Author	Campbell Storey
Author Status	Full time PhD, University of Newcastle upon Tyne
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<u>The Poverty of Tory Historiography</u> <u>Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party in the 1970s</u>

Margaret Thatcher's tenure as leader of the Conservative Party provides a sturdy challenge to the historiographical models employed when accounting for the party in the twentieth century. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to examine some of the problems encountered when writing histories of the Conservative Party. Second, it adumbrates the issues unique to Thatcher's subsequent time in office, and the problems thereby posed for existing modes of accounting for Conservative Prime Ministers and their ministries.

The Conservative Party has, to borrow a phrase from corporate America, no 'mission statement'. The Labour Party has its constitution, and the Liberal Party had a phalanx of philosophers and economists to attend their governmental activities, whereas the Conservative Party has a less obviously well equipped philosophical knowledge-bank to inform its thinking. Although they were changed in 1994, the aims and objectives of the Labour Party were clear from its inception. Likewise, the Liberals could call on figures from Mill to Bentham to Green to justify, explain or inform their policies. The governmental and oppositional platforms upon which the Conservative Party fought its elections and governed were diverse, often contradictory and if stumbled onto by a lay passer-by could be conceivably thought to belong to different parties. Contrast the 1992 Conservative manifesto with its predecessor in 1964 and the variations are manifest. Not only are the intentions contradictory in means, but sometimes, the ends also appear to have changed. Nowhere is this contradiction more vivid than in the respective approaches of Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher to the National Union of Mineworkers. Where Heath sought conciliation and consensus. Thatcher sought the decapitation of one of, as John Campbell called it, 'the hydra-headed enemy', of socialism¹. The fact that the Conservative Party can offer successive Prime Ministers with such contradictory style, policy and objectives, highlights the elasticity afforded by the absence of a written credo. There is no hymn sheet in the world large enough for Thatcher and Heath to both sing from.

On a simple and technical note for this historian, the lack of fixed criteria makes for difficulties of judgment. The extent of Labour's success when in power can be assessed

¹ Campbell, John, 'Margaret Thatcher, Volume II: The Iron Lady', London, Jonathon Cape, 2003, p.353.

against the criteria it set itself at its outset; the Attlee government intended to implement the recommendations of the Beveridge Report, and it largely did so.

This absence of shared purpose is not only a manifestation of Conservatism in government; it is also perhaps the party's only shared purpose as a corporate entity. From Burke to Salisbury to Heath, Gilmour and Coleraine, the Party has a deep-seated distrust of intellectuals, and, as it would see it, experts, hence its reputation first gained in the nineteenth century at the hand of John Stuart Mill, 'the stupid party'. When Burke wrote that those who followed reason 'despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men',² he stated the one constant of Conservative philosophy that would echo through three centuries. Lord Salisbury re-stated this belief at the close of the nineteenth century, as did Edward Heath on the eve of the millennium:

No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life as that you should never trust experts. If you believe the Doctors, nothing is wholesome. If you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent. If you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe. They all require to have their strong wine diluted by a large mixture of common sense³

I believe that politicians must be guided by experience, not by theories. Throughout my political life the Conservative Party had rightly criticized socialists for their attachment to doctrinal, impractical ideas. The purpose of politics is to bring benefit to one's country, not to experiment with academic theories.⁴

Distrust of theory, reason and abstraction and instead the use of knowledge, understanding, tradition and experience make for an organization that is much more a state of mind than a party, and states of mind pose significantly different problems for historical study. John Vincent, when considering this subject, neatly summed up the problem:

The way to study Conservatives is to meet Conservatives; and here Leftist writers are at a loss. They resemble early Victorian anthropologists, whose willingness to pronounce on the nature of man bore no relation to their readiness to commune with natives by sleeping in straw huts. Naturally, self-imprisoned in their intellectual ghetto, Leftists concentrate on printed texts, which, in Tory terms, means the ephemeral, the tangential and the epiphenomenal.⁵

Preventing change as a *modus operandi* for government does not make for fashionable historical enquiry, and for a profession whose *raison d'etre* is the explanation of why change occured, a movement whose principle objective is resistance to change does not recommend itself easily to study. Brian Harrison explains it thus: 'when young, historians are not attracted by movements which delay change; when middle aged, they lack the

² Burke, Edmund, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.59.

