

The US Republicans: lessons for the Conservatives?

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Both Labour's victory in the 1997 general election and the US Republicans' loss of the White House in 1992 led to crises of confidence among conservatives. Although there were those in both countries who attributed these defeats to presentational errors or the campaigning skills of their Labour and Democrat opponents, others saw a need for far-reaching policy shifts and a restructuring of conservative politics. This chapter considers the character of US conservatism during the 1990s, the different strands of opinion that emerged in the wake of the 1992 defeat, the factors that shaped the victorious Bush campaign in 2000, and the implications of these events for the Conservative Party in Britain.

George Bush's 1992 defeat was a watershed, bringing twelve years of Republican rule in the White House to a close. Although constrained by Democratic opposition in Congress, the 'Reagan revolution' had, seemingly, ushered in a fundamental shift in the character of US politics. Tax rates had been reduced and there was growing confidence in US economic capabilities. Indeed, Reaganism appropriated a number of the long-term goals that had long been associated with liberalism. In particular, the supply-side policies with which the administration associated itself promised that unfettered market forces would not only increase overall economic growth but also alleviate poverty and address deprivation in the inner-city neighbourhoods. The USA had also, it was said, regained its place in the world through the arms build-up and military intervention in Grenada. There had, furthermore, been shifts in political allegiances. Although there had not been a 'critical' election such as those of 1896 and 1932, some spoke in terms of realignment. In 1980 and 1984, Reagan had attracted a significant proportion of the blue-collar vote, much of which had traditionally been loyal to the Democrats. Indeed, in 1984, he captured 46 per cent of the votes of those living in union households.

How and why was this inheritance squandered in 1992? For Bush himself, the failure to secure a second term was largely inexplicable. His approval ratings had reached 89 per cent during the Gulf War only eighteenth months earlier. Furthermore, he faced an opponent who many regarded as morally

flawed. As Bush's biographer later asked: 'how in the world could the American people have chosen Bill Clinton over him? He never could understand.'¹ However, conservative journals and organisations did offer answers to the question, all of which laid the basis for different political strategies.

The Gingrich generation and the *Contract with America*

The first of these strategies was tied to the personality and politics of Newt Gingrich. First elected to Congress in 1978, Gingrich played a critical part in forming the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS). It put itself at the forefront of attacks on the Democrats, developed a public policy agenda for the Republicans, and sought to win the levers of power within the party.² While some established Washington insiders offered assistance to the grouping, it shared little of the older generation's deference towards Congressional tradition and respect for bipartisan procedures. The COS's efforts were paralleled by initiatives outside of Congress. Gingrich and his associates used a political action committee, GOPAC, to recruit and train Republican candidates

As Ashford notes, Gingrich's thinking defies simple political categorisation.³ He and those around him in the COS and GOPAC embraced policies that built upon those pursued by the Reagan administration, particularly during its first two years in office. They emphasised the role that could be played by cuts in marginal rates for both personal and corporate taxpayers. Such reductions, it was said, would unlock the supply-side of the economy, unleashing entrepreneurial activity, stimulating growth and, in the long term, generating the income required to balance the federal budget. Alongside supply-side economics, Gingrich and his co-thinkers stressed the need for welfare reform so as to end dependency and bolster self-reliance. They also emphasised the importance of addressing rising crime rates. Law enforcement agencies, it was said, required greater resources.

To an extent, all of this was common ground for conservatives. However, the abrasive tone adopted by Gingrich and the adoption of policies associated with supply-side economics created tensions. Many leading Republicans, particularly those in the Senate such as Bob Dole, who served as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and then Senate Majority Leader, took a much more traditionalist approach to fiscal policy and regarded the reduction of the federal government budget deficit as a defining priority. The differences between those committed to supply-side economics and the 'deficit hawks' led, at times, to acrimony and bitterness. In a celebrated insult, Newt Gingrich described Dole as the biggest 'tax collector for the welfare state'.⁴

Despite these strains, the COS progressively established its credibility within Republican Party circles. In 1985, it was in the forefront of GOP protests when the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives insisted on seating their party's candidate for the eighth district in Indiana

amidst fierce controversy about the outcome of the contest. In May 1989, the COS claimed the scalp of Jim Wright, House Speaker by pressing ethics charges that led to his resignation. However, the turning point lay in events and processes outside of Congress itself. There was a profound shift in the character of the political environment and this created a framework within which Gingrich's politics could become mainstream Republicanism. By the early 1990s frustration with government had become commonplace. At times, stronger emotions were also evident. Whereas in the late 1950s, 73 per cent of those asked had said that they trusted the federal government 'most of the time' or 'just about always', by 1992 and 1994, the figure had fallen to 29 and 21 per cent respectively. Such figures were well below those recorded during the Watergate era.⁵ In October 1992, 25 per cent of respondents told interviewers that they were 'angry' with the federal government. A mere 16 per cent were 'satisfied'.⁶

Although fanned by talk radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, these sentiments were grounded in the economic and cultural realities of the period. Following the boom of the late 1980s, the USA went into recession. Unemployment rose to 7.5 per cent and there was a dramatic increase in associated indices of social misery. There were also other sources of discontent. There had been a succession of Congressional scandals. The federal government budget deficit represented a visible symbol of government profligacy and led to high levels of debt repayment. At the same time, many felt that the cities were crime-ridden, welfare spending had created an urban underclass, the schools were failing to teach basic literacy skills and, in the eyes of many white men, affirmative action programmes had reduced their employment and promotion prospects.

