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Introduction

The Conservative Party has traditionally viewed itself as the ‘natural party of government’. This phrase has been used in most books written about the history of the party. It was argued that their electoral competitiveness had enabled them to govern, independently or in coalition, for such a large proportion of the twentieth century that it was the ‘Conservative century’ (Seldon and Snowden 2001: 27). Their dominance of the second half of the century was particularly significant. They had two multi-term periods in power. The one-nation era of affluence between 1951 and 1964 and then Thatcherism provided four terms between 1979 and 1997. Of the eight victories between 1951 and 1992 three justified the term landslide, that is, the victories in 1959, 1983 and 1987. All the remaining provided them with the opportunity to complete full parliamentary terms. Of their four defeats between 1951 and 1992 three were marginal and only 1966 constituted a significant reversal. The losses of October 1964 and 1974 gave Labour majorities under five, and Labour only entered office in March 1974 as a minority government (Table 1).

The end of the Conservative century would coincide with a number of important books being written on the Conservatives by political historians (Ball 1998; Blake 1998; Charmley 1996; Davies 1996; Evans and Taylor 1996; Gilmour and Garnett 1998; Ramsden 1995, 1996, 1999). Within this historical tradition there have been a number of core assumptions that were seen to explain their electoral success. It is worth reconsidering these:

- 1 It was argued that their electoral success could be explained with reference to their ‘appetite for power’ and their willingness to subordinate doctrinal considerations in that pursuit.
- 2 Their desire for office, rather than an adherence to an ideological creed, meant that they relied heavily on demonstrating internal discipline and unity. In these narratives the notion of loyalty was so significant that it was described as their ‘secret weapon’.
- 3 Tied to this was the assumption that the Conservatives were a party of tendencies rather than a party of factions (Rose 1964: 33–46). Factions amounted to stable, cohesive and organized groups furthering a broad range of policies. Such factions are said to be conscious of their group identity and they advance a programme for government.

Tendencies constituted fluctuating alignments between political elites on specific policy arenas; but these transient alignments are said to lack the cohesiveness and organization of factions. Rose argued that Labour was a party of factions, and the Conservatives were a party of tendencies.

Table 1: The electoral record of the Conservative Party 1945–2010

Election	Elected Conservatives	Percentage share of votes	Total vote received	Government and majority	
1945	213	39.8	9,577,667	Labour	146
1950	299	43.5	12,502,567	Labour	5
1951	321	48.0	13,717,538	Conservative	17
1955	345	49.7	13,311,936	Conservative	59
1959	365	49.4	13,749,830	Conservative	100
1964	304	43.4	12,001,396	Labour	4
1966	253	41.9	11,418,433	Labour	97
1970	330	46.4	13,145,123	Conservative	31
1974 F	297	37.9	11,872,180	Labour	Minority
1974 O	277	35.8	10,464,817	Labour	3
1979	339	43.9	13,697,923	Conservative	44
1983	397	42.4	13,012,315	Conservative	144
1987	376	42.3	13,763,066	Conservative	101
1992	336	41.9	14,092,891	Conservative	21
1997	165	30.7	9,602,957	Labour	179
2001	166	31.8	8,357,622	Labour	167
2005	197	32.4	8,772,473	Labour	66
2010	307	36.1	10,726,555	Conservative-led Coalition	

Source: Kavanagh and Cowley 2010: 350–1.

Before proceeding any further it might be worthwhile to reflect upon these assumptions from the perspective of the early 1990s, and to consider the reaction of academics to the Conservatives 1992 general election victory. Respected political scientists appeared to reaffirm the assumptions from within the political historical tradition. Consider these:

- 1 King argued that the Conservatives had reaffirmed their status as the natural party of government within a dominant party state. If the Conservatives could secure an electoral mandate when, first, opinion polls were predicting their imminent defeat; second, they were facing the electorate in the midst of an economic recession; and third, despite the fact that had been in office for over a decade already, then their continued electoral dominance seemed assured (King 1992: 224).
- 2 Norton also commented on the evolving configurations of party political competition, with one peripheral party, the Liberal Democrats; one minor party, Labour; and one dominant party, the Conservatives. Writing in 1998 he noted that in 1992 most political commentators had assumed that a fourth term of Conservative office would enable the party to orchestrate an economic recovery and thus the groundwork for a fifth successive electoral victory (Norton 1998: 75).
- 3 Dunleavy placed the continued electoral hegemony of the Conservatives in a comparative context. He noted that the Conservatives should be compared to the Japanese Social Democrats who had governed for generations, or with the Christian Democrats in Italy, who had been in government almost continuously since the war (Dunleavy 1993: 133).
- 4 Working on the assumption that the Conservatives would govern in perpetuity, there was an affiliated assumption that the intriguing dilemma was which brand of Conservatism would dominate. Cowley argued that the transformation of Britain into a dominant party state system had increased the importance of internal groupings and thus leadership selection within the Conservatives. Cowley implied that if general elections merely confirmed that the Conservatives are dominant, then political scientists needed to turn their attention to intra-party selection processes to determine which brand of Conservatism is dominant within the dominant party itself (Cowley 1996: 198).