³ Davies, A.J., 'We, The Nation', London, Little, Brown and Company, 1995, p.49

⁴ Heath, Edward, 'The Course of My Life', London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, p.576.

⁵ In Davies, A.J., 'We, The Nation', London, Little, Brown and Company, 1995, p.4.

time and enthusiasm required for doing justice to the subject'.⁶ Some of the grandest Conservative ministries are those which have appeared to indulge in years of relentless inactivity, such as those of Salisbury or Macmillan. Indeed, there is a strong tradition of curmudgeonly management of change in Conservative ministries, from Lord Liverpool's consummate distaste for alteration, to Peel's obsessive prudence, to Palmerston's dislike of legislation, to Salisbury, Baldwin, Macmillan and so on. Often, these ministries are appointed or elected, following great events; the stillness after the storm. Stated simply, Conservative ministries and oppositions are often not terribly exciting. Sometimes, exceptions appear such as Disraeli, Churchill, Heath and Thatcher, but radical methods and men are the exception rather than the rule.

The Conservative Diaspora provides historians with yet another challenge. Whereas bodies that are linked with the Labour Party typically make their links clear and explicit, such as the Trade Unions, those linked with the Conservative Party do not. There is a broad movement that makes up the forces of Conservatism, which is to some extent the bedrock for the Conservative Party, although often, as with the Women's Institute, organizations positively bristle with apolitical stances. Other organizations such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, and Chambers of Commerce, support the Conservatives more often than not, share members with it, and influence Conservative administrations – particularly the Thatcher and Major administrations - far more than a Trade Union could. At a recent Institute of Directors' conference, Baroness Thatcher alighted the stage to be greeted with a standing ovation; she did not speak, although whether this was the cause of the ovation is not for this author to judge.

Personalities, tenuous links, and the nuances of political association need to be considered when analysing what makes up the Conservative movement and what does not. This challenge is less daunting for historians of the British Left, who can point to Union funds , campaigns and so on as evidence of shared objectives. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is an example of a leftist organization that was clearly associated with the Labour party. In 1983, unilateral nuclear disarmament was a Labour party manifesto pledge, and indeed, many Labour figures, including the present Prime Minister, supported it through both CND and the Labour Party. The nearest comparable phenomenon, and only a recent development, is the campaign for Liberty and Livelihood of the Countryside Alliance, which attracted the talents of Iain Duncan Smith (whilst he was still Leader of the Conservative Party) on its march through central London in defence of 'rural interests'. Conservatives taking to the streets is an unusual phenomenon, and the absence of a vocal and physical presence among Tory special interest groups make them difficult to identify as recognizably Conservative.

The difficulties adumbrated here have left an imbalanced and imperfect literature on the Conservative Party. Nowhere is this imbalance felt more than in the scholarship on the party during the 1970s. The deficiencies which hamper the literature can be distilled into four areas of difficulty: familiarity with the characters involved; immediacy in time; excessive ambition on the part of the scholar; and injudiciousness.

The grand surveys of the party during the twentieth century provide some of the models to which other more specific studies adhere, and as such, are a useful starting point for

⁶ Ibid.