A number of the Republican state governors – such as Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin who pioneered efforts to reform welfare provision and was later to be appointed as Secretary of Health and Human Services in George W. Bush's administration – had already begun to respond to these sentiments. There was, however, a contrast between initiatives such as these and developments in Washington DC. For many, the Bush administration appeared distant and uninterested in domestic policy concerns. In contrast to the sense of direction seemingly offered at state level and by the Reagan administration, Bush ridiculed the 'vision thing'.⁷ He also, as his conservative critics emphasised, backed measures that appeared to expand the scope and powers of government, such as the Clean Air Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Furthermore, he had attempted to reach a compromise on gun control by prohibiting the importation of assault weapons.⁸ Most significantly of all, despite his celebrated 1988 election pledge, 'read my lips, no new taxes', he agreed – in a 1990 budget compromise with the Democratic majority in Congress – to an increase in marginal tax rates from 28 to 31.5 per cent.⁹ In Congress, the measure won backing from only a quarter of Republicans.

For many conservatives, this disoriented voters and fractured the electoral coalition that had served as the basis for Reagan's victories.

Initially, Bill Clinton was the principal beneficiary of these sentiments. However, though the November 1992 election brought him into office, it also brought the sense of popular hostility towards Washington DC 'insiders' out into the open. Standing as an independent candidate, Ross Perot, the Texan billionaire, gained 19 per cent of the vote. These feelings of resentment towards the political 'establishment' continued after the election. Indeed, they were fuelled by the actions of the Clinton administration which enjoyed only the shortest and superficial of political 'honeymoons'. Its uneasy compromise regarding the 'gays in the military' controversy alienated all sides and his proposed health care reforms had to be abandoned in the face of widespread opposition.

All of this laid the basis for Gingrich to establish his pre-eminence among House Republicans and, two years later, for the *Contract with America* to emerge. The Contract was a declaration, incorporating three resolutions and ten bills, signed by almost all Republican House candidates. It was not, however, a manifesto. While the Contract promised that the proposed Congressional reforms would be passed on the first day of the 104th Congress, it was not a pledge to enact legislation. It simply offered an assurance that there would be a vote on the measures included in the Contract during the first hundred days of a Republican-led House. It was not signed by those standing for the Senate. Indeed, some senators were opposed to a number of the proposals, particularly the imposition of term limits. The overall role of the Contract has also been questioned. A survey suggested that only 24 per cent of the electorate were aware of its existence. Just 4 per cent said that it was more likely to make them vote for Republican candidates.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the Republicans' electoral victories seemed to vindicate Gingrich's strategy in adopting and promoting the Contract. The Republicans gained fifty-two seats in the House giving them a majority for the first time since the 1952 elections. Not a single Republican incumbent was defeated. The newly elected GOP freshmen – who made up almost 32 per cent of the party's ranks – were committed conservatives who rallied around Gingrich. Indeed, at times, their populist sentiments led them to stake out positions with greater rigidity than Gingrich. The Contract also offered a sense of political purpose and direction. During the first hundred days of the 104th Congress, it gained momentum and acquired the moral suasion of a manifesto. Its adoption also shifted the locus of policy initiation from the White House to the House of Representatives and, at the same time, provided a focus for Congressional electioneering which had traditionally been governed by the dictum that 'all politics is local'.

Furthermore, despite the institutional obstacles that the US political system places in the way of legislative reform, twenty-three of the forty items

in the Contract were adopted. Most notably of all, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed and signed, albeit reluctantly, into law by President Clinton. It ended the system of welfare provision that had been initially established in the 1930s and created in its place the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programme. This imposed time limits on public assistance and introduced work requirements for recipients. At the same time, the Republican victories, and the GOP's legislative offensive, led to a significant change in the character of the Clinton administration. Increasingly, the President appeared to be drawing on a Republican vocabulary. He proclaimed that 'the era of big government is over' and signed the welfare reform bill. He re-emphasised his commitment to the death penalty and school prayer. He also called for the introduction of the V-chip, allowing parents to control their children's television viewing, and signed legislation prohibiting same-sex marriage.¹¹

Despite all of this, the Contract did not renew the conservative revolution in the way that its supporters hoped. Some of the most significant legislative proposals that it included were not enacted. More importantly, the Republican strategy of confrontation with the White House failed. It also created tensions and divisions among House Republicans. At the end of 1995, Congress passed a budget that reduced taxes, aimed to balance the budget within a seven-year period, and restructured some federal entitlement programmes. Clinton vetoed the budget reconciliation bill and a number of associated appropriations bills, arguing that the proposed budget threatened the future of education, Medicare and Medicaid. Instead, he offered compromise solutions. As Barbara Sinclair records:

Republicans were convinced that Clinton would cave in under pressure from the public. When negotiations between them and the White House failed to produce an agreement they considered satisfactory, they several times let appropriations lapse and shut down the government, in one case for twenty-two days over Christmas. Not only did Clinton hold fast, but the public reaction was the opposite of what House Republicans had expected; the public blamed the Republicans, not the president, and Clinton's job-approval ratings went up.¹²

Public opinion – which backed the President by a two-to-one majority – compelled the Republicans to back down. In early January, the Republicans voted to allow federal employees to return to work and the government business continued on the basis of appropriations bills but without an overall budget agreement.

