'one-nation conservatism'.

- 2** With the emergence of socialism as the main opponent of liberalism in the twentieth century, conservatives changed their philosophy. They sought alternatives to the collectivist and egalitarian aspirations of the socialists and thus became the champions of private enterprise and individualism. Excessive action by the state was regarded suspiciously and usually opposed.
- 3** When fascism began to spread between the world wars, conservatives were at first at a loss as to how to react. This was compounded by the fact that fascism tended to appeal to the same groups in society as conservatism – peasants, small business owners and elements of the disaffected, anti-socialist working class. Once the true nature of fascism was revealed, however, conservatives such as Winston Churchill (1874–1965) began to stress the importance of individual liberty, democracy and firm limits to the activities of the state. In other words, they became more liberal in character.
- 4** More recently, progressive liberalism has come to the fore. This philosophy supports individual liberty, moral and social diversity and some mild redistribution of income and wealth from rich to poor. In the USA, however, conservatism has developed a more authoritarian position on morality and law-and-order issues in reaction to this permissive philosophy. In many cases, the quest for a more moral society and the restoration of traditional values has given rise to a religious element in conservatism.

Conservatism has often been described as chameleon-like in that it changes its characteristics as its political environment

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changes. Its objection to ideology and ideological change, however, runs deeper than this, and is further examined later in this chapter.

### Core values of conservatism

Conservatism, then, altered its character in the face of two kinds of challenge – that of supporting the dominant social class in any particular age and that of responding to the emergence of new, popular ideologies. This has resulted in considerable variation in the nature of the philosophy. However, conservatism does have enduring values and these are discussed below.

### Human nature

Perhaps the most fundamental value of conservatism is its belief about basic human nature. This is more pessimistic in attitude than that of most other ideologies, notably liberalism and socialism. It is demonstrated by the following examples:

- The deepest conservatives take the Roman Catholic view that humankind is born with original sin and must therefore remain severely flawed in character. However much individuals try, they will be unable to achieve perfection. Ideologies such as socialism and anarchism have argued that individuals can be moulded by a just society into more perfect creatures. Not so, say such conservatives, who regard these ideologies as impractical and utopian. The religious nature of modern US conservatism has seen a restoration of this fundamentalist view.
- Individuals are not driven by reason, as Enlightenment thinkers had asserted, but by basic appetites. These include the desire for physical prosperity, for property, for power and to avoid deprivation. The implication is that individuals cannot generally be trusted with government since they will simply use it for their own ends rather than for the welfare of the whole community.

- Human nature is not a constant, but is always changing as the nature of society itself changes. The conservative philosopher Karl Popper (1902–94), for example, criticised all ideologies on the grounds that they have been based on a fixed view of human nature. This was, for him, an error which invalidated all ideologies. Thus, there may be periods when people mostly crave freedom and the pursuit of individualism, while at other times they may be fearful and crave security and welfare.
- It is a conservative tradition to see people as, on the whole, untrustworthy, self-seeking and generally feckless. This leads to the conclusion that humankind is sorely in need of firm government. This should not be government by dictators, who may too easily rise to power since people are readily persuaded by populist figures. Rather, it should be government by benevolent rulers, who need to be firm, but who have the people's general interests at heart. As Edmund Burke observed in the eighteenth century, the relationship between government and the people should be similar to that between a parent and a child. This view is often referred to as **paternalism**.
- We are, say conservatives, basically individuals who are more concerned with our own welfare than that of the community as a whole. As Margaret Thatcher famously asserted in a 1984 television interview: 'There are individuals and there are families. There is no such thing as society.'

The conservative view of human nature has a number of implications, for example in the field of law and order. The causes of crime and disorder, conservatives believe, lie with the individual. Indeed, some have argued that criminal behaviour is the product of humankind's inherent sinfulness. This directly opposes the more liberal view that it is the result of economic and social deprivation. The practical application of these beliefs therefore involves exemplary punishment rather than social remedies.



## Key Term

### Paternalism

Paternalism is a style of politics usually associated with conservatives, though this is not necessarily always the case. The concept suggests that those who govern claim superior knowledge and judgement over those who are governed. Rulers therefore believe that they understand what is best for the people to a greater extent than the people do themselves. A paternalist may well oppose democracy on the grounds that people will make poor judgements compared with their political masters. The paternalist model derives from the relationship between a parent and a child. This means that it can have positive implications, in that a paternalistic ruler would normally have the best interests of the people at heart, just as parents care for their children. Although mid-nineteenth-century conservatives, such as Peel and Disraeli, adopted a paternalistic approach to politics, in modern political life it has mostly been rejected in favour of popular democracy, whereby the people have a major input into the decisions that affect them.

A further consequence of this conservative philosophy concerns the nature of government. If there is an excess of popular democracy, the country is likely to be poorly governed. As long ago as the 1870s, Disraeli advocated that conservatives accept the need for universal suffrage, but this did not imply that people could be completely trusted with government. The conservative view of representation is that governments should not slavishly follow the fluctuating desires and demands of the people, but should use their wise judgement to serve the best interests of the whole community. In a modern context, this is reflected in the conservative suspicion of the referendum as a governing mechanism. (The British Conservative Party, however, has supported the use of referendums in some circumstances, such as possible approval for a European Union constitution in 2005 – a typical example of conservative pragmatism.)

A more dramatic example of the conservative view of human nature can be found in Margaret Thatcher's policies of the 1980s. She sought to unlock what she saw as humankind's natural desire to be free of the shackles of government (for example, in the form of personal taxation), to pursue individual goals and to compete freely with others in search of prosperity. Her pursuit of free-market policies certainly seemed to tap into the fundamental desires of many people for individualism. Of course, critics have suggested that what she did was to suppress community spirit and the desire for social justice, pandering to those who could benefit from free-market economics and ignoring those who were not in a position to take advantage of it.

### Order and authority

In the most basic terms, it could be said that liberals see humankind's most fundamental need, after food, clothing and shelter, as individual freedom. Socialists and anarchists, on the other hand, stress humankind's social nature and its preference for the collective rather than individual pursuit of goals. The conservative view is clear and stands in opposition to these beliefs. Conservatives affirm that humankind's most basic need is for order and security.

We can trace this key aspect of conservative philosophy to two English thinkers, Hobbes and Burke. Thomas Hobbes, writing shortly after the end of the English Civil War in 1651, examined humankind's basic predicament. On the one hand, individuals have a desire to be free and to exercise all their rights. On the other hand, individuals are intensely competitive and self-seeking. This would, if allowed to flourish, lead to an intolerable situation. Life, he famously argued, would become 'nasty, brutish and short' (*Leviathan*, 1651). In practice, people would consider themselves to be in competition with every other person and therefore live in fear of the results of that restless society. Hobbes believed that, faced with such a dilemma, humankind would choose to sacrifice much of its freedom and rights in favour of a secure existence. The only way to ensure this was to

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allow an absolute ruler to govern and protect us from each other.

Ever since Hobbes, conservatives have preferred strong authority and have tended to favour the community's need for security over the rights of individuals. Again, we see this philosophy most clearly in the conservative attitude to law and order and its reluctance to champion the cause of civil liberties. Critics have even suggested that traditional conservatives were authoritarian – preferring state power to the freedom of citizens.

Edmund Burke's great work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, was written in 1790, one year after the French had dismissed their monarchy and at a time when there was growing hysteria in England over whether revolution would cross the Channel. Starting as a vehement criticism of the actions of the revolutionaries, the book turned into a general manual of conservatism. Above all, Burke's *Reflections* is a plea for the preservation of order and gradual reform as opposed to the disorder that results from revolutionary change. The French Revolution sacrificed order and security in order to impose abstract theories that were premature, unnecessary and not generally supported by the majority of the people. Since Burke, conservatives have always erred on the side of caution and preserving order – until Margaret Thatcher, that is.

### Tradition and preservation

Conservatives' preference for the preservation of tradition is closely related to their desire for public order. When we refer to tradition in this context, we mean both traditional institutions, such as the monarchy, established Church and political constitution, as well as traditional values, such as the preservation of marriage and the importance of the nuclear family, religion and established morality. Again, this is an attitude that traces back to Burke.

The greatest crime of the French revolutionaries, according to Burke, was to abandon traditional forms of authority that had stood the test of time. This is summarised in his



Edmund Burke, whose 1790 critique of the French Revolution became a manual for traditional conservatives

ringing criticism that 'No generation should ever be so rash as to consider itself superior to its predecessors' (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790). The fact that values and institutions have survived, argue conservatives in general, is a testament to their quality. Furthermore, they carry the accumulated wisdom of the past and should therefore be respected. In a similar way, traditions bring to contemporary society some of the best aspects of past societies. How people thought and behaved in the past can inform current generations. Thus, the nineteenth-century novelist, poet and philosopher G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) called tradition the 'democracy of the dead', because it allows the wisdom of previous generations to be involved in the activities of current society.

Burke also praised traditions for their ability to provide continuity between the past and present. They give a sense of security and help to prevent violent transformations in society. He described tradition as:

*a partnership...between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born.*

*From Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790*



A typical example concerns the monarchy. Elected governments, political ideologies and social change may come and go, but if the monarchy endures in its traditional form the people will retain a sense of security and continuity amid the turmoil. Conservatives take a similar view of traditional morality based around the family. This helps each new generation hold on to a lasting set of values in an ever-changing world, thus giving them a sense of security, which they can pass on to the next generation.

Allied to their theories of tradition, conservatives believe that when institutions and values have proved useful in promoting order and stability in the past, they should be preserved. It is irresponsible, they argue, to reject them for the sake of ideological principles or new theories. This is not, however, a recipe for 'no change'. Rather, it is a tendency to conserve what is seen to be good and to reform what proves to be undesirable.

Despite this, modern British conservatism has largely ignored the importance of tradition, especially since the 1980s. It has embraced new social theories, such as economic monetarism, privatisation and opposition to the dependency culture, and has attacked some traditional institutions, such as the civil service, the Church of England, the legal establishment and the long-standing practices of the financial centre in London. There is still evidence, however, of strong support for traditional institutions and values in US and French conservatism, which have proved resistant to 'excessive' social reform.