an enguiry into Tory historiography. Lord Blake's 'The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher'7, traditionally has provided the yardstick against which other works are measured. In the bibliographical essay at the conclusion of 'Hope and Glory', Peter Clarke alludes to the longevity of Lord Blake's contribution,⁸ Robert Blake, The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher, [2nd edn, 1985] and Henry Pelling, A Short History of the Labour Party [9th edn, 1985], equally concise and fair-minded, are the standard works on the two major political parties'.⁹ While marveling at the scope of his account, and enduring trenchancy of his analysis, Blake's approach suffers from an over-familiarity with the characters involved, from Macmillan onwards. Blake's taxonomic approach nevertheless provides a useful and entertaining chronology of the party. The principal and most attractive characters in the party's past are pinned to the display case of history like butterflies in a natural history museum. While this is interesting to the lay reader, the more serious reader is left to adduce their own conclusions about the secrets of the party's success. Lord Blake himself acknowledges the dangers of writing so soon after events: 'To put into historical perspective a premiership which ended as recently as 1974 and was one of the most controversial in Conservative party history since that of Peel cannot be easy'.¹⁰ Moreover, Blake makes curious generalizations about the sources available for studying this period: 'There have been scarcely any diaries or memoirs published about the period; Conservatives tend to be more discreet than their opposite numbers'.¹¹ This problem was, of course, a manifestation of the difficulty of writing so soon after the events, as there is now a surfeit of diaries and memoirs of the period.

Perhaps the only other work which seeks to counter Blake for scope and chronological coverage is A J Davies, 'We the Nation'.¹² His thematic approach flatters to deceive. The analysis is unsatisfactory, as within each of his chosen themes, the author provides little more than a catalogued chronology of events related to his theme. There are specific and strange analyses that in some cases are incorrect. For example, he describes Asquith's threat to create more Peers an 'ingenious strategem'.¹³ This is an interesting comment, as Bagehot in The English Constitution, discusses this stratagem in some detail, pointing to it as a critical safety valve in English constitutional arrangements, and thus it was hardly an ingenious stratagem some forty years later.

There are, however, three books, which provide a significantly more cogent analysis of the party. *Conservatives and Conservatism*,¹⁴ furnishes a coherent synthesis of the party over the century, however, its remit extends only as far as 1981, and therefore requires an update to include the Thatcher premiership. A History of Conservative Politics, by

⁷ Blake, Robert, 'The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher', London, Fontana Press, 1985. The first edition of the book was originally published by Eyre & Spottiswood in 1970 as The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill'.

Clarke, Peter, 'Hope and Glory, Britain 1900-1990', London, Penguin, 1996.

⁹ Ibid, p.413.

¹⁰ Blake, Robert, 'The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher', London, Fontana Press, 1985, p. 309. ¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Davies, A.J., 'We, The Nation', London, Little, Brown and Company, 1995.

¹³ Ibid, p.128.

¹⁴ Norton, Philip and Aughey, Arthur, 'Conservatives and Conservatism', London, Maurice Temple Snith Ltd, 1981.

John Charmley, an author often attacked as a Thatcherite, provides his analysis up to 1996, but then fails to discuss the most severe defeat of the party's modern history. Perhaps the most compelling of the secondary literature is *Conservative Century*, edited by Seldon and Ball, which limits its scope by presenting a diverse collection of essays on many untouched areas of party history, such as its regional dimensions. However, the remit of the book causes it to fail in any attempt to supersede Lord Blake as the most comprehensive history of the party.

As well as scholarly literature, there is a host of primary literary material available about Thatcher, largely falling into two categories: autobiographies of her cabinet members, and biographies of her written during her time in office. There are three authors who should be mentioned, who although politicians and intimately involved in her career, have made constructive contributions to the library shelves. Philip Goodhart's *The 1922 Committee*,¹⁵, provides the sole detailed account of the history and workings of the committee which represents and governs the parliamentary party, and indeed played its most executive role to date in the deposition of Edward Heath. Ian Gilmour's various contributions, but particularly *Dancing with Dogma*,¹⁶ provide a thoughtful and sometimes rigorous interpretation of the 'wet' Tory tradition. Lastly, Nigel Fisher's *The Tory Leaders*,¹⁷ provides an insightful account (he was a member of the 1922 Executive Committee in the winter of 1974) of the campaign that resulted in Thatcher's election.