Why did the Republicans lose the battle with the White House? Some attribute the course of events to Clinton's skills as a political strategist, his adoption of a 'triangulation' strategy, and his ability to demonise the Republicans. Clinton was able to frame their proposals, particularly those that

concerned the future of Medicare and Medicaid, as extremist, allowing him both to recapture much of the middle ground and set the agenda for his 1996 re-election victory. Others point to Gingrich's volatile personality, and a succession of incidents that attracted negative publicity. However, long-term trends were also in play. The beginnings of an economic and cultural shift were beginning to become evident and the anger that many people felt towards the apparatus of government at the beginning of the 1990s had diminished. Unemployment levels were falling and crime rates had dropped in many of the major cities. Against such a background, there was less of a popular groundswell or enthusiasm for a strategy of all-out confrontation in pursuit of conservative goals.

Although the 1996 elections returned Republican majorities in both houses, the 105th and 106th Congresses (1997–2001) represented a partial return to more traditional forms of Congressional government. There were few policy initiatives. As Owens records:

On issues like tobacco regulation, health reform and campaign finance, Republicans preferred a wait-and-see strategy, often delaying action, waiting for events to run their course and interest groups to determine the climate of opinion. Issues pursued by Republican leaders were largely of minor political importance, necessitated little political risk and required only small investments of political capital.¹³

Although chastened, Gingrich himself survived as House Speaker until the 1998 mid-term elections. These results represented a further setback for the Republicans. Traditionally, it is the president's party that suffers losses. However, the Republicans not only failed to make gains, but instead lost seats, reducing their majority to eleven. In the aftermath, Gingrich stepped down and the Republican Conference chose Dennis Hastert as House Speaker. While the House Republicans continued to pursue Clinton and impeached him in 1998, Hastert's personality and politics epitomised the renewed sense of pragmatism and caution.

Pragmatism and the 1996 presidential election

Although Gingrich's personality and politics sometimes appear to define the Republican Party during the early and middle years of the decade, other conservative currents were also important, particularly after the 1995–96 budget debacle. Significant numbers of Republicans did not attribute Bush's 1992 defeat to the abandonment of conservative goals but, instead, saw the loss as an inevitable consequence of public weariness after twelve years of Republican rule in the White House. At the same time, they observed, the end of the Cold War had led to a shift in the popular agenda and, against this background, domestic issues came increasingly to the fore. A survey of voters

during the 1992 election campaign suggested that foreign policy ranked only eighth in terms of importance. Bush also had to fight on a number of fronts. In the November election, he faced both Clinton, the Democratic contender, and Ross Perot, whose campaign was weighted against the President.

Bush's difficulties were compounded by the actions of some associated with the conservative right. In April 1992, Dan Quayle, the Vice-President, castigated the television sitcom 'Murphy Brown' for its positive portrayal of single parenthood. The speech, critics asserted, confirmed that the Bush campaign was out of touch with the realities of contemporary life. During the Republican primaries and caucuses, Bush was challenged by Pat Buchanan who had served as a speechwriter and publicist in the Nixon and Reagan administrations. Buchanan, sometimes dubbed a paleo-conservative, offered a right-wing populist platform, calling for protectionism, cultural renewal, the outlawing of abortion and opposition to immigration. Although Buchanan's impact diminished in the subsequent primaries, his primetime address to the Republican National Convention commanded widespread attention. While he gave Bush his backing, he called for a cultural war that would 'retake' the USA.

Bush's defeat in the 1992 election therefore led some observers to a very different conclusion to that drawn by Gingrich and his co-thinkers. It showed that subsequent Republican candidates had to distance themselves from the more doctrinaire and radical forms of conservatism. This form of thinking shaped the course of the 1996 presidential election. After some initial hesitation, the party's supporters – who select the presidential candidate through the primaries and caucuses – threw their weight behind Dole. Unlike some of the other contenders, he had substantial name recognition through his role as Senate Majority Leader and his efforts to win the presidential nomination in 1980 and 1988. He was acceptable, as Mayer has noted, to all Republican interests and factions.¹⁴ As has been noted, Dole had a wary and pragmatic approach. Although he selected Jack Kemp – who was closely associated with supply-side economics – as his vice-presidential 'running mate' and adopted a call for a 15 per cent reduction in income taxes, there were profound doubts about the extent to which he was convinced by such a policy. He boasted that he had not read the Republican Party's 1996 platform and could not therefore be bound by it. Instead, for much of the campaign, Dole concentrated his efforts on criticisms of the Clinton administration. He raised the 'character issue' and questioned the scale of the economic recovery since 1993.