## Inequality

Until the eighteenth century, the idea that humankind is naturally divided into a hierarchy – that we are born into unequal circumstances, with the few privileged at the top of the hierarchy and the many inferiors at the bottom – was taken as natural and inevitable.

Conservatives gradually modified their view of the natural structure of society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was becoming clear that society was more fluid than it

had ever been and that people had begun to view themselves as individuals rather than as members of a social class (which would give them little chance to progress). By the 1980s, conservatives had abandoned their views of a hierarchical society, but held on to the belief that individuals are unequal in terms of their abilities and potentialities. This is a view shared by both conservatives and liberals.

In particular, conservatives have emphasised their belief in natural inequality in response to socialist ideas. The socialist objective of creating more social and economic equality is seen by conservatives as a completely artificial aspiration, unnatural to society. Furthermore, they suggest that inequality is a positive aspect of society since it creates competition and dynamism.

## Organic Society and Hierarchy

The term 'organic society' refers to a belief which became entrenched in traditional conservative thought in the latter part of the nineteenth century. To a great extent it was a reaction against the rise of liberal individualism which had been promoted by utilitarians and classical liberals. It proposes that society is more than merely a collection of free individuals, but it is a single entity, something like a single, living organism. We are connected to each other through our humanity and through common membership of the same community. Put another way, the organic society is seen by many conservatives as a reality which is superior to our own, individual interests. Of course, in the ideal organic society, the goals and aspirations of individuals will coincide with the goals of the society as a whole. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher challenged this notion, famously remarking that 'there is no such thing as society'. What she was implying was that the goals of individuals are superior to those of society as a whole.

The conservative view of hierarchy may, at first sight, appear to contradict the notion of an organic society. In fact it underpins it. Traditional conservatives believed that there is a 'natural' order into which each individual fits. It is normal and natural that society should be divided into a

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number of strata. The very rigid feudal system had long since disappeared, but there remained a belief that some kind of class system was inevitable. This hierarchy supports the organic society in that it creates an order and stability which the individualistic society lacks. The different parts of the hierarchy have different roles which complement and support each other. Of course, this also implies inequality, but it is an ordered inequality and one in which those at the upper levels of the hierarchy are expected to take responsibility for the welfare of the lower orders, a principle known as *noblesse oblige*. The idea of hierarchy now largely appears outdated, but the organic society remains a key idea for many conservatives, not least some of the supporters of David Cameron's style of conservatism.

### Pragmatism

It would be entirely wrong to suggest that conservatism is a doctrine of 'no change', or that it treats its own principles as eternal and fixed. Conservatives are, above all, pragmatists. Michael Oakeshott (1901–90), a leading conservative philosopher of modern times, particularly advocated a pragmatic approach. He asserted that politics should be 'a conversation, not an argument' (*On Being Conservative*, 1962). What he meant was that political action should never be the result of conflict over political dogmas and theories. Instead, it should be the result of a more gentle relationship between government and the governed. The good conservative politician should engage in a relationship with the people that would allow him or her to reach decisions based on the 'intimations and traditions' of the community.

Pragmatism implies a flexible approach to politics: an understanding of what is best for people, what is acceptable to them and what will preserve a stable society. It is also a rejection of the politics of strongly held ideology and of a dogmatic approach to decision-making. Perhaps the most striking example of pragmatism occurred in the 1950s. A series of moderate Conservative governments in the UK was confronted with a number of radical reforms that

had been implemented by the Labour governments of 1945–51. Should the Conservatives now cancel the widespread nationalisation of major industries, dismantle the newly created welfare state and remove freshly granted powers from local government? In principle, the party was opposed to the reforms, but it had to recognise that they were both popular and seemingly successful. It therefore reached a pragmatic decision to retain Labour's radical initiatives.

### Individualism

This is perhaps the most difficult conservative principle to define. It has lost much of its distinctiveness since it is a value that is now shared with liberals, most European democratic parties, both Republicans and Democrats in the USA and the British Labour Party. There is also a problem in distinguishing individualism from individual liberty. Although the ideas are linked, they are not necessarily the same concept, and represent distinct political traditions.

Individual liberty, a fundamentally liberal principle, concerns mainly an absence of external restraint. It refers to the extent to which our activities, as individuals or groups, may be constrained by laws, customs or a moral code. Prominent examples of individual liberty in Western democracies are the right to freedom of worship, thought and expression, freedom of movement and freedom to associate in whatever law-abiding group we wish. Individualism is a more positive concept and refers to choice, opportunity and self-fulfilment.

Conservative individualism has two main elements. First, it suggests that each individual and household should be presented with the widest possible range of choices and opportunities. The state should restrict such choices as little as possible. This provides a link with liberal freedom, but conservative individualism is distinguished from it in that the state can enhance and facilitate choice and opportunity. In other words, the state can play a positive rather than a negative role. Second, individualism implies a sense of privacy. There

are many areas where interference by the state may be seen as legitimate – for example, in the fields of law and order, national defence and management of the currency – but there is also an extensive private sphere. For conservatives, private life is not the concern of the state. Matters such as operating private businesses, religious belief, enjoyment of property and family-expenditure decisions are not normally to be interfered with by government. Therefore, it is part of the essence of conservatism that a strong barrier should be preserved between the public and private or individual spheres.

There is one further important implication of the conservative support for individualism. For conservatives, individualism can best flourish in a stable social, moral and economic environment. The continuity provided by morality, law and order and traditions provides the necessary scenery in which individuals can play their roles securely. Indeed, in many circumstances, the excessive exercise of individual liberties, as advocated by pure liberals, threatens individualism. A society that allows too much personal freedom may threaten its own security and stability. Given the choice between a free society and a collectively secure society in which individuals can flourish, conservatives usually favour the latter.

Michael Oakeshott describes such a society as nomocratic, i.e. one where people enjoy shared morality, values and beliefs, thus creating fertile ground for individualism. This, he continues, is preferable to a restless society that is always pursuing utopian goals – he critically refers to this as a ‘teleocratic’ society. The analogy Oakeshott used in *On Being Conservative* (1962) was that of a ship adrift in an open sea. The ship had no port of departure and no destination, but was constantly faced by crises and dangers which had to be dealt with by its officers. So it is with society, he argued. In the following passage from the work, he expresses the conservative view that society should not be driven towards a preferred goal and that government should confine itself to preventing social conflict:

*Government, then, as the conservative in this matter understands it, does not begin with a vision of another, different and better world, but with the observation of the self-government practised even by men of passion in the conduct of their enterprises; it begins in the informal adjustments of interests to one another which are designed to release those who are apt to collide from the mutual frustration of a collision.*

Oakeshott’s phrase, ‘the mutual frustration of a collision’, is a telling one for conservatives and sums up why order is so vital for them. Without order, we are liable to be constantly thwarted in our endeavours by conflict with others. For some extreme liberals and New Right conservatives, conflict can be a creative force. For traditional conservatives, however, it is seen as destructive.

## Property

For much of the nineteenth century, conservatives (then usually referred to as ‘Tories’) feared the rise of the property-owning middle classes. This was mainly because they believed the middle classes would sweep away traditional authority by using their vast economic wealth to wield political power. The Whig Party was seen at that time as the promoter of capitalist property. Following the Disraelian era of the 1860s and 1870s, however, the British Tories (who were in the process of turning themselves into the Conservative Party) accepted that they too must incorporate the interests of property owners. Similar stories were unfolding in the rest of Europe and the USA. As the growing property-owning classes required a political force to hold back the rise of working-class movements, mainly socialism, conservatism became a fundamentally middle-class tradition.

The defence of property has included opposition to the introduction of common ownership (i.e. nationalisation), resistance to high property taxes (e.g. Margaret Thatcher attempted to replace local property rates with a non-property-based poll tax in 1988) and heavy stress on law and order since high crime levels tend mostly to affect private property. In much of

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Europe, conservative parties also took up the cause of small farmers and business owners. Here again, it was socialist modes of thinking that threatened their enjoyment of their own property.

Perhaps the clearest example of conservative support for private property comes from Margaret Thatcher's time in office. In the early 1980s, shortly after coming to power, she announced an initiative known as the 'right to buy', whereby tenants in council-owned housing would be given the opportunity to purchase their own homes on preferential terms. She saw this as part of a new 'property and share-owning democracy' in the UK. She believed that owning property or shares in businesses (widespread privatisation of nationalised industries gave people the opportunity to buy shares at discounted prices) would give people a stake in society and thus promote a sense of responsibility. This has become a key element in the conservative attitude to property. It was opposed by socialists in the UK, who were strongly attached to collective ownership of low-cost housing. However, ultimately, the popularity of the policy went a long way to eroding socialist elements in the Labour Party. Attachment to private property rights, in other words, became part of a new British consensus.

### Opposition to ideology

As has been seen, conservatism changes its character according to the dominant ideology it is resisting at any given time. However, the movement's opposition to ideologies in general runs deeper than merely a suspicion of radical change. It has a number of different aspects:

- Oakeshott's view, described above, that societies should not be directed towards specific social goals has implications for anti-ideology. Most ideologies propose an ideal form of society and are dedicated to working towards it. This is seen by conservatives as contrived and artificial; it flies in the face of both tradition and the need for social stability. They derive no sense of social progress from it.

However, this is not to say that conservatives oppose social improvement. On the contrary, they believe that this is a worthwhile goal, but it should be pursued, they argue, in accordance with the emotions and traditions of the people, not according to an abstract set of political principles.

