

# **A Statecraft Analysis of the Conservative Party: 2001 to 2010**

By

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# **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010 and makes its principle contribution to the literature on this period by highlighting the importance of examining how the party has sought office, something which it argues has previously been insufficiently addressed. In order to do this, Jim Bulpitt's statecraft approach is critically assessed, clarified, improved and adapted in order to provide a framework of analysis that is systematically applied for the first time to a political party in opposition.

It argues that accounts of the Conservative Party under Duncan Smith should look beyond the theme of leadership failure to better understand the complex interaction of the party's putative statecraft and Labour's dominance of the party political context. It examines how the existing literature highlights the failure of the party to make further improvements and it is argued that the statecraft intentions of Howard were cautious because of the circumstances in which he became leader and the requirement to re-establish the Conservative Party as a credible political party after it edged towards the precipice in late 2003. This thesis argues that after 2005, the constraints on David Cameron altered, but remained, and that rather than exploring the party in relation to ideological change or party decontamination, these should be seen as part of the means used to return the party to an electable position, not as ends in themselves.

# **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Ruth, and my late sister Charlotte

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During the course of writing this thesis I have accrued debts of a level that would cause even George Osborne, a man well equipped to tackle imponderable debt, mild perturbation. It seems somewhat inadequate to just acknowledge them here, but I hope it will suffice until a 'Plan B' occurs to me.

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# Introduction

For much of the twentieth century the Conservative Party dominated the British Party political landscape to the extent that it has been referred to as the Conservative Century (Seldon and Ball, 1994). Yet as the century came to a close, the party once considered a master of reinventing itself in order to overcome obstacles to its pursuit of office, seemed more concerned with internecine conflict, tub-thumping populism, and an obsession with Europe than trying to meet the challenge of New Labour. It's not uncommon for a political party to lose one election badly every now and then; but it has been very rare for the Conservative Party to lose two consecutive elections, by such a margin as they did in 1997 and 2001, and even less common for it to lose a third (Green & Cowley, 2005, p. 47). Yet this is exactly what the Conservative Party managed to do, and even in the fourth successive general election it has only managed to recover office through the formation of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. This thesis seeks to examine why the Conservative Party remained in opposition for so long, examining the period between 2001 and 2010 under three consecutive leaders, Iain Duncan Smith, Michael Howard, and David Cameron. Three questions guide the analysis of this problems in asking: why the Conservative Party languished in opposition for so long despite the torrent of advice about what it needed to do to recover; why core vote strategies are seen as so important for understanding the period; and why the Conservative Party seemed to recover so quickly after 2005.

This thesis makes two principle contributions to the existing political science literature: one theoretical, and the other empirical. The theoretical contribution this thesis makes is in the way it critically examines the statecraft approach developed by Jim Bulpitt and clarifies the methodological assumptions Bulpitt briefly outlined for the approach. Furthermore, through a re-examination of Bulpitt's empirical work, and his putative concept of the natural rate of governability (NRG), a better understanding and greater detail of the methodological underpinnings of the statecraft approach is deduced and integrated with Bulpitt's explicit work in this area. As a result, it builds on the work of Buller who claimed that statecraft is in theory compatible with a realist position, by

arguing that in fact statecraft has always been compatible with, and indeed based on, such a premise, and explores the significance of this in overcoming some of the criticisms that have been associated with the statecraft approach. In particular, it is argued that statecraft is neither necessarily intentionalistic, or excessive agential in its approach to explaining political phenomena, and claims that it is in fact built on, and compatible with a sophisticated and dialectical understanding of the interrelationship between structure and agency, and especially the strategic-relational conception of this relationship.

Bulpitt's statecraft approach is transformed into a systematic framework for analysis that has only previously been attempted on one occasion, and in that case only partially. The four component areas of statecraft used here are: party management, strategy, political argument hegemony (PAH), and competence, and they structure the empirical chapters and analysis in this thesis. Whereas statecraft has traditionally be conceived of as a cycle, this thesis argues that there is a constant interaction between the four component areas of statecraft and a 'feedback loop' relationship within in component area, and this modified and improved statecraft cycle is located within the wider party political environment which encompasses the statecraft of other parties, events, party political competition, institutions and dominant paradigms. The result is an improved statecraft framework which it is argued has much to offer political science, proceeding from an assumption that political parties principally seek office, and seeks to understand how they try to achieve this within the party political environment. Finally, this thesis systematically applies this framework to a political party in opposition, the first time opposition has been the principal focus of statecraft analysis.