Dole was widely seen as more honest and trustworthy than Clinton. However, as the election approached, Clinton led on almost all the critical issues, notably the economy, employment, the future of Medicare, and education. Furthermore, despite Dole's efforts, Clinton's strategists also succeeded in associating the Republican campaign with the 'extremism' of his colleagues in the House of Representatives. Clinton successfully positioned

himself as the centrist candidate and reaped the electoral rewards of economic recovery. About eleven million new jobs were created between January 1993, when Clinton had been inaugurated, and November 1996, when he faced re-election. Against this background, the budget deficit, which had dominated political discourse in preceding years, had been substantially reduced. By 1996, some commentators were projecting a surplus for the end of the decade. Against this background, Dole was defeated, gaining only 41.4 per cent of the vote.

The religious right

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, the religious (or Christian) right was an important and integral component of the US conservative movement. Spurred into the political arena by developments such as the shift in women's social and economic roles, the secularisation of education, successive Supreme Court rulings (particularly *Roe v. Wade*) and the emergence of the 'gay lobby', evangelical Christians sought the adoption of policies structured around moral traditionalism and family values. In particular, they hoped to outlaw abortion and counter efforts to represent homosexuality and heterosexuality as moral equivalents. However, although the Moral Majority – established in 1979 by the Reverend Jerry Falwell – won adherents, attracted press attention and enjoyed a close relationship with some in the Reagan administration, its overall political impact (if measured in terms of legislative successes) was limited. Furthermore, the organisation was discredited by a succession of scandals involving prominent 'televangelists'.

The Christian Coalition, which was established in the aftermath of the Reverend Pat Robertson's attempts to secure the 1988 Republican presidential nomination, had greater success. By late 1995, it claimed 1.7 million members and supporters who were spread across all fifty states and organised in 1,700 local chapters.¹⁵ The Coalition's understanding of the political process, and the strategy that it developed, were shaped by Ralph Reed, who served as the organisation's executive director from its formation in 1989 until 1997. In Reed's eyes, Bush's 1992 defeat was not a consequence of events such as Buchanan's address to the Republican national convention. Instead, it could be attributed to his failure to associate himself with moral and cultural causes: 'what cost Bush the election was not four days in Houston but the four years preceding the convention'.¹⁶

The Coalition, and the other groupings associated with the religious right, cited what were regarded as efforts by the Bush administration to court the gay vote and its seeming equivocation when attempts were made to dilute the Republican Party's opposition to abortion.

At the same time, however, Reed drew lessons from the sectarianism that the Christian right had sometimes displayed during the preceding years. In

its place, he stressed the importance of coalition building. He acknowledged that born-again evangelical Protestants, the core of the Christian right, represented less than a quarter of the voting age population and did not, furthermore, constitute a homogeneous or disciplined bloc. Indeed, many did not share the Coalition's political priorities. Fewer than a quarter, for example, regarded abortion as a pivotal issue that determined the way in which their votes were cast.¹⁷ Christian conservatives should, therefore, reach out to others.

The process of coalition building took a number of forms. Firstly, limited attempts were made to establish the Coalition's bipartisan credentials by supporting a small number of Democratic candidates. Secondly, Reed encouraged overtures to Roman Catholic voters and, invoking the memory of Martin Luther King, called for racial bridge building. Thirdly, he urged the Christian right to take up 'pocketbook' issues associated with economic conservatism. The strengthening of the family, he asserted, required lower taxation and economic growth. Reed also called upon Christian conservatives to address issues such as health care, crime and education.¹⁸ Fourthly, he backed candidates who were electorally credible, even if they did not subscribe to the Coalition's full agenda. Despite ideological affinities, he withheld support from figures such as Pat Buchanan. Furthermore, in contrast with some of the other groupings associated with the Christian right, he eschewed attempts to tie such candidates to the adoption of specific policies. As he noted in the aftermath of the 1996 election:

We were not about to dictate terms to Bob Dole. He had won the nomination in his own right, and we had no intention of making harsh demands like those that the labor unions and the radical left had made of presidential nominees in recent years.¹⁹

However, although Christian conservatives continued to be well represented in the Republican presidential primaries at successive elections, the Christian right lost much of the influence that it had won for itself earlier in the decade. Indeed, in the 2000 elections, there was evidence that some grassroots Christian conservatives were pulling back from the political arena. According to Karl Rove, Bush's chief political advisor, only 15 million of the 19 million religious conservatives who should have voted went to the polls in the 2000 election.²⁰ Even before this, some reports suggested that the Christian Coalition's earlier membership figures had been overstated and that it had been financially over-committed.