- Ideological change is normally radical in nature. As far back as Burke's opposition to the actions of the French revolutionaries, conservatives have resisted rapid forms of social revolution or transformation. Reforms, when clearly necessary and desirable, should be gentle and should be carried out with continuity in mind. Burke's warning has remained relevant to conservatives:

*[revolutionaries] despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men, and, as for the rest, they have wrought underground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion, all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters and acts of parliament.*

*From Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790*

- Excessive attachments to ideologies may result in tyranny. There are two main reasons for this. First, ideological leaders tend to become totalitarian in their ruthless pursuit of political goals. Burke observed this in the French revolutionaries; since then, movements such as fascism, communism and even radical feminism have suffered the same fate. Indeed, ideas alone can be tyrannical in nature (a concept that has come to be known as Jacobinism, after Robespierre's revolutionary party in France). The so-called 'political correctness' proposed by militant feminists is seen by conservatism as a form of Jacobinism. Second, the revolutionary change that often results from ideology sweeps away traditional authority and stability, resulting in disorder at best, and anarchy at worst.
- Ideologies have a fixed view of human nature; indeed, several are actually based on such an

assumption. Conservatives see human nature as fickle, non-rational and changeable. This makes all fixed political principles fundamentally flawed. The academic conservative Karl Popper further suggested that ideological movements, far from being based on human nature, actually influence human nature. They are not scientific in nature, therefore, but are manipulative. It follows that they create artificial societies and so are doomed to fail. For Popper, the Marxist-inspired communist regimes were a classic example of this. Ideas such as equality and common ownership of property, which communists imposed on their states, were not natural to human nature, so therefore they could not hope to endure.

### Scepticism and empiricism

This review of core ideas can be summarised by returning to the typical conservative political state of mind. First, conservatives are, by nature, sceptical of most fixed political principles. As the modern conservative politician Michael Portillo (1953–) stated in a 1996 television interview:

*If there were no political nostrums [i.e. fixed beliefs], there would be no need for conservatism.*

In fact, conservatives tend to be suspicious of the activity of politics in general. For them it should be a limited activity since they doubt how effective it can, or ought, to be. Another modern British conservative, Lord Hailsham (1907–2001), has gone as far as to say that:

*The man who puts politics before his family is not fit to be called a civilised human being.*

From *The Case for Conservatism*, 1947

For many traditional conservatives, it is the main role of their philosophy to express reservations and doubts about all political movements.

Second, conservatives are usually empiricists. Empiricism involves judging current actions against the experience of the past. Respect for

tradition, pragmatism and suspicion of the new and the untried are all aspects of this empirical approach. The wise politician, it is suggested, builds on the wisdom of the past and is informed by that past. This is a preference for the known (what has gone before) over the unknown (what may be in the future). This view follows Chesterton's concept of the 'democracy of the dead' and respects Burke's plea not to believe that the current generation is wiser than those which have gone before. Critics see this as permanently looking backwards, but conservatives respond by pointing out how much that is positive has been achieved in the past, from which we can still learn.

Box 2.1 gives quotations on some key traditional conservative ideas.

#### Box 2.1 Some key traditional conservative ideas

'The Tory Party has three great objects...to maintain the institutions of the country...to uphold the Empire of England...and to elevate the condition of the people...'

Benjamin Disraeli, 1872 speech

'Scepticism and empiricism are the foundations of Conservatism.'

'The Tory Party has emotions, but no doctrine.'

Both from Ian Gilmour, *The Body Politic*, 1969

'Moderation is indispensable if passionate men are to escape being locked in an encounter of mutual frustration...'

From Michael Oakeshott, *On Being Conservative*, 1962

'If the main strength of Conservatism is adaptability, its main enemy is ideology.'

From Francis Pym, *The Politics of Consent*, 1984

### Types of conservatism

#### Early conservatism

At the beginning of this chapter, we placed the origins of conservatism at the end of the eighteenth century. The term 'conservatism' itself

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is probably of French origin, referring to the reaction against the ideals of the French Revolution; at that stage, it represented a movement that hoped to restore the traditional authority of the monarchy and the Church. In the early days of the USA, the conservative elements among the founding fathers wished to see the retention of central authority and the political power of the propertied classes. In England, conservatism was known as Toryism. Its main concern was to hold back the rise of liberal ideas, which prompted such fearful developments as constitutional reform and free-trade policies.

It is tempting, therefore, to see the origins of conservatism in reactionary ideas, and thereby to view it as a wholly negative philosophy. Certainly, there was a powerful conservative movement in the first half of the nineteenth century that challenged all the main ideas of the Enlightenment. Conservatism stood for romantic ideals in preference to rationalism. Politics was seen largely in terms of paternalism and judgement, rather than rational thought and democratic fervour. There were desperate appeals to retain the authority of the Church, the aristocracy and the monarchy.

It was Sir Robert Peel (1788–1850), widely known as the founder of the British Conservative Party, who understood that conservatism would not survive with such a negative philosophy.

### The Peelites

Peel recognised that if reform and change were both inevitable and desirable, it was pointless for conservatives to resist it. In his widely acclaimed Tamworth Manifesto of 1834, he insisted that conservatism had to become a pragmatic, rather than a reactionary, movement. By then Parliament had been reformed and there were proposals to introduce free trade in place of the protectionism that served the interests of the great landowners rather than the common people. He urged his party to embrace these changes and to move on to new concerns.

In effect, it was Peel who enabled the British conservative movement to ally itself to free-



*Benjamin Disraeli, who developed One Nation Conservatism*

market capitalism and so gain the support of the growing middle classes. Peelite conservatism was, therefore, pragmatic, tied to capitalism, protective of property rights and fundamentally middle class in nature. For many of its followers, the movement remained basically Peelite up until the radical reforms introduced by Margaret Thatcher.

### One-nationism

After Peel, the next great conservative leader was Benjamin Disraeli. Like Peel, he was a pragmatist and, as such, dealt with the threat posed by the rise of the working classes and their main political tradition – socialism. While Peel had recognised the importance of taking up the cause of the middle class, Disraeli had to decide where to take his party in relation to the working class.

Perhaps Disraeli's main contribution to conservatism – not only in Britain, but also in the rest of Europe and the USA – were his theories about the organic nature of society. What capitalism was doing, he argued, was to create a society of individuals at the expense of a general sense of social responsibility. In other words, the country was in danger of losing its sense of community (what German conservatives were calling *Volksgemeinschaft* – a common feeling of

national identity). People who were too busy pursuing their own selfish ends were liable to lose a strong sense of nation and society.

At the same time, the effect of free-market capitalism, which Peelite conservatives had supported, was dividing the country into distinctive groups – the prosperous few and the many poor. Disraeli described this growing phenomenon as two nations. It was a recipe for revolution since it created class conflict. It was the role of conservatives, Disraeli insisted, to unite the nation and create one nation. In order to do this, government should cease to rule in the interests of only one class and, instead, care for the welfare of all classes. R. A. Butler (1902–82), a ‘one-nation Tory’ and government minister of the 1950s and 1960s, admitted to still being inspired by Disraeli nearly 100 years later. He said in 1954:

*Underlying all our differences there should be fundamental unity – the very antithesis of class war – bringing together what Disraeli called the Two Nations into a single social entity.*

So, Disraelian one-nation Toryism was a type of conservatism that had as its core aim the unity of the people and the avoidance of social conflict. This was a theme taken up by continental European conservatives at the same time. In Germany in the 1870s, for example, Otto von Bismarck (1815–98) was preaching a similar message to his people.

According to Disraeli, national unity was to be provided by four main forces. These were constitutional unity of the UK (he opposed Irish independence, for example), the maintenance of great traditions around which people could unite, the encouragement of patriotism and the provision of welfare for the poor to prevent excessive inequality and therefore conflict.

One-nation conservatism survives to this day. It formed a powerful opposition from within the Conservative Party to Margaret Thatcher’s radicalism in the 1980s. Figures such as Michael Heseltine (1933–), Kenneth Clarke (1940–), Ian

Gilmour (1920–) and Francis Pym (1922–2008), collectively and disparagingly known to Thatcher’s supporters as ‘wets’, all claimed to be social unifiers. They criticised the new individualist and free-market policies of the Thatcher era. These new ideas within conservatism were once again, they argued, threatening to divide Britain into two nations – the haves and have-nots. Ultimately, the one-nation group lost the argument and their own positions in the party. It nevertheless remains as a significant minority within the Conservative Party; now often known as ‘social’ conservatives, the group continues to resist the movement to the right in British conservatism. In the USA, such ‘progressive’ conservative members of the Republican Party have, by contrast, been completely routed and have moved to the Democratic Party.

### **The nationalist-authoritarian right**

There is a long tradition in Europe of a type of conservatism often characterised as ‘ultra right’ and, in its most extreme form, even quasi-fascist. A typical example has been the National Front movement in France, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen (1928–), but there have also been popular movements in Austria, Russia, Serbia, Denmark and even in the Netherlands (which has one of the most liberal reputations of the continent).

Ultra conservatives are radical nationalists, placing the national interest above all other considerations. As one would expect, they oppose the activities of the European Union and international organisations in general, and are extremely resistant to immigration into their countries. It would be wrong to characterise this group as ‘racist’ in outlook, but they certainly do oppose multiculturalism, preferring a ‘monoculture’ where all citizens are expected to adopt the dominant domestic culture.

It would also be mistaken to describe them as fascists. While they do propose an extremely authoritarian form of state in terms of law and order, morality and national security, they are democrats and support a pluralist society where different groups can be allowed to flourish as

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long as they do not threaten the national culture or public order. They tend to support free-market economics, insisting that the state, although strong, should be limited to matters of order and security, not industrial and commercial activity.

Few British conservatives have conformed to this model. Enoch Powell (1912–98), a leading politician of the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps came closest to doing so. He was noted for his opposition to immigration on the grounds that it would lead to excessive conflict (he claimed his policy was not racially based), his reaction against the growth of moral permissiveness in the 1960s and his championing of free-market economics (this was well before Margaret Thatcher reintroduced them). Arguably, the emergence of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the early years of the twenty-first century marks something of a revival of this political tradition. Although opposition to European integration is the UKIP's emblematic policy, there is no doubt that the party contains many authoritarian-conservative politicians.

### The New Right

It is important at this stage to be clear about what is meant by the term 'New Right'. It was coined in the USA to describe a new wing of the Republican Party, represented by Ronald Reagan's presidency, and was imported into the UK to describe the wing of the Conservative Party that gathered around the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. Although it was described as 'new', its main ideas were not new at all. They were, in fact, a revival of a number of past political traditions including classical liberalism, populism, Whiggism and conservatism itself. What was 'new' was that these different strands of thought were brought together into one political movement. In addition, many of the ideas of the New Right were new to the British Conservative Party.