Those political scientists who had implied, or had merely reported upon, an assumption of the Conservatives governing in perpetuity overemphasized the extent of Conservative hegemony. The supposed natural party of government were almost immediately forced onto the defensive politically. The Major administration imploded and destroyed their party of government credentials. They became viewed as incompetent; the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) was divided; Conservative parliamentarians were

seen to be sleazy and untrustworthy; and John Major was felt to be a weak and ineffective Prime Minister (Heppell 2006: 2–5).

The prolonged era of Conservative opposition between 1997 and 2010 challenges the merit of the assumptions that have underpinned the historical tradition. Significantly they do not provide us with an adequate explanation for Conservative electoral failure and specifically prolonged electoral failure (Hayton 2012a: 7). Their claims to unity and cohesion seem ‘questionable’ after the events of the last two decades (Seawright 2010: 2). The period between the fall of Margaret Thatcher and the emergence of David Cameron was characterized by a degree of ideological feuding that contravened the Conservatives self-proclaimed inclination towards discipline and unity, and their supposed preference for being in office rather than dogmatically adhering to set ideological positions.

This book questions the assumptions that have permeated the historical tradition of Conservative academic work. It assumes that the key issue to be examining when studying the Conservatives is their adaptive capability (or otherwise). Examining processes of adaptation enables us to understand adaptations which are accepted and/or are successful, and those which are disputed and/or unsuccessful. This is critical as

adaptation is an intensely political, not technical process and is seldom smooth or unproblematic because adaptation challenges the extant definition of what Conservatism is. Parties exist in a system of rules producing stability (or inertia) which inhibit adaptation. Adaptations are more radical than the tactical shifts of electoral politics, they occur at a deeper level and in response to influences broader than the electoral cycle. Adaptation requires the party to reinterpret policies and style, modulating these with the perceived changes in the party’s milieu, thereby redefining Conservatism. Successful adaptation delivers power. If not, further adaptation occurs. (Taylor 2005a: 133)

Therefore, this book provides students of British politics and general readers with a way of interpreting the historical development of the Conservatives in the post-war era which focuses on these processes of adaptation. The book will be influenced (but not overcome) by the statecraft model. This was advanced by the late Jim Bulpitt, to evaluate how the Conservatives have attempted to win office (the politics of support) and then govern competently (the politics of power) so as to then retain office (Bulpitt 1986a: 19–39). There are four dimensions to the cycle of statecraft analysis – successful party management, a winning electoral strategy, political argument hegemony, governing competence – which if all are successfully achieved should lead to another winning electoral strategy (i.e. re-election) (Bulpitt 1986a: 21–2).

The first dimension is successful party management. This recognizes the centrality of internal discipline, unity and loyalty to external perceptions

of the party. It encapsulates how the leadership uses the powers of policy formulation and appointment to engender cohesion within the PCP and the wider party (Bulpitt 1986a: 21). The second dimension is the constructing of a winning electoral strategy. Such a strategy needs to energize Conservative party activists to ensure that they contribute to the mobilization of support. It also needs to penetrate into the traditional core Labour Party vote (Evans and Taylor 1996: 280).

The third dimension is political argument hegemony. This constitutes a component central to the self-confidence of a governing party and its acquisition and maintenance will better assist in the execution of internal party management. Political argument hegemony involves manufacturing a political scenario in which the arguments made by the leadership obtain predominance in terms of elite debate, that is, ensuring that the Conservatives are perceived to be the more plausible party for addressing specific public policy concerns. This process is entwined with the acquisition of a winning electoral strategy. It is a dual process in which Conservative administrations are attempting to organize their own core values into the political domain while forcing the core values of their political opponents out of the political domain, thus mobilizing bias in their favour (Stevens 2002: 119). Therefore, the successful execution of statecraft enables the Conservatives to secure the primacy of their policy prescriptions and it aims to define the political terrain over which political arguments occur (Hickson 2005: 181).

The fourth dimension is having acquired office does the electoral strategy and the political argument espoused enable the Conservatives to govern competently? The central determinant of perceptions of competence is the choice and appropriateness of policies both domestic and external. The successful execution of the governing competence dimension of statecraft requires that the Conservatives pursue policies that can be implemented successfully (Bulpitt 1986a: 22).