There were two principal reasons why the Christian right lost ground as the 1990s progressed. Despite Reed's strategic planning, the Christian right was undermined by cultural and social shifts. During the 1990s, there was a process of partial 'remoralisation'. After rising dramatically during the years that followed the 1973 *Roe* ruling, which established abortion as a

constitutional right, the number of abortions fell from 345 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 306 in 1997.²¹ Similarly, the proportion of divorces fell from 1985 onwards. At the same time, however, gay relationships and premarital sex became more widely accepted. Furthermore, the Lewinsky scandal did little to erode public backing for Clinton. Against the background of these paradoxical trends, the sense of cultural crisis that had contributed to the growth of Christian right organisations lost some of its former potency, while their emphasis upon moral traditionalism seemed outdated and anachronistic to increasing numbers.²²

‘National greatness conservatism’

A further strand within the conservative movement crystallised around the Hudson Institute, the Project for Conservative Reform, and the *Weekly Standard* during the latter half of the 1990s. Although there were few in its ranks, its emergence reflected a shift in mood among some on the right. In 1997, Bill Kristol, the *Weekly Standard* editor and David Brooks, another *Weekly Standard* writer, questioned the libertarian and anti-statist character of contemporary conservatism. They seemed to have Gingrich and those around him in their sights: ‘In recent years some conservatives’ sensible contempt for the nanny state has at times spilled over into a foolish, and politically suicidal, contempt for the American state.’²³

In contrast, advocates of ‘national greatness conservatism’ called for limited but, at the same time, ‘energetic’ forms of government.²⁴ Both the domestic and foreign policy implications of this were sometimes uncertain, but a number of policy differences with mainstream conservatism did become evident. ‘National greatness conservatives’ emphasised civil society and the strengthening of civic life rather than the market. They called on the conservative movement to loosen its ties to commercial interests and corporate lobbyists. They supported campaign finance reform and stressed the importance of environmental protection. They were reluctant to endorse tax reductions that, as they saw it, benefited only the highest income groups.

In foreign policy, those who talked of ‘national greatness conservatism’ looked back towards Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency. He was, according to Brooks, ‘unshaking in his courage, balanced in his tactics, and righteous in his cause’.²⁵ They called for an assertion of US leadership across the globe based upon ‘benevolent hegemony’. It would not be based upon business needs, a narrow understanding of the national interest, or the amoral calculus of *realpolitik*. Instead, it was to be informed by moral considerations and a broad understanding of both US needs and the contemporary world order:

If America refrains from shaping this order, we can be sure that others will shape it in ways that reflect neither our interests nor our values ... The

decision Americans need to make is whether the United States should generally lean forward, as it were, or sit back. A strategy aimed at preserving American hegemony should embrace the former stance, being more rather than less inclined to weigh in when crises erupt, and preferably before they erupt.²⁶

This approach led those committed to 'national greatness conservatism' to argue that the USA should have challenged Chinese ambitions and its repression of dissidents much more overtly. It should also, they said, have brought about the downfall of Saddam Hussein and intervened more decisively, and at an earlier stage, in the former Yugoslavia.

This form of thinking drew its proponents towards the candidacy of Senator John McCain rather than that of George W. Bush during the 2000 Republican presidential primaries.²⁷ Although there was a significant cultural gap between the Arizona Senator and Kristol's north-eastern neo-conservatism, there was a degree of political convergence. The liaison continued after McCain conceded defeat and gave his backing to Bush. Indeed, McCain sometimes translated the philosophy of 'national greatness conservatism' into specific policy proposals. He distanced himself from calls for large-scale tax reductions and instead emphasised the importance of Social Security funding. Insofar as he backed tax cuts, he argued for mildly redistributive proposals. In contrast with the Bush plans, McCain's scheme would have given nothing to the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population and eliminated tax subsidies to companies

The Republican governors

The governors, some of whom had played a part in shaping the *Contract with America*, and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity (or welfare reform) Act, also played a part in the reshaping of Republican thinking. Their contribution was partly a matter of political style. Although a number of the governors, most notably George W. Bush of Texas, embraced rigorous law and order policies, they also adopted less confrontational and partisan forms of discourse than many in Congress. However, it was not a matter of style alone. There were five significant policy differences between the governors and established Republican politics.

Firstly, the governors' emphasis on the importance of welfare reform and personal self-reliance was increasingly framed in less punitive terms than those traditionally employed by Republicans. The references to 'welfare queens' that had, at times, laced the GOP's rhetoric were displaced by a plea to assist those who faced systematic forms of disadvantage.

Secondly, as Peter Beinart argued, while many of the governors sought to end welfare as a long-term entitlement and, at the same time, cut the tax

burden, they also adopted a markedly different approach to other forms of government provision:

The nation's Republican governors have embraced a conservatism of easy answers. They have cut taxes, slashed benefits for the poor, and cracked down on crime. But they haven't taken on the popular spending that feeds the middle class: education, roads, sports stadiums, prisons, the environment.²⁸

Indeed, some of the governors increased spending on education, the environment and the infrastructure. A report by the libertarian Cato Institute noted there had been 'an unprecedented acceleration of state spending. Republican governors who advertise themselves as fiscal conservatives have been some of the worst offenders.'²⁹ Despite such warnings, the governors' strategy worked well during the boom conditions of the late 1990s. However, it hit difficulties during the economic downturn of 2001–2. Falling revenues forced the abandonment of proposed tax cuts and led to reductions in spending programmes.³⁰