The movement has also been described as 'Thatcherism' or 'Reaganism', or sometimes a blend of 'neo-liberalism' and 'neo-conservatism'. All these terms may prove to be misleading so,



*Margaret Thatcher sought to put New Right conservatism into effect in Britain in the 1980s*

for the purposes of this book, it will be referred to as the 'New Right'. A second potential confusion arises from the identification of the sources of the movement. It was certainly not developed by Thatcher and Reagan. They were merely the dominant political leaders who were able to put its principles into practice. Our search for its origins are best centred on the USA.

The 'Chicago School' of economists was led by Milton Friedman, who is still seen as the leading figure of the New Right. His great work, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), has become something of a bible for New Right thinkers. The Chicago School argued that the rise of socialist thinking had resulted in excessive interference by the state in the workings of the economy. This was holding back progress, stifling enterprise and curtailing individual freedom. Friedman believed that the loss of economic freedom involved in state planning and control would eventually lead to a wider loss of political freedom.

Meanwhile, in Europe, Friedrich von Hayek, the Austrian philosopher, was becoming widely read in conservative circles, notably by Margaret Thatcher and her close adviser, Keith Joseph (1918–94). Like Friedman, Hayek saw the future



dangers of the growth of socialism; the pair effectively founded the Chicago School in the 1950s. Hayek's major work, *The Road to Serfdom*, written in 1944, assumed a similar role to that of Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* as a source of New Right thinking. For Hayek, the casualty of socialism was individualism and the inevitable result of its progress was a form of totalitarianism. Both the growing power of the state and the influence of organised labour, in the form of trade unions, were identified as vehicles for this new totalitarianism. It existed in full form in the Soviet Union, but Hayek warned that similar states could develop in the West. If we are ever to doubt Hayek's influence we should note the words of Margaret Thatcher in her 1995 memoirs, *The Downing Street Years*:

*The most powerful critique of socialist planning and the socialist state which I read and to which I have returned so often since is F. A. Hayek's The Road to Serfdom.*

A third key figure of the New Right was Robert Nozick of the USA, whose obsessions with individual liberty and the evils of the strong state are sometimes described as 'anarcho-capitalism'. Nozick had a major influence on US Republicanism at a time when the party was moving towards an anti-government position. Indeed, Ronald Reagan, in his 1981 inauguration speech, expressed the view that 'government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem'. Thatcher was also prone to describing her policies as 'rolling back the frontiers of the state'. Perhaps Nozick's quasi-anarchist views represent the extreme of the New Right in that he proposed the withdrawal of the state from nearly all activities. Most New Right conservatives limit their anti-state views to the economic sphere.

So the New Right, unlike conservatism in general, does have strong philosophical roots, running through Hayek, Friedman and Nozick. It also draws inspiration from a number of other political traditions. Some of these are described briefly below.

### Classical liberalism

This nineteenth-century movement was closely associated with the growth of free-market capitalism. Classical liberals began by supporting extensive individual freedom. This was carried forward into advocating a minimal state, free economic markets, a competitive society and the absence of state-organised welfare. Classical liberals believed strongly in self-responsibility: that individuals should not expect to be cradled by the state but instead must accept that their life circumstances are under their own control. The New Right did not accept the whole of classical liberal philosophy. For the New Right, freedom was to be extended in the economic sphere, rather than in society in general.

### Neo-classical economics

The economics of Alfred Marshall (1842–1924) in the early twentieth century were known as 'neo-classical' because they were an adaptation of the economic theories from a century before. In short, this kind of economics included two main propositions. The first was that the state should intervene solely to control the currency and public finances so as to maintain stability (effectively to avoid excessive price inflation). The second asserted that the economy contained internal mechanisms that would always bring it back to full employment and growth. This automatic stabilising system relied upon the state not interfering.

In the 1980s, conservatives rediscovered neo-classical economics and renamed them 'monetarism'. Edward Heath (1916–) had a brief and unsuccessful flirtation with monetarism when he was prime minister at the start of the 1970s, but it was Margaret Thatcher who was the first to dare to experiment with it, when she was faced with a severely depressed British economy in the early 1980s. She argued that high inflation and unemployment resulted from an excess of government intervention, not a lack of it. She refused to intervene and the economy recovered, albeit temporarily. The USA under Ronald Reagan followed suit with the same results. The one-nation conservatives who had opposed such

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audacity went into retreat and the New Right was well and truly established.

### Populism

This political tradition is largely American and French in origin. It is a philosophy and style of politics that is centred on the potential of individuals to succeed as a result of their own efforts. It appeals to individuals who earn their living independently, without the support either of the state or powerful economic interests. It therefore finds supporters among groups such as small independent farmers, shopkeepers, tradespeople and entrepreneurs who run their own small businesses (groups Marx described as the 'petite bourgeoisie'). Populists are suspicious of the power of the state, oppose personal and corporate taxation, seek to control the power of both trade unions and big business and are intensely nationalistic in their outlook. Certainly, it was these petite bourgeois groups that formed the bedrock of support for Margaret Thatcher's brand of conservatism in the 1980s. A remarkable example of a conservative, populist politician is Sarah Palin, the unsuccessful vice presidential candidate in the USA's 2008 presidential election. The message of Palin and other Republican politicians like her, is that government should be carried on in accordance with the basic values of the 'ordinary' people. These, she claimed, include fundamental Christian values, strong family ties, totally free enterprise and rugged individualism, as well as pure 'common sense'.

### Right-wing nationalism

The New Right took the traditional conservative philosophy of nationalism and raised it to new heights. As a movement, the New Right was faced by the challenges of both globalisation and the advance of European integration. Its UK supporters reacted strongly by asserting national interests in the face of these threats to the autonomy of nation-states everywhere. Their nationalism was inevitably defensive and, at its extreme, became somewhat xenophobic in nature.

The issue of Europe created a dilemma for the New Right. On the one hand, a single European

market with no trade barriers was consistent with its attachment to the importance of free markets. On the other hand, integration threatened the nation's political independence. Ultimately, it was this latter political consideration that prevailed, but not before the Conservative Party in the UK had torn itself apart over the issue.

### Neo-conservatism

Although the New Right has been suspicious of state power, it has become equally concerned by the potential social disorder resulting from increased freedom, permissiveness, lack of social responsibility and challenges to authority from alienated sections of society. It has therefore adapted aspects of the origins of conservatism (hence the term neo-conservative) to the modern world. Just as Burke stressed the need for good order and took a paternalistic view of the role of the state, so too has the New Right. A strong stance on law and order issues, attempts to restore traditional values and morality and a firm position on national security have all therefore been adopted. Neo-cons (as Americans call such theorists) also propose the export of the American concept of order and democracy to the rest of the world, no matter what their culture. They belong, therefore, in Burke's tradition of paternalist conservatism. Dick Cheney (US Vice President, 2001–2008) has been a leading exponent of neo-conservatism, a neo-liberal on economic matters and a staunch conservative on social and international affairs.

Putting together the neo-liberal position on the economy and welfare and the neo-conservative stance on law and order, moral values and national security gives a useful summary of New Right philosophy.

### Contemporary US conservatism

The rise of the New Right in the USA largely coincided with the movement's success in the UK. Its origins, however, are different. In the USA there was no perceived threat from socialism, as was experienced by British conservatives. It is true that the role of the federal government had expanded considerably in the 1960s and that there was a conservative reaction

against this, beginning with the 1968–74 presidency of Richard Nixon (1913–94), but socialism and the expanded state were not the main enemies. For US conservatives, the principal adversary was ‘progressive liberalism’.

Classical liberalism and populism had always been important features of US Republicanism, but in the 1980s a new feature emerged. This was a moralistic, religious element. Many of society’s problems, especially rising crime rates, public disorder and family breakdown, were blamed on the excessively liberal and permissive culture of the 1960s. The growth of religious observance – mainly Christian – gathered pace in the USA in the 1980s and 1990s. This gave rise to an increasingly moralistic outlook and a stern defence of traditional family values, as well as opposition to feminism and its objectives, such as equal opportunities and abortion on demand. Christianity and a moralistic interpretation of its teachings were now part of the US ‘way of life’, claimed conservatives. The traditional love of individual liberty in the USA did not, for them, extend to private morality. This was because private moral permissiveness, they suggested, ultimately led to public disorder.

The rise of the ‘religious right’, represented largely by a movement known as the Moral Majority, coincided with the triumph of the USA and its allies in the Cold War. For US conservatives, this was a victory not just for US economic and military prowess, but also for its traditional values.

The challenge of Islamic fundamentalism has reinforced this belief further and added a new dimension. Traditionally, US conservatives have been isolationist in global terms. They have been reluctant to support foreign adventures and have believed that it is up to other nations to defend their own interests. The Cold War victory and the fundamentalist threat have resulted in a new proactive, interventionist attitude to world affairs. The term New World Order was coined in 1990 by James Baker (1930–), then Republican Secretary of State under President George Bush

Senior (1924–). It suggested two main propositions. First, that there was now only one world power able to maintain peace – the USA. The second proposition – essentially conservative in outlook – was that traditional US values were superior to those of other cultures and were, therefore, exportable all over the world. In short, the long-term creation of a stable world order depended on widespread acceptance of those values.

The main elements of contemporary US conservatism can be summarised as follows:

- a religious and moralistic attitude to social issues
- opposition to socially progressive ideas
- deep suspicion of centralised state power
- an attachment to pluralist, decentralised democracy
- classical liberal economic views
- a fixed view of US culture and a sense of its superiority
- a desire to spread US influence and values globally
- a view that democracy is a ‘core value’ that should be widely exported and applied.

The apparent rejection of American conservatism in the US general election of 2008, and the election of a progressive liberal president (Barak Obama), suggests that the movement may be forced to re-evaluate its principles and it may indeed have entered long-term decline.

### Continental European conservatism

It would be a mistake to make too many generalisations about conservatism in Europe outside of the UK. Nevertheless, there are some elements that help to distinguish it from the British tradition.

First, continental conservatives tend to be more nationalistic in their outlook. French

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Gaullism is a good example. Inspired by President Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970), Gaullists believe that French national interests are absolutely paramount. This results in French refusal to cooperate fully with international organisations and a monocultural outlook. Like US conservatives, the French are intensely patriotic, especially about French social and political values. They argue that all citizens should support these values.