The empirical contribution this thesis makes to the literature on the Conservative Party is to emphasize the importance of the wider party political environment and the need to highlight a link between the study of a political party, and the practice of party politics, and it also adds to the rather sparse literature of parties in opposition generally. In particular, this refers to how parties seek office and attempt to improve their 'electability' whilst drawing attention to the considerable constraints on a party's ability to do so. Rather than focus just on specific aspects such as a party's

ideology, policy, or personnel as most of the existing literature does, this thesis has sought to highlight how parties and their leaders try to maximize their electability, even if they fail either to maximize it, or to win office. By examining the Conservative Party under the leadership of Iain Duncan Smith, Michael Howard, and David Cameron the importance of seeking office has been analysed and emphasized to not only remedy a deficiency in the literature, but also to highlight the unhelpful narratives that have dominated the way each period is viewed in the existing literature. The narratives of personal failure under Duncan Smith; the narrative of the pursuit of a 'core vote strategy' under Michael Howard; and the pursuit of 'brand decontamination' under Cameron obscure a more nuanced understanding of what each leader was principally concerned with: seeking to return their party to a position of electability in order to compete for office.

Political parties in opposition have often attracted less academic attention than they have done when in office, and this is certainly the case for much of the period of interest to this thesis and this is explored in Chapter 1 (see Fletcher, 2011). It is divided into sections corresponding to each of the three leaders of the party between 2001 and 2010, and whilst there are common characteristics of the literature across all three, there are also period-specific narratives that have come to dominate the way each is viewed.

In particular, an examination of the literature on the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2005 shows that very little attention has been devoted to this period in its own right. Instead, it is treated either as an unfortunate time in the party's history, or perhaps as a precursor to the more successful period once David Cameron became leader. Furthermore, the majority of the literature on the Conservative Party in opposition throughout the period of interest here is descriptive, and is not explicitly theoretically informed, nor does it proceed from an acknowledged conceptual position, and this serves to reduce its explanatory purchase.

It is argued that the period during which Duncan Smith was leader of the Conservative has come to be dominated by a narrative that emphasizes his personal failings as leader, which serves to obscure

a more complex understanding of how the party sought to confront the problems that faced it at this time, by stressing agential failings. For the period when Michael Howard was leader, the dominant narrative is that of the 'core vote strategy' the party is regarded as having pursued in the run-up to the 2005 general election. A narrative is disputed by this thesis.

Although the 2005 to 2010 period has received more attention, much of this concentrates on specific aspects of the Conservative Party at this time, whether that be ideology, Cameron and his personal traits, or party policy. Whilst many of these accounts are excellent, they only concentrate on specific areas or features, and so they can only provide a partial understanding and explanation of the Conservative Party at this time.

In the literature on all three of these periods, insufficient attention has been devoted to how the Conservative party sought office, and looked to improve its electability, and this is a gap this thesis seeks to remedy via the statecraft approach. Before concluding the chapter, the research process is explored, and the metatheoretical assumptions, methodology and methods associated with the statecraft approach are introduced and discussed.

Chapter 2 moves on to outline the theoretical approach that this thesis adopts in order to frame and structure the analysis in the three empirical chapters that follow. It introduces the statecraft approach developed by Jim Bulpitt, which examines political parties from the perspective of how they seek office within the context of the British party political environment and as a result is well suited to addressing both the research questions that guide this thesis and the gap in the existing literature on this area. The chapter outlines Bulpitt's statecraft approach, and reviews the literature on its application both by Bulpitt, and the limited number of other individuals who have utilized a statecraft approach, although it is argued that only Jim Buller has applied it in a way compatible with Bulpitt's original work. Attention then turns to the criticisms and problems associated with Bulpitt's statecraft approach, before arguing that in fact many of them stem from the well intentioned, but limited methodological detail Bulpitt provided about statecraft, which served to