Thirdly, although the governors distanced themselves from the Congressional revolutionaries who had sought to roll back government across a broad front, they also recognised the need for the restructuring and modernisation of government services. In particular, they promoted educational initiatives and urban renewal programmes. Some, such as Governor Jeb Bush of Florida, embarked on radical reform. They tied school funding to test results and endorsed the provision of school vouchers, enabling some parents to select a school for their children. Jeb Bush also put forward urban renewal proposals that rested on low-level government activism. These included small business loans, assistance for faith-based projects, as well as drug and crime prevention programmes.³¹

Fourthly, the governors distanced themselves from the strident moral traditionalism of the Christian right. Although their ranks included some in both the pro-life and pro-choice camps, neither sought to proselytise. Instead, issues such as gay rights and abortion were downplayed as they sought to fashion a form of Republicanism that did not prescribe a rigid moral code for others to follow.

Fifthly, although party identifiers were overwhelmingly white, a number of Republican governors made systematic attempts to court the minority vote. George W. Bush, in particular, actively sought to reach out. As Boris Johnson recorded in February 1999:

Not only does he sloganise in Spanish. He speaks it ... He makes long speeches full of the test score of Texan African-Americans; he calls in Hispanic adolescents who have learned to read successfully, and uses them as props for his orations.³²

To an extent, this strategy reaped rewards. In the 1998 elections, George W. and Jeb Bush won an estimated 49 per cent and 60 per cent of the Latino vote in Texas and Florida respectively. In Michigan, John Engler attracted 28 per cent of the black vote, almost three times higher than the usual numbers of African-Americans who vote for the GOP in presidential elections across the country.³³

‘Compassionate conservatism’

George W. Bush’s campaign for the presidency emerged against this background. It owed much, in terms of the political vocabulary that it employed, to the reforms adopted by the governors. Like both the governors and ‘national greatness conservatism’, it accepted that government could in some circumstances play an activist role.

Bush’s campaign was underpinned by a call for ‘compassionate conservatism’. Although the concept defies precise definition, it is closely associated with the work of Marvin Olasky, a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. He argued that assistance to those in need – through, for example, poverty, drug abuse, mental illness – should be undertaken through faith-based and community organisations rather than government agencies. They could, Olasky asserted, offer more effective and lasting solutions. This was because voluntary organisations would work in a personal and intensive way. Individuals would not simply be regarded as members of a particular category. Furthermore, he argued, there would be a growth in active citizenship. Voluntary initiative would encourage individuals to become more involved in their neighbourhoods and communities.

Olasky’s next step was to ask how faith-based and voluntary organisations could be helped. His first answer echoed a familiar conservative tone. Government should, he asserted, pursue a deregulatory policy so as to eliminate the barriers that voluntary and faith-based initiatives often faced. He wanted, as he put it, to see the ‘calling off the regulatory dogs’.³⁴ However, he went beyond this. He asserted the principle of subsidiarity in the provision of assistance. If the family or neighbourhood did not have the resources to help those needing assistance, there was a place for government backing and assistance. The federal government should, however, only become involved if the other tiers of government – at city, county and state level – are unable to respond in an appropriate way. It should work by backing the activities of voluntary organisations rather than directly intervening itself. However, so as to protect the independence of faith-based and community groups, this is most effectively undertaken, Olasky asserted, by establishing tax credits or, failing that, the introduction of voucher systems, enabling the ‘consumer’ to select a provider. Direct grants by government to voluntary organisations were, he said, the least desirable option.

Although compassionate conservatism was criticised by some commentators for its opaque character, it had three defining characteristics. Firstly, in contrast to some of the notions that underpinned the *Contract with America*, the proponents of compassionate conservatism saw a positive role for government. It was not regarded as simply an economic and political burden. It had a part to play because markets did not clear in all circumstances. According to Steve Goldsmith, a Bush domestic adviser and Mayor of Indianapolis:

It is the marketplace which creates value, but there are individuals for whom the marketplace isn't working, and there is a role for government in facilitating opportunity inside the marketplace.³⁵

In George W. Bush's words, government could play an 'effective and energetic' role. Secondly, compassionate conservatism suggested that the relationship between the apparatus of government and civil society should not be represented as a zero-sum game in which government activity inevitably displaced the actions of private individuals and civic groupings. There could instead be a complementary relationship based upon mutual cooperation. Thirdly, reform was not to be motivated by either punitive or fiscal concerns. Indeed, the delivery of services through voluntary initiative would not necessarily reduce the burden upon the government budget and the taxpayer. As Olasky noted: 'I don't see a likelihood of great reductions in expenditures anytime soon.'³⁶

The call for 'compassionate conservatism' was shaped, at least in part, by popular opinion. It corresponded to the concerns of the period. In the mid-1990s, Robert Putnam of Harvard University attracted considerable attention with the publication of the article, 'Bowling Alone', in the *Journal of Democracy*.³⁷ It charted the decline of traditionally important civic and voluntary organisations. US society had, he argued, become more fragmented and individuals were increasingly isolated. This, he said, was leading to lower levels of social capital and less vibrant forms of democracy. *Bowling Alone* led to calls from across the political spectrum for civic re-engagement. By speaking of active citizenship, compassionate conservatism corresponded with these sentiments.