Second, it is generally true that continental conservatives are less suspicious of state power than their British and US counterparts. They have largely accepted that the state is crucial in maintaining social, political and economic stability. This is probably the result of the greater tendency to revolutionary activity that exists in European countries. The UK and the USA have not come under serious internal threat for more than 200 years. This is not the case in continental Europe: most countries there have turbulent pasts. The interwar fascist regimes are well known. It should also be noted that France suffered violent changes of government as recently as 1958 and 1969; Italy has endured frequent and rapid changes of government since 1945; the Spanish and Portuguese democracies are still in their infancy and Greece was under military rule as recently as the 1970s. For conservatives in these states, liberalism and socialism represent instability. By contrast, the state provides order and security – classical conservative goals.

Third, there is a much stronger element of populism among such conservatives. Many European states have large and influential agricultural sectors. Farmers (especially small, independent farmers, still often described as 'peasants'), are well known for their conservative outlook, as, typically, are small-scale entrepreneurs and the inhabitants of the many thousands of small towns characteristic of continental Europe. Conservatives have appealed successfully to these groups by promoting their independence, adopting agriculture-friendly policies and defending rural causes in preference to metropolitan values. The concerns of the UK's

Countryside Alliance – those of pro-hunting, protectionism against foreign competition, better transport facilities, opposition to excessive environmental interference and support for low taxation, for example – are typical of conservatism in much of the rest of Europe. It is no coincidence that the cross-national conservative group in the European Parliament has adopted the collective name European People's Party. The election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President of France in 2007 demonstrates the strength of this movement, as he represents the tradition very accurately.

### Social and liberal conservatism

Although the New Right dominated conservative parties in the USA and Europe, there remained a faction in the conservative movement that is more liberal and progressive in its outlook. Its members call themselves 'social conservatives'. The election of David Cameron to the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2005 elevated social conservatism to a primary position, at least in Britain. For some it even became 'Cameronian conservatism'.

Social conservatives retain some of the values of traditional 'one nation' conservatism. These include:

- A view that society is indeed organic, thus rejecting the New Right neo-liberal perspective that saw society as little more than a collection of individuals. Though social conservatives continue to stress the importance of individualism, they accept that this should not be at the expense of a persistent minority who are denied the benefits of an otherwise prosperous society.
- They retain the principle that families are the cornerstone of an ordered society.
- They remain firm nationalists who promote the best interests of Britain abroad. They therefore remain sceptical of excessive European integration.
- Though they are social reformers, Cameronian conservatives tend to be suspicious of

constitutional reform and can be seen as traditionalists where the political system is concerned.

- They remain largely authoritarian in their approach to many, though not all, law and order issues. They place a higher value on order than on personal liberty.
- They do not share the neo-liberal view that welfare benefits are a disincentive to work and self-improvement. Instead, they see a properly targeted benefits system as a means of increasing and spreading opportunities.

Despite these traditional tendencies they do consider themselves to be reformers, notably in the following areas:

- They argue that social reform can be effective and that it is a legitimate function of government to promote such reform. Thus, they support the importance of education, welfare systems and social services in supporting families and promoting equal opportunities.
- They see education as a key element in social reform. In particular they support Labour's policies of providing a wide degree of choice in educational provision, notably secondary schooling.
- They emphasise the need for greater social mobility – the ability of individuals and families to improve their own prosperity and status.
- They have a tolerant attitude to different forms of family and lifestyle. Although they see the traditional family as desirable and superior, they accept that there are many who wish to adopt a different kind of family lifestyle, be it lone parenthood or same-sex relationships.
- While remaining nationalists, the new social conservatives accept the reality of a multicultural society and promote equal opportunities for all minority groups, as long as they are willing to adopt British identity in addition to their own cultural identity.

- Though they fully support the welfare state, they wish to promote further the involvement of the private sector in service provision.
- Social conservatives remain authoritarian in their approach to serious crime, but have come to accept the need for more creative, non-custodial ways of dealing with minor, persistent crime.

The New Right, neo-liberal agenda has not, however, been totally abandoned. Some neo-liberal principles persist:

- Conservatives still firmly believe that free markets are the best way to increase wealth.
- They argue that Britain is still over-governed and there should be less regulation of industry and commerce, as well as our personal lives. This applies to domestic government as well as to the European Union.
- They see taxation as a major disincentive to enterprise and so wish to see much lower corporate taxation.

## Key conservative thinkers

### Edmund Burke (Irish, 1729–97)

Burke is often described as the father of conservatism and, although he did not coin the term, his best-known work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, is certainly one of the first great conservative texts. Burke was born in Ireland and became an MP at Westminster. Confusingly, he described himself as a Whig and associated with other well-known Whigs of his day. His thinking, however, was predominantly conservative. Equally confusingly, he was a supporter of the US revolutionaries and spoke for them in Parliament. He believed that the USA had been hopelessly misgoverned by Britain and that the actions of the republicans were therefore justified. The French Revolution, however, provoked his utter disapproval and prompted him to develop his conservative philosophy.

Burke opposed all rational ways of thinking about political and social issues. Action, he

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asserted, must always be based on practical experience. Furthermore, it should never threaten the security of a society. 'Good order is the foundation of all good things,' Burke declared; it is the most important good that mankind can enjoy (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790). He berated the French revolutionaries on the grounds that they had not just threatened order – they had actually thrown society into the melting pot and attempted to reform it along rational lines. In the colourful passage from *Reflections* quoted below, Burke likens the state to a parent and subjects to its children. He expresses horror at the way the children of France have treated their parent:

*We are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into a kettle of magicians in hopes that, by poisonous weeds and wild incantations, they may regenerate the parental constitution, and renovate their father's life.*

The 'kettle of magicians' undoubtedly refers to the philosophers of the Enlightenment who were proposing a 'renovation' of society along the lines of rational principles.

For Burke, and for all those conservatives who have followed him, social and political change should be undertaken with great caution, and only with reference to the experience of the past and the traditions of the people. Tradition was a key element in society for Burke. He described it as a 'partnership' between 'those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born' (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790). Tradition therefore provided continuity from the past into the future. Furthermore, Burke believed that society was an organic, living thing and as such constantly developing naturally. It was not for humankind to interfere with nature on the excuse that it was attempting to improve it.

Burke is also famous for his view on the nature of representation. The electorate, he announced, should not vote for an MP and then

expect him to do its bidding. Instead, it should elect him to use his judgement on its behalf. This extremely conservative view of representation was the result of Burke's fear that politics might become nothing more than a struggle between warring factions and interests. Politics should be a measured activity, based on pragmatism, knowledge of the past and good judgement. In this view he was following the teaching of one of his US associates, James Madison (1751–1836), who attempted to build a constitution for the USA that would not require party activity. Both Burke and Madison were, of course, to be disappointed in this respect.

Although Burke has often been accused of an inconsistent approach to political philosophy, there is a detectable thread that connects his ideas. The key elements of Burkean philosophy were as follows:

- The most important quality of any society is order.
- The people have an obligation to obey the state as long as it provides them with order.
- The affairs of the state should be conducted on the basis of measured judgement and consideration of past experience, not on the basis of abstract theories and principles.
- Traditions and traditional institutions are key factors in the preservation of order and continuity.
- Change in society should only be undertaken when it becomes clear that the existing order is untenable.

### **Benjamin Disraeli (British, 1804–81)**

Disraeli was prime minister twice and, along with his Liberal Party counterpart, William Gladstone, dominated late-Victorian British politics. He rivals his predecessor, Robert Peel, in being credited as the founder of the Conservative Party. Disraeli wrote and worked at a time when there was real danger of social conflict breaking out in Britain. In other words, the greatest of all

conservative objectives – the maintenance of order – was threatened.

He saw that Britain was in danger of becoming effectively 'two nations', divided into the rich and the poor. As capitalism flourished, the plight of the working classes and the unemployed worsened. It was for conservatives, or 'Tories' as Disraeli's followers were usually known, to take a paternalistic view and intervene on behalf of the downtrodden masses. Disraeli knew that if the Tories did not take up the cause of the poor, the socialists would. As representatives of the aristocracy and landed gentry, Disraeli believed that conservatives could play a dispassionate, neutral role in the struggle between labour and capitalism. Furthermore, the traditional wealth and privilege that the ruling class enjoyed in society also carried with it responsibility – that of preserving the welfare of the people. The term *noblesse oblige* has often been applied to this concept of the social obligation of the wealthy. Its modern equivalent suggests that those who benefit most from the fruits of capitalism have an obligation to consider the plight of the less fortunate. It is an appeal against a totally self-interested form of economic life. In 1882 Disraeli described the principle of *noblesse oblige* – the principle that the wealthier, landed class should care for the rest of the people:

*What is the fundamental principle of the feudal system gentlemen? It is that the tenure of property shall be the performance of its duties. Why, when William the Conqueror carved out parts of the land and introduced the feudal system, he said to the recipient, 'You shall have the estate, but you shall do something for it; you shall feed the poor; you shall endow the Church; you shall defend the land in case of war; and you shall execute justice and maintain truth to the poor for nothing'.*

Disraeli and his Tory, one-nation followers sought to preserve national unity by stressing the importance of the great traditional institutions of the country, the Church of England, the monarchy and the Empire, allegiances to which all classes could subscribe. By granting the

franchise to a wide section of the population, he believed that people would feel they had a greater stake in their own society.

Many conservatives to this day follow Disraelian principles, albeit updated to suit modern conditions; they are still often described as one-nation Tories. Prominent contemporary examples include Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke. They support tradition, promote policies that unite rather than divide the nation, and wish to see political actions that create **inclusiveness**.

## Key Term

### Inclusiveness

This concept is associated mainly with liberalism, but is also supported by moderate, one-nation conservatives. It suggests that all sections of the community should be included in decision-making, the enjoyment of rights and in the rewards that society has to offer. Put another way, it implies that no legal groups should be excluded from opportunities or from full participation in society on an equal basis.