The autobiographies of Conservative politicians of the 1970s and 1980s are as numerous as they are various in quality. Reading the reflections in 2004 demonstrates how divisive a character Thatcher was. The books tend to fall into one of two camps; those that seek to play down their role and criticize her tenure - often their authors were sacked by her or resigned, as Geoffrey Howe¹⁸ and Nigel Lawson¹⁹ were - or by those who seek to identify with her such as Norman Tebbit²⁰ or Cecil Parkinson.²¹ There are some surprisingly readable accounts, usually produced by former journalists, such as Norman Fowler²² and Sir George Gardiner.²³ Alas, there are some missing autobiographies which would have added to our understanding of the period, but for often tragic reasons, were never written; Iain Mcleod, Airey Neave, Ian Gow and Denis Thatcher. Indeed, it was not until 1998 that Edward Heath published his memoirs, *The Course of My Life*.²⁴. There are, of course, also Mrs Thatcher's own two volumes on her life: *The Path to power*,²⁵ and *The Downing Street Years*.²⁶

¹⁵ Goodhart, Philip, 'The 1922', London, MacMillan, 1973.

¹⁶ Gilmour, Ian, 'Dancing with Dogma', London, Simon & Schuster, 1992.

¹⁷ Fisher, Nigel, 'The Tory Leaders', London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1977.

¹⁸ Howe, Geoffrey, 'Conflict of Loyalty', London, Macmillan, 1994.

¹⁹ Lawson, Nigel, 'The view from no. 11', London, Bantam Press, 1992.

²⁰ Tebbit, Norman, 'Upwardly Mobile', London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1988.

²¹ Parkinson, Cecil, 'Right at the Centre', London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1992.

²² Fowler, Norman, 'Minister's Decide: a personal memoir of the Thatcher years', London, Chapmans, 1991.

²³ Gardiner, George, 'A bastard's tale: the political memoirs of George Gardiner', London, Aurum, 1999.

²⁴ Heath, Edward, 'The Course of My Life', London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1998.

²⁵ Thatcher, Margaret, 'The Path to Power, London, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1995.

²⁶ Thatcher, Margaret, 'The Downing Street Years', London, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1993.

Other than autobiography there are some hagiographies of Thatcher, largely written during the 1970s and 1980s, such as those by Patrick Cosgrave²⁷, Ernle Money²⁸ and Kenneth Harris²⁹. These craven eulogies to England's punk Boudicca should be read as primary sources, even as campaigning material in some cases, and can best be redressed by new histories of the period.

There is no shortage of scholarly biography, particularly about Mrs Thatcher. Hugo Young's *One of Us*, ³⁰ provided the first biography to incorporate the appropriate academic apparatus, and is complemented by John Campbell's two volumes on her life; *The Grocer's Daughter*,³¹, and *The Iron Lady*,³², which remain the most recent and comprehensive accounts of her career. Presently, her authorised biography is being prepared by Charles Moore, formerly the Editor of The Daily Telegraph, and will be published after Baroness Thatcher's death.

The absence of scholarly attention to the Conservative Party and Thatcher in the 1970s can be ascribed to a number of themes that are unique to her role in shaping the politics of the 1970s and 1980s. Technically, the availability of sources during her lifetime is unprecedented. Her personal papers have been lodged at Churchill College in Cambridge, where she enjoys the company of Winston Churchill, as well as Neil Kinnock, rather like the graveyard in Wuthering Heights following Cathy's death, lodged as it were between her Heathcliff and her Edgar Linton. All of her papers to 1979 have been released and are available to the public, as are most of those of her contemporaries. Those who have not lodged papers are also available for interview. Papers released under the thirty year rule relating to the Heath government are already available, and as of next year, those of the third Wilson government will also become available.