However, there were also political considerations. Compassionate conservatism not only provided a distinguishing hallmark for Bush that marked him out from other Republican contenders during the primaries and caucuses, but it also had a role in the general election campaign. The phrase 'compassionate conservatism' itself is significant. As David Frum has observed, 'it combines the left's favorite adjective with the right's favorite noun'.³⁸ It thereby broadened Bush's appeal to moderate voters, a significant proportion of whom had backed Clinton. In particular, it enabled Bush to seek higher levels of support from Roman Catholic voters.

British conservatism

In the aftermath of the British Conservatives' 1997 defeat, the need for a policy rethink was widely accepted. Given the magnitude of their losses, few thought that a swing of the political pendulum would alone bring electoral victory, even after two terms in opposition. Instead, it was argued, the party had to distance itself from the ideological legacy of Thatcherism and seek out policy alternatives.

Against this background, the Bush strategy and the concept of 'compassionate conservatism' held four political attractions. Firstly, the use of the term could enable the Conservatives to recapture a vocabulary that had been, for much of the 1990s, the property of Labour and the left. Secondly, it could be used to address issues such as criminality in terms that supplanted simple calls for punitive measures. It thereby had an appeal that extended beyond the party's core constituencies. Thirdly, 'compassionate conservatism' represented a means by which the party could distance itself from its associations with untrammelled individualism. For many, the spiritual essence of the Thatcher years had been captured in her celebrated claim that there was 'no such thing as society'. In place of this, compassionate conservatism was tied to forms of public policy that sought the restoration of the social fabric. It held out the promise of civic renewal, community regeneration and the strengthening of family networks. Lastly, although compassionate conservatism had some originality as a slogan, it also rested on themes, such as the overweening powers of government, that corresponded closely with the traditional concerns of the party's most loyal supporters.

At times, there were signs that compassionate conservatism was being embraced. By 1999, William Hague seemed to be talking in the same terms as George W. Bush. As Johnson noted:

Mr Hague extols the 'little platoons', the churches, the charities which he hopes will step in to the areas of care in danger of state monopoly. Mr Bush talks about the 'little armies' ... Mr Hague speaks of social entrepreneurs; Mr Bush speaks of educational entrepreneurs.³⁹

Hague's trip to the US in February 1999 was trailed as an attempt to learn from, and understand, compassionate conservatism. His schedule included meetings with Bush, New York City mayor, Rudolph Guiliani, Marvin Olasky and Myron Magnet, author of *The Dream and the Nightmare* which emphasised the close association between individual values and poverty.⁴⁰ Sixteen months later, Hague met Olasky again in London and, in October 2000, Hague launched the party's Renewing One Nation team. It promised to 'build relationships with charities, voluntary groups, churches and other faith communities who have frontline experience of rebuilding community life in every corner of our country'.⁴¹ Hague accompanied this with a commitment to

'denationalise compassion'.⁴² He also issued a pledge to establish an Office of Civil Society which would be headed by a Cabinet minister.

Nonetheless, these initiatives had only limited significance. Hague returned to Britain talking in terms of 'kitchen table conservatism' rather than 'compassionate conservatism'. The phrase had Canadian rather than US origins. In 1995, the Progressive Conservative Party in Ontario built its election platform on the basis of both formal and informal meetings across the province. Speaking in Toronto, Hague drew conclusions from the Canadian experience:

In the town halls, living rooms and around the kitchen tables of Ontario Mike Harris [the Progressive Conservative Party leader] went to hear the people of the Province tell him what they thought. This wasn't an electoral gimmick, it was a vital part of putting his Conservatives in touch with the people who support they wanted. We too are determined to be a listening party.⁴³

The imprecision of 'listening' was followed by the adoption of populist themes. As the general election came into sight, Conservative frontbenchers talked of lower taxes, individual freedom, smaller government, opposition to the European single currency and a commitment to renegotiate a number of European Union treaties. They also highlighted the case of Tony Martin, the Norfolk farmer who shot an intruder, and emphasised the growing numbers seeking asylum in Britain. In all, as Collings and Seldon have ruefully concluded, 'Hague let policy bob around like a buoy in a choppy sea.'⁴⁴

Why did Hague pull back from compassionate conservatism? His decision to appears to have stemmed from three considerations. Firstly there was a fear, as opinion polls continued to show a large Labour lead, that the party was losing the allegiance of its core constituencies. There was little scope for radical or untried policy initiatives. Secondly, there were doubts about the extent to which Bush's thinking had a relevance to British politics. Nick Kent, a Tory Reform Group vice-chairman and Andrew Marshall, an executive member, argued that compassionate conservatism rested on the minimalist notions of government that formed the basis of US political culture. In countries such as Britain, individuals expected government to play a much more important role in the provision of education, welfare and health care. Such responsibilities could not be handed to charities and faith-based organisations. Much more, they suggested, could be learned from Bush's attempts to win the votes of women and minorities. They pointed to his embrace of 'tolerance' and his efforts to dissociate himself from the unrestrained 'materialism' of earlier years. The Conservative Party could also, they said, make electoral inroads if it asserted its opposition to prejudice much more vigorously and adopted a more visionary approach to issues such as education.⁴⁵