## George Santayana (Spanish 1863–1952)

Santayana worked largely in the USA and his influence lay mostly in that country. Like most traditional conservatives he saw politics as firmly rooted in society. It should certainly not be the result of rational theories of dogmatic principles. The actual practice of politics should be carried out with full understanding of the feelings of the people and should be more of an artform than a science.

He is mainly known, however, for his empiricism, scepticism and pragmatism. Thus he saw it as vital that political action should be based on a knowledge of the past. Possibly his most famous statement is this:

*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*

*From Life of Reason, 1905*

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The ideal political strategy for Santayana should be to consider the experience of the past, to be sceptical of ideological solutions and take into account the belief systems of the people who will be affected.

Santayana, like Burke, insisted that society should be constructed in order to remove insecurity. For him the greatest threat to individualism was disorder rather than a lack of freedom. Individualism consists of the ability to make free choices, and to be able to pursue both economic well-being and personal development in terms of more general happiness and fulfilment. It is the role of the state, said Santayana, to promote such individualism.

### Michael Oakeshott (British, 1901–90)

Perhaps Oakeshott's main contribution to conservative thought was to suggest that politics should not have any fixed goals or sense of specific direction. In *On Being Conservative* (1962), he likened the state to a ship afloat on a boundless sea with no origin and no destination (see p. 44). The role of government, which commands the ship, should simply be to keep it on an even keel and care for the welfare of its passengers. The state, therefore, should be governed on a pragmatic basis, taking into account the traditions and 'intimations' of the people. By intimations, Oakeshott meant the general way in which people wish the affairs of state to be run. He was insistent that political action based on fixed theories and principles leads to conflict and takes too little account of the wishes of the people.

In a sense, Oakeshott's philosophy is simple. Governments should merely govern, and that means doing what is right for the people, not what politicians think ought to be right for the people. This is how he sums up his view:

*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 so that no occasion of conflict can occur; the office of government is merely to rule.*

*From On Being Conservative, 1962*

In some ways, Oakeshott's philosophy can be seen as a bridge between traditional and New Right, neo-liberal conservatism. In line with traditional conservative thinking, he sees government as a pragmatic activity, free of ideological content. On the other hand, he wishes government to be a limited activity. This is linked with the New Right, which prefers that government disengages from regulation and so restores widespread freedom of action to its citizens.

### Karl Popper (Austrian/British, 1902–94)

Sir Karl Popper began life as an Austrian, but fled from Nazi persecution and became a British citizen in 1945. He is mainly known for his opposition to totalitarianism, and was particularly critical of extreme examples of socialism. He based his opposition on what he saw as their flawed view of human nature; in line with other conservatives, he believed that human nature is not a fixed aspect of society, but the product of historical change. Those ideologies that viewed human nature as fixed were therefore in error.

Popper argued that scientific enquiry is based upon the assumption that what has always happened in the past (if it is observed often enough) will continue to happen in the future. He saw this as potentially mistaken. There is no guarantee that what has been happening will continue to happen. Scientific method, therefore, is about proving things to be wrong, rather than confirming that they are right. He called the process of discovering errors in prediction 'falsification'. This theory can also be applied to political action.

We cannot truly predict what will happen in the future, Popper asserted. Human nature and human society are constantly evolving, so society in the past is never like society in the future. For



that reason, political theories based on scientific explanations of history and society cannot be proved. They are all utopian in nature. This leads to a rejection of both Marxist and socialist claims that their philosophies are scientific.

In practice, Popper's philosophy suggests that no one has a valid claim to understanding what is best for society in the future. All that politicians can do is attempt to achieve what appears to be in the best interests of the people at any given time. It would be an error for them to claim that they are always right. It follows that good government must be open to criticism and must be removable by the people if it is not acting in their interests. Popper called this 'the open society'. Conservative followers of Popper have used his philosophy to demonstrate the flaws in all ideologies and to justify a pragmatic outlook in politics.

### **Keith Joseph (British, 1918–94)**

Together with Margaret Thatcher, Keith Joseph founded the Centre for Policy Studies in 1975. This think-tank was to become the driving force behind the dramatic change that took place within British, US and European conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, although neo-liberal conservatism became known as 'Thatcherism', it was Joseph who was the ideological inspiration behind it.

Joseph began with the assertion that deprivation in society was inherited from one generation to the next. He called this the 'cycle of deprivation', claiming it was not caused by lack of action by the state, but by too much action. The state was creating a dependency culture in which families had no incentive to better themselves because they had grown used to relying on the state. The answer, therefore, was to create a freer economic society, which would produce more wealth – wealth that would trickle down to all parts of society and so benefit everybody.

Joseph became the main architect of the 1980s programme of liberalising the British state. This involved privatising major industries, reducing the power of trade unions, reducing personal and corporate taxation, deregulating financial

markets to make more capital available and reducing the scope of the welfare state, especially social security benefits. When recession struck the UK in the early 1980s, it was Joseph who encouraged Thatcher not to intervene, as so many of her predecessors had done, and to withdraw from economic management and allow the slump to work its natural way through. Many other conservatives lost their nerve, but Joseph and Thatcher stuck to their guns. When the economy eventually recovered of its own accord, Joseph's ideas appeared to be vindicated.

In areas of government such as law and order, immigration and social policy, Joseph was a traditional conservative, but his economic ideas were a throwback to classical liberalism, as he and Thatcher freely admitted. His was a new kind of economic conservatism, dedicated to the free market rather than to state management.

### **Pat Buchanan (US, 1938–)**

Buchanan is one of the most prominent members of the US conservative right (which is seen as more extreme than its British counterpart). He has unsuccessfully challenged for the Republican nomination as presidential candidate and he has also stood for the presidency itself. Although Buchanan attracted the votes of 3 million Americans, he has never looked likely to win office. Nevertheless, his relative success in garnering support has had some influence in shifting the Republican Party to the right.

Like many other neo-conservatives, Buchanan was influenced by the philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973), who called for the moral regeneration of the USA and a new sense of shared values, based on a traditional form of Christianity. Strauss saw the world as being divided sharply into good and evil. US citizens must, he insisted, be firmly on the side of good.

Buchanan is the founder of a campaigning organisation known as the American Cause. The 1993 mission statement of the American Cause reveals its aims:

*Our mission is to advance and promote traditional American values that are rooted in*

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*the conservative principles of national sovereignty, economic patriotism, limited government and individual freedom.*

We can certainly recognise limited government and individual freedom as being major features of the conservative New Right, but the inclusion of national sovereignty and economic patriotism demands some explanation. National sovereignty implies that Buchanan's brand of conservatism is determined to protect US interests. It is, in effect, a charter for isolationism, denying that the USA has any global responsibilities or that it should be influenced by any other power or organisation. Certainly, George W. Bush's (1946–) refusal to cooperate with international agreements on global warming and nuclear weapons control are examples of this position.

Economic patriotism is connected to the idea of national sovereignty. It asserts that the USA should be concerned only with its own economic interests. The benefit of world trade is not a consideration. Buchanan has therefore campaigned to protect US industry from competition through the use of tariffs and subsidies. For him, the employment of US citizens is of greater importance than the long-term benefits of international trade. There are echoes of this attitude in the British New Right's opposition to further European economic integration and its suspicion of international trade organisations.

Buchanan and his followers wish to see strict controls over immigration into the USA. They oppose multiculturalism, arguing that there should be one dominant culture in the USA and that all citizens should adopt it. Both these positions are shared by the right wing of the British Conservative Party.

The principal distinction between Buchanan's brand of conservatism and its counterpart in the UK and the rest of Europe concerns religion. For him, religion cannot be separated from politics, and morality is strictly based on a traditional brand of fundamentalist Christianity. European conservatives support the maintenance of

traditional values too, but this support has not necessarily been based specifically upon religion. This type of conservatism, which is based on Christian values but is not overtly or exclusively religious, is often described as **Christian democracy**.



### Key Term

#### **Christian democracy**

This term refers to a European form of conservatism originally inspired by Christian values; its religious content has since declined. It is similar to the one-nation, social conservatism that flourished in the UK in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Christian democrats support market capitalism, but believe its aim should not be merely personal gain. Its wealth should be spread more evenly, to the benefit of the whole community. The state is therefore justified in intervening to create more social justice and alleviate deprivation. Tony Blair has often been seen as a kind of Christian democrat, rather than a socialist.

The conservatism of Pat Buchanan and others like him somewhat echoes that of early-twentieth-century Republicanism. Indeed, it is so historical in its outlook that it has been described as 'paleoconservatism', a term implying that its views are truly ancient in their origins. Nevertheless, it has gained adherents in recent years, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attack.

## Issues in conservatism

### **Conservatism as an ideology**

In essence, the term 'ideology' implies a strong sense of progress towards a specific set of social goals. Ideologies have fixed principles that are coherent and interlocking. They make assumptions about the nature of humankind and develop theories about the true nature of society. Furthermore, ideologies are consistent in their belief systems.

We can now examine the extent to which conservatism conforms to this definition.

Traditional conservatism certainly has no sense of progress. Indeed, Michael Oakeshott specified that true conservatism should avoid adopting any sense of direction. On the other hand, the New Right, as defined by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher, certainly did envisage the creation of a society of free individuals, with wide access to ownership of property and shares in industry and in which each individual was responsible for his or her own welfare.

Similarly, traditional conservatives have tended to avoid adopting fixed principles and have opposed political movements based on such fixed principles. Conservatism has often been described as chameleon-like in that it changes its appearance according to the dominant political environment at any given time. In the nineteenth century, when liberalism was its main opponent, conservatism adopted an organic vision of society, seeing it as a living entity and expecting people to demonstrate a sense of responsibility towards each other. When socialism came to the fore, however, conservatives changed course and began to emphasise the virtues of free markets and individualism to combat collectivist ideals. Such an adaptable movement certainly cannot be described as ideological in nature.

Once again, however, the New Right does not conform. It adopted some fixed ideas that could be described as ideological in nature. In particular, monetarism became its political dogma. This was the belief that the state should confine itself to controlling the currency and public finances rather than attempting to regulate the whole economy. Furthermore, these conservatives, also known as neo-liberals, were inflexible in their attitudes to taxation and welfare, believing both to be barriers to economic progress. There is, perhaps, a case for arguing that the anti-state position of New Right conservatives is an ideological position in that it suggests a fixed view that society will flourish only if it is free of government regulation.