Mrs Thatcher's gender is the crucial and under examined aspect of Conservative Politics in the 1970s. There are no comparable figures, the only other women on the public political platform at about that time were Shirley Williams, Barbara Castle, Judtih Hart and, although not an elected politician, Marcia Falkender. None of these figures, however, went on to lead a party. On the international political circuit, comparable figures are sparce. Golder Meir, and Indira Ghandi are the only other female post war leaders of large democracies. Comparison with other female leaders would thus prove a weak tool, as the results would be limited by the scarcity of comparable figures Mrs Thatcher's own reluctance to discuss the gender issue is another obstacle; she insisted that it was more important that she was the first scientifically trained Prime Minister. The single instance in which she discusses the 'so-called 'feminine factor''³³, relates to her relationship with Queen Elizabeth;

²⁷ Cosgrave, Patrick, 'Margaret Thatcher: Prime Minister', London, Arrow Books, 1979.

²⁸ Money, Ernle, 'Margaret Thatcher: first lady of the House', London, Frewin, 1975.

²⁹ Harris, Kenneth, 'Thatcher', London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1988.

³⁰ Young, Hugo, 'One of us', London, Macmillan, 1989.

³¹ Campbell, John, 'The Grocer's Daughter', London, Jonathon Cape, 2000.

³² Campbell, John, 'The Iron Lady', London, Jonathon Cape, 2003.

³³ Thatcher, Margaret, 'The Downing Street Years', London, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1993, p.18.

'I was always asked how it felt to be a woman prime minister. I would reply: 'I don't know: I've never experienced the alternative'.³⁴

Her femininity, and its role in her accession to the leadership remains to be studied, and should provide one of the most fruitful and novel lens through which she can be studied.

The cult of personality that grew up around Mrs Thatcher, as early as the 1970s, is a feature of her tenure she shares with few other Tory Prime Ministers, excepting perhaps Disraeli and Churchill. The deliberateness with which Thatcher was 'packaged' for the modern radio and Television consumer only adds to the cult of personality which was encouraged around her. As early as 1977, Thatcher was prepared to, and did, undergo specialist voice coaching for radio;

I have been able to arrange some coaching in radio talk and interviewresponse technique for Margaret. This is primarily in use of the spoken word, but it is of course the basis of TV technique to. Margaret responded favourably to the idea.³⁵

The pioneering techniques of Gordon Reece, Charles Saatchi and speech writing of Ronnie Millar all added to the creation of a strong media persona for Thatcher. The epithets constructed for her remain the most varied, amusing and apposite of any literary caricatures developed for politicians. President Mitterand described her as having the 'eyes of Caligula and the mouth of Marilyn Monroe', while Matthew Parris, her one time assistant and latterly parliamentary sketch writer for The Times, described her as 'a cross between a B2 bomber and a sabre-toothed tiger'.³⁶ The variety of satire provoked by her personality and her politics illustrates the miasma of reaction to her as a woman and as a Prime Minister. Perhaps the most fitting of satires appeared in *Private Eye* in 2001, and commented on the decapitation of a likeness sculpted in stone and stood in the Guild Hall;

I met a traveler from, er, England Who said:- A great big lump of stone Stands in the Guildhall, Near to it, on the carpet, Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command Tell that its sculptor well those passions read Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things, The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed. And on the pedestal these words appear: "My name is Ozymaggias, queen of queens. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair".

The overshadowing of the Party by the cult of her personality not only creates difficulties for assessing her as a Tory Prime Minister. It also reflects the factionalism brought about by having such a divisive character as Prime Minister and party leader. While the Conservative Party had always been typically described as a broad church, it has a

³⁴ ibid.

³⁵ Sherman Papers, AC 63/B1-3-17 Box 3 Archives, Royal Holloway, University of London.

