

Do Cameron Conservatives have a theory?

This is not, of course, the same as asking whether Cameron Conservatism is theory-driven.

Like any distinctively Conservative discourse, Cameron Conservatism is radically pragmatic rather than radically dogmatic. It is a practical response to felt need – a balanced answer to what are understood to be real and present challenges. \_\_But a political position which is not theory-driven, (which, indeed, is profoundly sceptical of theory as a guide to political action) may nevertheless disclose deep theoretical dispositions – distinctive patterns of thought which, through their internal coherence, lend strength to pragmatic responses as these come under attack in the battle of ideas and strengthen also the unity of purpose displayed when pragmatically tackling the perceived real-world challenges. \_\_In this sense, then, I repeat my question, do Cameron Conservatives have a theory? \_\_And my answer, in that same sense, is yes. The pragmatic responses of Cameron Conservatism to perceived real-world challenges do disclose a set of coherent theoretical dispositions. \_\_In particular, Cameron Conservatism is an attempt to achieve two paradigm shifts – a shift in the locus of political debate and a shift in the theory of the state. \_\_First, it is an attempt to shift the locus of debate from an econo-centric paradigm to a socio-centric paradigm. \_\_Second, it is an attempt to shift the theory of the state from a provision-based paradigm to a framework-based paradigm, within which government (apart from its perennial role in guaranteeing security and stability)...

is conceived principally as an agency for enabling individuals, families, associations and corporations to internalise externalities and hence to live up to social responsibilities without the further intervention of authority. \_\_This concise description of the theory is inevitably both dense and unfamiliar. \_\_Let me now unpack it, employing a somewhat more perspicuous and familiar idiom. \_\_But before I do so, let me offer you what is sometimes called a meta-thought or a second-order observation. \_\_There is a reason why I have been using this ridiculous, high-falutin language. \_\_I want to make the point that ridiculous high-falutin language is not the sole prerogative of Gordon Brown with his post neo-classical endogenous growth theory...

Nor of David Miliband with his “emphasis on the value of equality and solidarity...supplemented by renewed commitment to the extension of

personal autonomy in an increasingly interdependent world”.\_\_You shouldn't think that, just because someone uses complicated words, they have a coherent theory. And you shouldn't think that, just because someone tries, most of the time to speak in plain English, they don't have a theory.\_\_Cameron Conservatives have a strong attachment to plain English. That is because we think that it is easier to think clearly in clear language. But this has misled some people who think that theories come in complicated language to think we haven't got one.

And my point is that, despite our general preference for plain language, we do have a theory. It can be expressed (as I have just expressed it) in complicated language. It can also be expressed (as I am about to do) in much simpler terms.\_\_So what do I mean by Cameron Conservatism being an attempt to shift the locus of debate from an econo-centric paradigm to a socio-centric paradigm?\_\_It all goes back to Marx.\_\_Before Marx, politics was multi-dimensional – constitutional, social, environmental as well as economic. But Marx changed all that. The real triumph of Marxism consisted in the way that it defined the preoccupations not only of its supporters but also of its opponents.

After Marx, socialists defended socialism and free marketeers defended capitalism. For both sides, the centrepiece of the debate was the system of economic management. Politics became econo-centric.\_\_But, as we begin the 21st century, things have changed. Since Thatcher, and despite recent recurrences of something like full-blooded socialism in some parts of Latin America, the capitalist/socialist debate has in general ceased to dominate modern politics. From Beijing to Brussels, the free market has won the battle of economic ideas.\_\_Victories like this often cause a hiatus in political thought. And the transition to a post-Marxist politics caused just such a hiatus.

\_For several years, politicians have been wandering round in the mist, trying to discern the shape of a new politics more suited to an age in which socialism and capitalism no longer vie for acceptance.\_\_After war, the peace is sometimes more difficult for the victors than for the vanquished. So it was in this ideological war. Peace proved particularly difficult for British Conservatives – the very group that had raised the battle-standard and led the global army of the free market to victory.\_\_\_But, after a decade of disarray and enforced reflection on the part of the British Conservative Party, an answer has emerged. Cameron Conservatives have recognised the profound consequences of the fact that we have entered a post-Marxist era. Politics – once econo-centric – must

now become socio-centric. \_\_\_ If the free market is a matter of consensus, the debate must change its nature. Instead of arguing about systems of economic management, we have to discuss how to make better lives out of the prosperity generated by the free market. Growth in well-being hasn't kept pace with growth in domestic product. \_\_\_ At the recent Conservative Spring Forum, I chaired a discussion about the work of our six policy groups. Afterwards, a senior party official – who had taken time off from his arduous administrative responsibilities to listen to the discussion – approached me to say that he had now understood what we were up to. “Instead of economics”, he said, “it's now about the whole way we live our lives”. \_\_\_ Bull's eye. \_\_\_ Instead of being about economics, politics in a post-Marxist age is about the whole way we live our lives; it is about society. \_\_\_ Politics today is socio-centric. \_\_\_ The first theoretical advance (the first paradigm shift) of Cameron-Conservatism is to see that fact clearly – to refocus the debate, to change the terms of political trade, to ask a different set of questions.