pose more questions than it answered. As a result, it is argued that by ‘reading between the lines’ of Bulpitt’s work, and in particular by deducing greater detail of the methodological assumptions of his approach from re-examination of his empirical work, the established criticisms of the statecraft approach can be refuted. Furthermore, by updating the assumptions of the approach in light of some of the developments in political science in the years since statecraft was introduced, a more robust and sophisticated account of the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the statecraft approach is provided. This applies in particular in the area of structure and agency, and the chapter argues that statecraft is compatible with a dynamic or dialectical notion of the interrelationship of structure and agency, and in particular the strategic relational approach of Bob Jessop and Colin Hay. The chapter concludes by outlining how the statecraft approach is transformed into a framework for analysis. It is divided into its four component areas which frame and guide the analysis in the empirical chapters. Party statecraft in each period is examined with regard to party management, strategy, political argument hegemony and competence, but crucially these are not just discrete headings, and the emphasis is on the constant dynamic relationship between and within these four components as framework is applied in the following empirical chapters.

Chapter 3 sees the beginning of the empirical part of the thesis, as attention turns to the application of the statecraft framework to the Conservative Party under Iain Duncan Smith between 2001 and 2003. It argues that the Conservative Party was in a worse position than it had been after 1997 because after four years in opposition it had made no electoral progress, whilst Labour had received a renewed mandate and electoral approval of their time in office. It argues that concentrating on agential factors for explaining the party’s performance during this period, and in particular the leadership failure of Duncan Smith; or conversely the structural explanation that attribute much of the causation of to the party’s election process from which Duncan Smith emerged as leader fail to do justice to the period. Instead it highlights how Duncan Smith did seek to improve the party’s electability, and tried to create what amounts to a putative statecraft position for the party, in particular by initiating a dual-track policy review process that was designed to furnish the party both with policies it would attempt to sell to the electorate, and arguments which it could use to attack

Labour's record. However, whilst this review continued, the considerable constraints acting on the party and Duncan Smith as leader are stressed, and the complexity of the party political environment is highlighted to show how Labour's dominance of the political landscape in combination with the sepulchral depths the Conservative Party had sunk to would not only act against an improvement in the party's electoral position at this time, but actively worsen it.

Chapter 4 moves on to examine the Conservative Party under Michael Howard between 2003 and 2005. This period is usually regarded as one of failure for the Conservative Party because whilst Michael Howard's tenure as leader is usually regarded as having witnessed more quiescent internal party relations, and more competent leadership, it is consequently judged more harshly for failing to make greater gains in the 2005 election and this is compounded by an overemphasis of the problems affecting the Labour government. The claim that the party pursued a core vote strategy is disputed. Instead it is argued that the Conservative statecraft the party leadership developed at this time had limited aims, and the principle of these was given the depths to which it had descended prior to the removal of Duncan Smith, to return the party to a position where it could credibly claim to be a viable political party: this had to come before it could compete for office. As a result of this and the limited mandate Howard had to lead the party, the limited time available before the next election was likely, and most importantly Labour's continued dominance of the party political landscape, a cautious statecraft which had little risk of imperilling the party was developed to primarily build upon areas of Conservative strength. It is further argued that there is a significant difference between this, and a core vote strategy designed to maximize the turn-out of a party's own supporters at an election.

Chapter 5 turns its attention to the Conservative Party under David Cameron between 2005 and 2010. This chapter differs somewhat from the others because it is a period of party recovery, which sees the Conservative Party proceed from a deeply uncertain position after its third successive heavy general election defeat in 2005, to a point where it was able to gain office in 2010, albeit as the majority party in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. This has usually been attributed to the

damage done to the Labour government by the financial and economic problems, the recession that affected Britain from 2008, or to the personal leadership of David Cameron, although the latter has been criticized in light of the party's failure to win an outright majority in order to govern alone in 2010. This chapter argues that rather than a pursuit of 'change' or 'brand decontamination' the Conservative Party under Cameron is best understood as the pursuit of electability, and the former are the means to achieve this, not ends in themselves. However, it is also argued that the changing party political environment, in particular the deterioration in the dominance of the Labour government, Cameron's mandate which extended beyond the democratic endorsement he received from his party, in combination with a statecraft that exhibited more continuity with the past than is often acknowledged, and an emphasis of the use of rhetoric all contributed to the party's improved performance. Whilst some will view coalition as an underachievement for a party that had enjoyed a considerable lead in the polls prior to 2010, and had been faced with a prime minister who seemed unsuited to the job, this chapter also argues that there is historical precedence for the electorate being cautious about changing a government despite a troublesome term in office. The remaining doubts about how the Conservative Party would govern, lingering and negative associations with the previous conservative administration, and questions over how suitable the Conservative policy platform was for addressing the country's problems, were only likely to be finally dismissed or reaffirmed as a result of the party actually governing. Indeed, the thesis finished with a brief epilogue examining the creation and early operation of the coalition, which presents both risks and opportunities for Conservative statecraft, however, the real test of Conservative statecraft will be how they perform in the next general election, which is expected to be in 2015.