The statement model does, however, operate under a number of assumptions. It assumes that the Conservatives have traditionally possessed a willingness to seek electoral support from any and all sections of the electorate. By this we are implying that traditionally the Conservatives have sought to 'accommodate' the preferences of the electorate (Bale 2010: 7). Traditionally Conservative electoral strategy has reflected a recognition that the party could not afford to leave itself 'stranded outside' the crucial 'zone of acquiescence' in 'which the plurality of largely moderate voters would be prepared to reward you with office' (Norris and Lovenduski 2004: 99–100). Therefore, prior to the onset of Thatcherism, post-war Conservative leaders from Winston Churchill to Edward Heath had aimed to position the party towards the centre ground of British politics and the location of the median voter. By centre ground we mean the electoral centre rather than the ideological centre (Quinn 2008: 179).

The second assumption was that upon the acquisition of power, incumbent Conservative governments wished to insulate themselves from

domestic and external pressures and that they would seek to manipulate social, economic and international pressures to maintain a degree of governing competence (Hickson 2005: 182). The goal of statecraft when occupying power was therefore centre autonomy. This suggests that once in government, Conservative governments would want to secure relative autonomy for the centre – that is, the Cabinet and the Civil Service – on matters of high politics, most notably economic management. Simultaneous to this pursuit, Conservative governments would aim to delegate issues viewed as ‘low politics’ to governmental agencies beyond the centre. However, it is the domain of high politics that is most pertinent to the execution of statecraft and, within this context, the formulation of a depoliticized mode of economic management is the pre-eminent concern (Evans and Taylor 1996: 224). Depoliticization involves a deliberate political strategy of attempting to place responsibility for decision-making ‘at one remove’ from government (Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller 2006). This amounts to a form of statecraft which is ‘designed primarily to service the continuation of power and the maintenance of political office by reducing the risks of failure’, in which the governing party aims to ‘distance themselves from accountability while enhancing their electoral prospects’ (Kerr et al. 2011: 200). Buller and James take the notion of depoliticization as statecraft one step further by arguing thus:

Faced with problems that are difficult to resolve and where decisions may lead to unpopularity, it will be rational in statecraft terms for leaders not to do anything themselves, but to devolve responsibility for these problems to other individuals, groups or organisations. If these individuals, groups or organisations then end up solving these difficult problems, party leaders can claim credit for the act of devolution. If things go wrong, the self-same leaders will have the option of distancing themselves from responsibility while letting others take the blame. (Buller and James 2012: 541)

The third assumption that we can make with regard to the statecraft model relates to the notion that it appears to be supported by the valence model of voting behaviour. The gradual decline of voting behaviour being orientated around stable class-based cleavages resulted in the growth of valence politics (Butler and Stokes 1969; Stokes 1992). This differentiates between issues on which the electorate will differ – that is, positional politics, from issues in which there is general agreement on the ends if not the means – that is, valence politics. Positional politics referred to how voters interpreted a range of political issues and then voted for a party whose positions were nearest to their own – that is, ends. Valence politics referred to how voters evaluated the general political competence of parties in relation to the means by which they would aim to secure their political goals. The importance of valence-based politics was evident in the seminal work *Political Choice in Britain*, which argued that valence politics and judgements on the relative

competence of the two main political parties was the most important factor underlying electoral choice (Clarke et al. 2004: 9). Within this the central determinant of party identification based on competence was leadership evaluations. From this Buller and James conclude that the 'key statecraft task for political leaders is to cultivate such an image of competence, especially in the area of economic management' (Buller and James 2012: 541).

Buller notes that the statecraft interpretation 'has made an important contribution to our academic understanding of twentieth century political development' (Buller 1999: 691). This seems an entirely justifiable assertion as variants upon it have been applied to the study of territorial politics (Bulpitt 1983); race and British politics (Bulpitt 1986b); the contours of British foreign policy, with particular reference to the position of Britain within the European Union (Bulpitt 1988, 1992; Buller 2000). More recently, Buller and James have utilized statecraft as a means of assessing the Prime Ministerial leadership of Tony Blair (Buller and James 2012). However, although this book assumes that as a framework the statecraft theory is of value, it is important to avoid the accusation that critiques and competing perspectives of statecraft are being ignored. Discussions and debates on statecraft are offered by Stevens (2002: 119–50), Buller (1999: 691–712) and Buller (2000: 319–27).