³⁶ Parris, Matthew, 'Chance Witness', London, Penguin, 2003, p.212.

tradition of loose factions, from Young England to the Tory Reform Group. At no other time in its history, however, has the leader himself (or herself in this instance) condoned, supported and employed factionalism as a means of operating within the parliamentary party. Mrs Thatcher herself would ask of a colleague, 'is he one of us?' This sentence could easily bring about the end of a ministerial career, or slight the ambitions of a young MP. Her cabinet making, in the early days of her premiership, was designed to maintain a balance in the cabinet in order that the powerhouse of her administration, the Treasury Team, remained rigorously controlled by those who were 'one of us'. This distinction between wets and dries, as it became, was the central aspect of Thatcher's cabinet making, and created factions within the party which, after her resignation, would force a sitting Prime Minister to label three members of his cabinet as Bastards. The factionalism condoned, encouraged and used to Mrs Thatcher's advantage, was the instrument by which the party slit its own throat during the Major premiership and at the 1997 and 2001 General Elections. Whether it will recover from this consequence of her tenure remains to be seen.

The label 'one of us' referred, at the start of her first government, to a colleague's adherence to monetarist economics. The term 'monetarist', is vigorously disputed by those accused of its practice, but for the sake of concision, it will be employed here. Mrs Thatcher was the first Conservative leader actively and openly to embrace an 'ideology' and put it into practice. So much for Burkean distrust of grand theories, the 1979, 1980 and 1981 budgets were monetarist in intent, application and formulation. The social harmony held as the party's primary objective from Disraeli to Heath was subsumed by a ministry intent on conquering inflation, the trade unions and, as they saw it, decline. Mrs Thatcher is reported to have said;

'We must have an ideology. The other side have got an ideology they can test their policies against. We must have one as well'.³⁷

This ideological and rigid approach to government elicited the greatest controversy in post war British economic management. At one point, 394 economists wrote to The Times deploring the monetary and fiscal constriction which was being applied to the British economy. This divisiveness, mirrored in her micro-management of the miners' strike in 1984, typifies the unbending adherence to a doctrine without sufficient regard for alternative opinion; the very antithesis of the Conservative tradition.

These themes call into question the historiographical model that we can use to explain the Conservative century. The fact remains, however, that in terms of election victories and political longevity, Mrs Thatcher remains the most successful Prime Minister the Conservative Party has produced. Historians must account for her as a Conservative Prime Minister, and that means changing the rubric of Tory historiography to incorporate her leadership. Not only might these changes enhance the model for the 1980s, it might enable the inclusion of other controversial figures such as Enoch Powell into the mainstream of Conservative thought, and acknowledge aspects of Conservative history that have been sacrificed to maintain an outdated model.

³⁷ Davies, 'We The Nation', p. 54.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a critique of the material available in 2004, but it also suggests changes to the rubric of Tory historiography to enable a fulsome analysis of Margaret Thatcher as a Conservative Prime Minister. The first suggestion is to treat the 1970s not just as a consequence of the 1960s or as a precursor to the 1980s, but as an important period in its own right. 1974-1976 was a period of deep crisis for the elite of British politics; two Prime Ministers leave office, two party leaders resign, two general elections in a row result in almost inconclusive results, the role of the monarch called into question, one party leader becomes embroiled in a murder investigation, a referendum is called for the first time, and there is the prelude to a coalition, which usually attends the cleavage in a progressive party, as happened to Labour in 1981-2. In this sense, Margaret Thatcher's accession should be treated as part of this crisis, and not just as the prelude to her ministries. Secondly, greater importance should be placed on 'The Conservative movement' as a whole, rather than just narrow analyses of the parliamentary party. 'Conservative Century', has begun this trend, and it should now be followed by future Tory historians. Thirdly, an acknowledgement of factionalism as a theme in Conservative politics, and also of identification with ideologies. Recent texts such as Ideologies of Conservatism,³⁸ have sought to challenge the accepted wisdom that the party is the 'stupid party', and this approach, not necessarily its conclusions, should be used in the future.

The final words will be left to Newcastle University's own Martin Pugh, who, in *The Tories and the People*,³⁹ wrote that 'The Conservative half of society is still largely awaiting its historians'⁴⁰. In a small way, this paper echoes Dr Pugh's call, and hopes to inform the debate that will address the poverty of Tory historiography.

³⁸ Green, E. H. H., Ideologies of Conservatism, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

³⁹ Pugh, Martin, 'The Tories and the People', Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 2.