This evidence appears to lead to the conclusion that, while traditional conservatism is very much a state of mind, and a broad and

flexible philosophy, the more modern forms of the movement have become ideological in character. The conservative state of mind is to prefer order to liberty, to be suspicious of radical change and to prefer what is known from the past to what is unknown in the future. The New Right, in contrast, has been a radical movement; its adherents have been prepared to reject the past in favour of the pursuit of New Right doctrines.

### **The paradox of the New Right**

The New Right has often been characterised as a synthesis between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. This gives rise to an apparently contradictory attitude towards the role of the state.

The neo-liberal aspect of the movement proposes the restoration of free markets, without interference from the state. This echoes the classical liberal era of the nineteenth century. Margaret Thatcher was content to describe herself as a classical liberal at heart and famously claimed that 'there is no such thing as society'. What she meant was that she viewed society as a collection of individuals, not as an organic whole. Taxation and welfare were to be reduced in order to create more individual incentives. The so-called 'nanny state' was blamed for sapping society of its dynamism, for reducing the economic freedom that was necessary for wealth creation and for granting excessive amounts of power to organised labour. As far back as 1968, Margaret Thatcher expressed distaste for the role of the state in a speech she gave to a Conservative Party conference:

*What we need now is a far greater degree of personal responsibility and decision, far more independence from the government and a comparative reduction in the role of government.*

All these ideas would have been at home in the middle of the nineteenth century, when free-market capitalism was at its height and at its least regulated. Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, both members of the Chicago School of Economics, were the inspiration behind the

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restoration of classical liberal values. Both these philosophers argued that a lack of economic freedom would entail a loss of political freedom in general. In other words, the heavily regulated and partly government-controlled states run by socialist governments could never be described as 'free' because individuals were not free to pursue their own economic goals.

The main criticism faced by these neo-liberals was that the excessive amounts of freedom and the inequality it generated would threaten the unity of society. The New Right responded by developing a set of policies which became known as 'neo-conservatism'. Recognising that order in society might be threatened by an excess of freedom in the economic sphere, the New Right has emphasised personal morality. It has been relatively intolerant of lifestyles considered to be outside of the 'norm', such as homosexuality. Several attempts have been made (with little success, it has to be said) to return to basic values – for example, the nuclear family, traditional education methods and patriotism. This echoes the principle, dating back to Burke, that respect for traditions stabilises society.

The second strand of neo-conservatism concerns law and order. Again, more traditional methods have been supported, notably the use of prison sentences as a deterrent, a hard line on youth crime and extended powers for an expanded police force.

Conservatives have always accused those on the left of politics of lacking patriotism and paying too little attention to the UK's best interests. With European integration uppermost in their minds, members of the the New Right have stressed national sovereignty and the need to preserve the unity of the UK. They have opposed political integration in Europe and devolution on the grounds that they threaten to remove national sovereignty either upwards to Brussels or downwards to Scotland and Wales. The New Right sees the **nation-state** as the fundamental political community and will resist any threat to its independence.

Finally, the neo-conservative wing of modern conservatism has been concerned with the effects



### Key Term

#### **Nation-state**

This term combines the concepts of nation and state. The nation is considered the natural basis for any political community. It is seen, by both conservatives and many liberals, as the most significant binding force for a society since it comprises a people's common circumstances of birth and experience. The state is a political entity. It is the territory within which a single centre of sovereignty can be identified. When the nation is also a state, and the state is based on the identity of a nation, this is a nation-state – the most common form of political society.

of immigration and increasing cultural diversity. Again, diversity is seen as a threat to the unity of a community. The neo-conservative answer is to limit immigration and to insist that all sections of the community learn to conform to a common set of British values.

It should be noted that the British New Right's attitude to the European Union is itself something of a paradox. The movement's neo-liberalism leads it to support the idea of a completely free European market; free trade has always been a goal of economic liberals. On the other hand, the political integration of Europe threatens the integrity of the nation-state and so has been opposed.

Although the blending of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism in the New Right emerged largely in the UK, it is also a feature of contemporary US conservatism. There, neo-conservative features are underpinned by a strong attachment to fundamentalist religious belief, especially Christianity. Indeed, much of the US style of religion is highly conservative in nature. This has led to a harder line on moral issues, especially abortion and homosexuality.

Table 2.1 summarises the neo-liberal and neo-conservative strands of the New Right.

Neo-liberalism	Neo-conservatism
<p><b>UK</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Restoration of free labour, product and financial markets wherever possible</li> <li>● Minimal role for the state in regulating commerce and industry</li> <li>● Minimal state role in regulating the economy</li> <li>● Taxation to be kept to a minimum, especially income and corporate taxes</li> <li>● Belief that welfare is a disincentive to work and enterprise and therefore should be kept to a minimum</li> <li>● Support for a free market in Europe</li> </ul> <p><b>USA</b></p> <p>As above, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Preference for power to be reserved for individual states, not federal government</li> </ul>	<p><b>UK</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Traditional position on morality and lifestyles</li> <li>● Authoritarian stance on law-and-order issues</li> <li>● Heavy emphasis on national self-interest and patriotism</li> <li>● Opposition to excessive immigration and cultural diversity</li> <li>● Opposition to European political integration</li> </ul> <p><b>USA</b></p> <p>As above, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong religious element to moral and social issues</li> <li>● Insistence on protection for US industry from foreign competition</li> </ul>

Table 2.1 Summary of the two strands of the New Right

## Conservatism in the UK

### The crisis of conservatism

In the UK, conservatism has endured a politically difficult period since 1992. To some extent, this is the result of the aftermath of Margaret Thatcher's fall from power in 1990, a blow from which the movement has not fully recovered. In particular, conservatives have been uncertain whether to carry the Thatcher reforms still further or to propose a period of consolidation. Her long political shadow continues to cause controversy. The Conservative Party itself has suffered from a combination of weak leadership, internal divisions and a loss of economic direction, while the wider conservative movement faces longer-term difficulties, which have become so marked that the situation may be described as a crisis.

As a philosophy, conservatism has invariably been a reaction against ideological tendencies that have threatened the order and unity of society and which have been based on apparently 'false' assumptions and principles. In the post-Thatcher era, however, it could be said that a political consensus has descended upon the UK (and indeed the rest of Western Europe). This

consensus has been based upon the neo-liberal and neo-conservative principles described above. In some ways, therefore, it could be said that modern conservatism has become the victim of its own success. Its ideas have dominated the political culture to such an extent that conservatism has nothing to react against. At the same time, there are no new political movements threatening the existing order. New Labour and the contemporary Liberal Democrats in the UK may wish to change the emphasis of public policy, but they propose no radical reforms.

Conservatism has also suffered from the legacy of the 1980s – that of being seen as a movement that lacks compassion and which has failed to adjust to the changing social and cultural structure of the UK. Some critics have suggested that the movement has not been true to the traditional principles put forward by the likes of Michael Oakeshott and even Benjamin Disraeli – it has failed to consider the welfare of the whole country and has, instead, concentrated on the interests of one section of the community. There have been many who have benefited from the neo-liberal reforms of the Thatcher era – the business classes, property owners, middle-

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income families and the like – but there are also many who have suffered – for example, those who rely on welfare, lone parents, deprived ethnic minorities and alienated youths living in depressed regions of the country.

Despite these criticisms, conservatism has not come under serious attack from either the left or the right of British politics. Instead, its philosophy and policies have been absorbed by other political parties. The Conservative Party has tried to respond by supporting multiculturalism and inclusiveness, and by adopting a more compassionate approach to deprived sections of the community, but these causes have already been taken up by liberals and social democrats. They do not represent a distinctive position for conservatives.

The one political stance that does single out modern conservatives as radically different is their attitude to European integration. They have been hampered in this area by internal divisions, and many see their position of supporting a single, free European market while opposing any political integration as illogical, as we have seen above. However, Euroscepticism does resonate with the British people and has been a potential touchstone for a conservative revival. However, on this issue the Conservative Party has been effectively outflanked by the Labour Party. Labour has insisted that any future progress towards integration – mainly entry into the single currency and adoption of a European constitution – should be put to the British people in referendums, thereby taking the whole issue of Europe effectively out of the arena of party politics.

It may be that the UK Conservative Party and the wider conservative movement will suffer the same fate as liberalism did in the 60 years after the First World War. In that period, liberal principles were absorbed by the Conservative and Labour Parties, and liberalism, as a distinctive movement, was squeezed out of the political arena. The Liberal Party found itself in a political wilderness from which it did not emerge until the 1980s. The current Conservative Party is seeking

to present itself as the best manager of the post-Thatcher consensus, but perhaps the days of the party being seen as the 'natural party of government' are over.

### The impact of Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party in 1975. She was a relatively little-known politician at the time, and in many ways a compromise candidate since the party could not agree on any of the more conventional candidates for the office. The party was taking a further chance since it was not clear at that time whether a woman was electable. It is often claimed that the party chose her as a short-term leader while it searched for someone more suitable to fight the 1979 election. Whatever the party's motives were in electing her, there were few clues to the ideological position she was to take up later. Having said that, her close association with Keith Joseph (see p. 59) should have been an indication that she was going to support neo-liberal policies.

She began her premiership cautiously. In this she had little choice, having inherited a front bench full of natural enemies and a country in the grip of economic recession. Over the next few years, however, she replaced most of her opponents with allies and, at the same time, the economy began to recover. She ruffled feathers by insisting that her government would not attempt to 'spend its way out of the recession' – that is, borrow large amounts of money to subsidise failing industries and create jobs artificially. Her neo-liberal instincts, reinforced by Joseph's economic philosophy, told her that if government held on and refused to intervene, the economy would naturally pick up. Traditional conservatives, who were associated with the Keynesian idea that aggressive economic action by government was needed to cure recession, found themselves marginalised and many left the government. The first impact of Thatcher, therefore, was that in times of economic difficulty, governments should do less, not more. This policy was described as *laissez-faire*.