Within the critiques has been the accusation that it shows a bias towards the agency of political elites and pays insufficient attention to structural constraints. For example, Stevens argues that Bulpitt offers an essentially 'high politics' view of history, as his model 'sees the role of political actors as overwhelmingly important in creating political outcomes', when their agency should be seen to operate within the context of the 'underlying institutional and ideological structures' (Stevens 2002: 123). Stevens suggests that structures, and the constraints that they may create, are crucial to the framework of governance and party leadership, and thus they form a critical aspect of the rules of the political game. Moreover, statecraft has been criticized for its limited sensitivity to the impact of international events upon domestic politics, and this limitation, alongside its predominant focus on political change over other explanations for change – be that economic or ideological – means that the statecraft model adopts a 'uni-dimensional' approach to politics (Kerr and Marsh 1999). However, the statecraft approach should not be seen as 'uni-dimensional' as it is the manipulation of these rules of the political game – the interaction between the agency of elites of the wider political structures – which forms the basis of statecraft strategies (Stevens 2002). As Hickson concludes:

Statecraft should be viewed as an examination of how the Conservative Party has sought when in power to *insulate* itself from social, economic and international pressures and how it has sought to *manipulate* them in order to maintain some degree of governing competence. (Hickson 2005: 182)

The emphasis on manipulation is critical here. The Conservatives have always wanted to give the impression to the electorate that they can govern effectively and are broadly unified, but such judgements about them should be viewed in relative rather than absolute terms. When using statecraft we must not understate the importance of perceptions of the Conservatives relative to Labour in relation to the various dimensions of statecraft. As such, the activities and condition of opposition parties also need to be considered. A weak and badly divided opposition, for example, in the 1951–62 or 1979–87 period, was a contributing factor to successful Conservative statecraft.

In addition to noting its international dimensions and the importance of the opposition, Hickson makes two critical observations with regard to statecraft which are intrinsic to the way in which this book aims to utilize the model. First, Hickson argues that Bulpitt ‘reduces the salience of ideology’ within the Conservatives. Rather than subsume ideology within statecraft, it would be better to interpret statecraft as the way in which we can observe how the Conservatives have pursued, (successfully or otherwise), their ideological objectives at any one time (Hickson 2005: 183–4). Second, Hickson argues that we must not overstate continuity when examining the Conservative statecraft strategies. When assessing them over time it is possible to identify ‘several’ statecraft strategies which can be seen as being time specific, that is, given that economic, social, cultural and political climates evolve and change, so statecraft strategies will have to evolve to reflect the new and altered terrain (Hickson 2005: 182).

Therefore, this book is about the electoral strategies, governing approaches and ideological thought of the Conservatives from Churchill to Cameron. It will consider how the statecraft strategies adopted by the Conservatives have evolved since 1945 as mechanisms designed to ensure that they gain and retain access to power. Implicit will be the argument that adaptations to the narrative of Conservatism may be required to manufacture a viable form of statecraft. The book argues that post-war Conservatism can be seen in terms of five significant blocks of time in statecraft terms:

- 1 The first period (1945–64) involves a successful adaptation of Conservatism in the immediate post-war era as the Conservatives re-orientated themselves to the state and the one-nation narrative helped to provide a viable statecraft strategy to the mid-1960s.
- 2 The second period is the Heathite era between 1964 and 1975 which was characterized by a failure of statecraft. Although the objective of winning power back was achieved in 1970, the Heath administration was unable to maintain political argument hegemony or demonstrate governing competence. The Heath era ended with Conservatism in a state of flux.
- 3 During the third period (1975–92) Conservatism engaged in a process of adaptation in the form of Thatcherism which abandoned the state

and embraced the market. This provided an appropriate time-specific instrument of statecraft that propelled them to four successive general election victories between 1979 and 1992.

- 4 The fourth period is best described as the post-Thatcherite era. Embracing the end of the Major era and the 1992–97 administration, as well as the period of opposition between 1997 and 2005, this period embraces the three cataclysmic electoral defeats of 1997, 2001 and 2005. The post-Thatcherite era has been characterized by a failure of statecraft with clear evidence of a complete collapse in the four dimensions of statecraft, and more specifically once this mode of statecraft ceased to be of value to the Conservatives, there was an inability to transcend it. This contributed to a prolonged period of electoral rejection.
- 5 The fifth and contemporary mode of statecraft to be considered relates to the Cameronite modernization strategy; built around transcending Thatcherism and the construction of a liberal conservative outlook as a statecraft strategy (2005–). This retains the economic liberal mentality associated with Thatcherism (and Euroscepticism), but welds this to a liberally social outlook in moral matters, and reflects the altered terrain after a generation of New Labour governance. Liberal conservatism provides the basis of the Cameronite statecraft model and the central narrative to this approach has become the emerging notion of the Big Society.

The aim of this introduction has been to demonstrate how the identification of an operational form of statecraft is the eternal concern for the Conservatives, that is, what strategy will secure an electoral mandate (the politics of support), which will enable them to govern effectively (the politics of power). The remaining chronologically structured chapters provide scope through which to evaluate, first, the evolving statecraft strategies and to explain their viability when they have provided electoral hegemony and governing competence, and second, their non-viability when governing incompetence has contributed to electoral rejection. The following chapters are thereby structured in a way that allows the reader to follow the chronological development of the party in each of the time periods identified, leading to an analytical overview of their statecraft strategies.