As David Cameron put it in his speech to the same Spring Forum:

“It's not economic breakdown that Britain now faces, but social breakdown. Not businesses that aren't delivering, but public services. Not rampant inflation but rampant crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour. Not irresponsible unions – it's irresponsible parents...”

And as a recent report from UNICEF showed – a report which put Britain at the bottom of the international league table for the well-being of children – it's not that Britain is the sick man of Europe; we're becoming the sick family of Europe... The mission of the modern Conservative Party, could not be clearer. It is to bring about Britain's social revival: to improve the quality of life for everyone in our country, increasing our well-being, not just our wealth.”

So far, I hope, so clear. \_\_\_ But what do I mean by saying that Cameron Conservatism is also “an attempt to shift the theory of the state from a provision-based paradigm to a framework-based paradigm, within which government (apart from its perennial role in guaranteeing security and stability)...

is conceived principally as an agency for enabling individuals, families, associations and corporations to internalise externalities and hence to live up to social responsibilities without the further intervention of authority?”\_

Here, we move from the focus of the debate to the arguments on each side of the refocused debate – from the nature of the question to the nature of the answer. \_\_\_ And, first, we have to attend to the meaning of the provision-theory of the modern state. \_\_\_ This is the successor to socialism in the post-Marxist era. It is, in British terms, the essence of Gordon Brown's version of New Labour. \_\_\_ The provision-theory accepts the free market as the engine of economic growth. But, just as Clause 4 socialism once saw the state as the proper provider of goods and services through ownership of the means of production, so the provision-theorists of Brownian New Labour see the state as the proper provider of public services and of well-being through direction and control. \_\_\_ The tell-tale marks of provision-theory are to be seen in much of the record of the last ten years – the targets and directives, the reorganisations, schemes and initiatives. Direct government intervention has been brought – with the best of intentions, though often with notable lack of practical success – to bear on schools and hospitals, police officers and neighbourhoods, local authorities and universities...

The state has been seen as the source of enlightened social action, just as it was once seen as the source of enlightened economic action. \_\_\_ The Cameron Conservative framework-theory of the state is fundamentally different. It takes the same place in the socio-centric political debate of the twenty-first century that free market theory once took before it triumphed in, and hence outdated, the econo-centric debate of the twentieth century. \_\_\_ The framework theory of the modern state sees government as having two fundamental roles: to guarantee the stability and security upon which, by common consent, both the free market and well-being depend; and, much more controversially, to establish a framework...

of support and incentive which enables and induces individual citizens and organisations to act in ways that fulfil not merely their own self-interested ambitions but also their wider social responsibilities. \_\_\_ It is in emphasising this second duty of government that Cameron Conservatism distinguishes itself radically from the provision-theory of Brownian New Labour. \_\_\_ Cameron Conservatism puts no faith in central direction and control. Instead, it seeks to identify externalities (social and environmental responsibilities) that participants in the free market are likely to neglect, and then seeks to establish frameworks that will lead people and organisations to internalise those externalities – to act of their own volition in ways that will improve society by increasing general well being.

The intuitions about human nature that underpin this framework-theory of the modern state in twenty-first century post-Marxist socio-centric politics are unsurprisingly the same as the intuitions about human nature that underpinned free market theory in twentieth century econo-centric politics.

The first intuition is that human enterprise, initiative, vocation and morale are the things that lead to progress and sustainable success in the socio-environmental sphere, just as in the economic sphere. The second, allied intuition is that command and control systems eventually fall under their own weight because they stifle enterprise, initiative, vocation and morale.

And the third intuition is that a framework which leads people to internalise their social responsibilities and to fulfil those responsibilities of their own volition in their own ways is accordingly a much more powerful engine for sustained socio-environmental success than direct government control. Will the framework-theory based on these liberal conservative intuitions come in time to win the battle of ideas in socio-centric politics as comprehensively as its precursor, liberal conservative free market theory, did in the old econo-centric political debates? It is too early to tell. But one thing at least is clear. Cameron Conservatives have both an analysis of the nature of twenty-first century politics and a theory of the role of the modern state. To win a battle of ideas is always a hard task. But having an idea is certainly a good starting-point.