## Key Term

### *Laissez-faire*

This is a nineteenth-century expression, literally meaning 'let them act', which is associated with classical liberalism. It refers to the government policy of not intervening in economic activity, but allowing economic forces to work naturally. The policy assumes that the operation of free markets, without state regulation or any external interference, will create wealth effectively and so benefit the whole community.

Buoyed up by the success of her economic policies, Thatcher turned to the issue of trade union power. Again, traditionalists warned her against confrontation. They saw the unions as an entrenched and vital part of the economic structure. Attacking them was seen as a radical and dangerous undertaking. But Thatcher once more won her battle with the doubters and embarked on a series of measures to reduce the legal and economic power of the unions. This was the beginning of a series of actions against British institutions. She later turned her attention to the civil service, local government and the financial institutions of the City, reducing their influence and subjecting them to competitive forces. Once again, we can see how her radicalism enabled her to challenge established traditions and the institutions that underpinned them.

The privatisation of major industries was part of her general commitment to 'rolling back the frontiers of the state'. This marked the end of the type of conservatism, dating back to Harold Macmillan (1894–1986) in the 1950s, which accepted the state as a vehicle for providing stability and serving the interests of the community as a whole. The conservative support for the welfare state itself was also shaken under Thatcher. While she preserved the state health and education systems, her governments reduced the size and scope of social security benefits and the old age pension.

Thus, the traditional conservative tendency to paternalism was eroded. The Disraelian view that

it was the duty of conservatives to care for the welfare of the people was being replaced by an insistence that individuals should be responsible for their own welfare. Thatcher's attack on the dependency culture flew directly in the face of the traditional Tory sense of social responsibility and its vision of the organic society. For Thatcher, society was made up of self-interested individuals and it was the role of government to provide the conditions where such an individualist community could flourish.

We can see that the impact of Thatcherism and the New Right was considerable and the challenges it posed to traditional conservatism were numerous. These included:

- Society is made up of free individuals; it is not organic.
- Excessive interference by the state is counterproductive, holds back economic progress and inhibits the development of a sense of self-responsibility.
- Traditional institutions may be challenged if they can be shown to be holding back progress.
- Conservative paternalism denies the individual spirit of enterprise and self-responsibility, and so should be curbed.
- Individuals prefer to be granted freedom rather than rely upon the support of the state.
- Radical government can improve society and does not necessarily create unexpected consequences.
- A slavish attachment to traditional modes of thinking prevents original solutions to society's problems.

## Conservatism and liberalism

### Individualism

What is the difference between the liberal conception of freedom and the conservative notion of individualism? On a simple level,

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liberal freedom is essentially negative: it proposes a society where there is a minimum of restrictions on the actions of individuals. Conservative individualism, on the other hand, is more akin to positive liberty. It entails the provision of opportunities and choices for individuals and families and the ability of people to achieve their own goals without hindrance. The difference, however, may be more complex in reality.

Individualism is perhaps best viewed as a reaction against collectivism. It is based on the belief that people prefer to achieve their goals individually and not collectively, as socialists insist. Conservatives therefore argue that they have a duty to create the conditions in which such individualism can flourish. This involves economic certainty and stability, low levels of taxation, the protection of private property, low crime rates and a secure international environment. The state has a duty to produce these conditions, but its role should end there. It should not interfere in people's lives directly.

Liberals who promote freedom are also suspicious of state interference, but they concentrate on the need for individuals to enjoy their private lives and to have their rights protected. This kind of free society can, in theory, flourish even in a situation where collectivism is a common method of achieving social goals. This means that, for liberals, there need be no contradiction between a welfare state and a free society. Put another way, freedom requires that the state should guarantee its people's liberties, whereas individualism requires that the state create a stable environment in which people can pursue their own goals. Individualism opposes the idea that the state can achieve goals that individuals could achieve for themselves. Liberals believe freedom need not be compromised by state involvement in society.

One final observation can help to distinguish between the two concepts. A conservative will accept that the state might be justified in curtailing some freedom in society if it can promote individualism by doing so. For example,

it may be necessary to reduce the scope of civil liberties in the interests of crime reduction, perhaps by granting extensive powers to the police. Reducing crime in this way might encourage people to feel more secure to enjoy their property and to engage in new economic ventures. Similarly, by removing some of the legal rights and freedoms of workers, entrepreneurs may feel encouraged to employ more labour and so create more wealth to the benefit of all.

### Liberal freedom and conservative individualism

At first, these terms seem to be almost identical. Both liberals and conservatives extol the virtues of a free society and tend to be suspicious of the role of the state. However, the concepts do have distinct meanings.

For a liberal, freedom mainly means the absence of restriction. We are free if nobody controls our ability to say what we like, go where we wish and worship whatever gods we may choose. We are also free if the state does not restrict our ability to engage in economic enterprise and does not place too many regulations on our activities.

Individualism is more closely associated with conservatism. The term refers to the ability of the individual to be able to pursue his or her own happiness, to make free choices and to be presented with a wide range of opportunities. It implies too that we will be secure enough to enjoy whatever wealth and property we may possess. Individualism in this sense could only flourish in a society in which each person is free to pursue his or her own goals and is not forced to accept the collective goals of a society. It is therefore associated with free enterprise, the encouragement of the private sector, low taxation, a favourable environment for property owners and minimal regulation of business activities. To secure such freedom necessitates a heavy emphasis on national defence, law and order and property rights.



The main conflict between the two concepts lies in the contrast between the liberal belief that the individual will flourish most successfully in a free society, whereas conservatives typically believe that the individual most needs a secure society. Nevertheless, both philosophies agree that the state should be organised to promote the interests of individuals and individual self-fulfilment; it is about the means to achieve these ends that they disagree.

### Property and rights

It is perhaps in their attitudes to private property that conservatives and liberals agree to the greatest extent. When we consider the more general field of rights, however, there are critical points of difference.

The right to private property is one of the original beliefs of liberalism. Figures such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine all saw the possession and enjoyment of property as a basic human right. They believed that the possession of property and wealth is the natural outcome of an individual's pursuit of his or her own interests. This has always remained a liberal aspiration. Liberals are not collectivist by nature and see private property as one of the most important aspects of the individual's fulfilled life.

Conservatism, too, has always been committed to property rights, but for different reasons. For conservatives, property ownership promotes social stability. Those who own property will have a stronger sense of responsibility and will have a vested interest in the preservation of order. It follows from this that all conservatives see the protection of property, both from criminal behaviour and from encroachments by government, as a priority of the state.

The preservation of rights and the guarantee of legal and political equality are fundamental liberal principles. There are very few circumstances in which liberals will accept any compromise in their defence of rights. Conservatives, too, accept that rights are worthy

of protection, especially in modern constitutional democracies. There are, however, circumstances in which a conservative would abandon this commitment. Conservatives insist that the community as a whole has rights, not just individuals. There will be occasions when the rights of individuals conflict with the rights of the community. When this happens, the conservative tendency is to consider the community first.

This is most clearly seen in the field of crime. While suspected criminals may expect rights to protect them from injustice, the community also has a right to be protected from criminals. In practice, this might mean that conservatives would support the right of property owners to protect their property over and above the criminal's right to be protected from injury. The clearest example of the conflict between conservative and liberal views concerns the issue of terrorism. While liberals say our rights cannot be sacrificed even in the interests of anti-terrorism measures, conservatives argue that we must be prepared to sacrifice some individual rights in the interests of our security. In short, this means that conservatives revere property and community rights, but their commitment to the rights of individuals remains relatively fragile.

### Is the Thatcherite era over?

The financial and economic crisis that emerged after 2007 put into focus the conflict between the neo-liberal ideas of the Thatcherite New Right and the emerging social, liberal form of conservatism, which had been introduced in Britain by David Cameron – in particular the apparent failure of *'laissez-faire'* policies and the 'moral crisis' that was identified when it became clear that the quest for ever-greater wealth had not been built on solid ground and had resulted in unacceptable excesses. President Obama's election in the US was a further symptom of this crisis.

The main criticisms of the New Right which appeared after 2007 included the following:

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- *Laissez-faire* policies resulted in excessive levels of borrowing and conspicuous spending that could not be sustained. Lack of regulation, especially of the financial system, had created a bubble of wealth that was bound to burst. Irresponsible behaviour by unregulated financial institutions led to an inevitable economic recession as the system of credit creation collapsed in 2007–08.
- Despite the growing prosperity from the mid-1990s onwards, there remained a persistent 'underclass' of individuals and families who were excluded from this wealth and lacked the opportunities and means to improve their situation. This underclass was characterised by poor educational attainment, persistent poverty and unemployment, high crime levels and a variety of other social problems. The neo-liberal state that had been created seemed to pay little attention to these groups.
- Lack of support from the New Right for the welfare state and other public services (in the interests of low taxation and sound public finance) had left a legacy of deprivation and poor public services.
- Many argued that the highly individualistic, acquisitive society that had been created lacked a sense of morality and community. This too had led to a growth of social problems, especially among the young who grew up in deprived families.

A consistent theme of conservatism, stretching back to the time of Disraeli around 1870, is that those who enjoy prosperity have an obligation to help the less fortunate (known formerly as *noblesse oblige*). Traditional conservatives also see society as organic and so lamented the loss of sense of community from the 1980s onwards. They also stress the need for good order and security. The highly individualistic policies of the New Right had clearly threatened such order. The lack of morality in economic life seemed to have leaked into social life in general. Margaret Thatcher's well-known assertion that 'there is no such thing as society, there are individuals and families' came back to haunt the British Conservative Party, which went on to lose general elections in 1997, 2001 and 2005. The emergence of Cameron's more social and liberal form of conservatism was the result, as we have seen above.

Nevertheless, British conservatives do retain some Thatcherite instincts. There is still a resistance to over-government and excessive regulation; conservatives remain opposed to high personal and corporate taxation; they also see social disorder as largely the responsibility of individuals rather than the circumstances of those individuals. Conservatives also understand where their main support lies – it is among property owners, small business owners and the wealthy. These were the groups to whom Margaret Thatcher and her supporters appealed. The British Conservative Party is, therefore, reluctant to abandon its traditional constituency.

## Further reading

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