Thirdly, Hague's ability to impose a radical restructuring of the party's goals was constrained by ideological differences within the parliamentary party. Although political circumstances drew many influential Conservatives towards 'post-Thatcherism', there were different priorities and emphases. Indeed, some observers felt that prominent frontbenchers were pursuing their own distinct and personalised agendas (which were tied in some instances to post-election ambitions) and there was a reluctance to rally behind a single banner. In April 1999, Peter Lilley spoke of limits to the efficacy of market mechanisms. While leaving open the possibility of 'internal markets', he ruled out the privatisation of education and health as policy options. Indeed, he committed the party to higher levels of public spending on them.⁴⁶ Furthermore, it became known that Lilley had originally intended to go further and had planned to suggest that important public services were 'intrinsically unsuited to delivery by the market'.⁴⁷ Significant numbers of MPs were antagonised by these assertions which some represented as an accommodation to entrenched interests in the health and education sectors. For his part, Michael Portillo had, from 1997 onwards, talked of adopting a more conciliatory approach towards groups such as lone mothers, unmarried couples and the trades unions. He was increasingly described as a 'libertarian' and, in some representations, pitted against the 'authoritarian' wing of the party. At the same time, David Willetts spoke of civic conservatism. Conservatives, he asserted, must champion civil society as well as the market. He referred to the importance of community, tradition and neighbourhood.⁴⁸ There were also differences about the rate of change that was required. While some advised gradualism, others within Conservative Central Office called for an 'electric shock' comparable with Tony Blair's successful bid to rewrite Clause IV of Labour's Constitution.

However, in the aftermath of the 2001 defeat, there was some evidence that leading Conservatives were again prepared to look across the Atlantic. Iain Duncan Smith visited the US in early December 2001. His engagements included a meeting with George Pataki, governor of New York state. On his return, Duncan Smith commended Pataki's efforts in reforming welfare provision through workfare whereby recipients work in return for public assistance. He also paid tribute to the Republican Party's presidential campaign:

Yet Bush turned the Clinton–Blair tide and a center right renaissance now crackles through the autumnal air in Washington. He did it by boldly invading territory once seen as the Left's . . . Bush took the fight to the enemy and campaigned on issues such as education and welfare reform. It paid off for him; I believe it will pay off for British Conservatives.⁴⁹

Using themes drawn from the Republican governors and the Bush campaign, Duncan Smith argued that the language employed by Conservatives had to take a positive form and shift away from the expenditure cuts

that welfare reform might generate. In place of this, it should emphasise the provision of greater security and self-esteem for those in poverty. Duncan Smith built upon this in March 2002. Citing conditions in a Glasgow housing estate, he called for the adoption of a strategy directed towards the most 'vulnerable' sections of the population. *The Times* noted that 'it might have been George W. Bush himself addressing the Tory faithful in Harrogate'.⁵⁰

Conclusion

George W. Bush's embrace of 'compassionate conservatism' was a conscious effort to distance himself from the forms of conservatism that had defined Republican thinking earlier in the decade. In particular, Bush sought to distinguish himself from the politics that had underpinned the *Contract with America* and the moralism of the religious right. He drew instead upon themes that had been pursued by the Republican governors, although in contrast with the policies that were adopted at state level, compassionate conservatism did not depict community and faith-based provision for the poor as an opportunity to reduce overall expenditure levels.

This strategy, Al Gore's failings, and the mathematics of the Electoral College, placed Bush in the White House. To what extent can British Conservatives emulate his success? Although there are few specific policy commitments, Duncan Smith has adopted some of the vocabulary associated with Bush and some of the Republican governors. There are, however, formidable obstacles if the party's leadership seeks to embrace 'compassionate conservatism' more fully. Portillo's failure to secure a place in the final round of voting for the leadership bid suggests that many of the party's MPs may be reluctant to make a radical break with the past. More importantly, the character of the contemporary Labour Party should be considered. In Gore, George W. Bush faced an opponent who abandoned some of the political territory that had been taken by Clinton and instead turned to themes associated with the Democratic Party's traditions. At times, the Gore campaign had a populist edge as he turned against corporate interests.

New Labour and 'Blairism' are different. They have not only broken with earlier forms of labourism, they also owe relatively little to the traditions of either social democracy or European Christian Democrats. Instead, there are close parallels between Blair's thinking and that of Bush and a number of the Republican governors. There is, for example, common ground in terms of proposals for welfare reform, the modernisation of education, conceptions of active citizenship and the adoption of a 'tough love' approach to those in need.⁵¹ If the Conservatives choose to follow in Bush's footsteps, they face the problem that, although there is a gap (that may yet widen) between the rhetorical aspirations of Blairism and its achievements, much of the ideological space associated with 'compassionate conservatism' is already occupied.

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