# **Chapter 1**

## **Development Of Research and Conservative Literature Review**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the background for the rest of the thesis, and begins by outlining the three questions that the subsequent chapters seek to address. These questions are not adequately addressed by the existing literature on the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010, which is discussed in three sections under a heading devoted to each of the three leaders of the party during this period and critically assessed accordingly. It highlights a number of deficiencies in the literature, including the fact that very little attention has been devoted to the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2005, and what attention it has received has often treated it as a precursor to the more interesting period after 2005 when David Cameron became leader. Furthermore, the literature on this earlier period is often not theoretically informed, and often implicitly emphasizes structural or agential factors, and stresses a number of overarching themes which it is argued serve to close off a more complex understanding of this part of Conservative Party history.

Whilst the Conservative Party under David Cameron has received greater attention, many of the accounts of the period focus on a narrow area of interest, for example ideology, or Cameron as leader. These are often good, but it is argued that there is a place, and indeed a requirement, for an examination of the Conservative Party from the perspective of how it has sought office, especially given that this is what political parties exist to achieve<sup>1</sup>, and the best way to do this is the statecraft approach outlined in Chapter 2.

This chapter concludes with a discussion of the research process. It explores and outlines the meta-theoretical assumptions that underpin the statecraft approach<sup>2</sup> that this thesis uses to examine the

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, politicians rarely state explicitly that their principle aim is office, for understandable reasons. That said, one possible and recent exception, albeit still implicit, could be Jean Claude Juncker's quote "We all know what to do, but we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it" (Economist, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Statecraft is a term used in several different ways, and is most usually used with reference to statesmanship and diplomacy. Whilst there are common antecedents between the various meanings, the version used here, and outlined below, is based on Bulpitt's statecraft (see for example: Bulpitt, 1983, pp. 50-67; Marsh, 1993; Thatcher, 2002, pp.xvii).

Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010. It argues that statecraft is compatible with, and should be viewed as being based on, a critical realist approach to political science, and the ontological and epistemological implications of this are discussed. Finally, methodological factors and the research methods this thesis draws on are examined.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

In pursuing a better understanding of the period, three main lines of enquiry direct this study:

1. Why were Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard unable to restore the Conservative Party's electoral fortunes, despite there being a vast corpus of advice about what was required in order to do so?
2. Why did the Conservatives pursue what have been termed a core-vote strategy for the 2005 general election, despite the evidence that appeared to show this was unlikely to improve the party's performance?
3. If the problems both within the Conservative Party, and facing it, were so serious, why was the situation transformed seemingly so rapidly in the months after the general election of 2005?

## **1.3 Reviewing The Literature**

### **1.3.1 Literature 2001 to 2005**

Whilst witnessing two leaders of the Conservative Party, it is argued that the period between the 2001 and 2005 general elections has been dominated by two narratives within the academic literature. The first of these is that the leadership of Iain Duncan Smith was virtually pre-determined by the leadership election process, and his personal failings as leader. The second argument, which dominates the way the leadership of Howard is treated, is that the party pursued a misguided core-vote strategy, when they needed to fight Labour from the centre. If anything, 2001-2003 is almost

written off as a mistake; whilst 2003-2005 is classified as a wasted opportunity for the party which should have done better. This only serves to give the appearance that the crucial factor in party performance is determined by leader, when this is only a partial explanation. Once again, much of the literature is historical and descriptive. Whilst this is interesting, the dominance of these two themes serves to close off a more contextual understanding of the party during this time, and the business of practical, party politics during the period are subsumed under the dominant narrative.

### ***2001-2003: The Conservative Party under Iain Duncan Smith***

This period has received less attention that it deserves; although recently there has been a degree of fresh interest in the period when Iain Duncan Smith was leader, and to some extent an attempt to examine the period. However, whilst these are to be welcomed, and are interesting, it is also dangerous because Duncan Smith's leadership is being re-examined from the perspective of, and assessing its significance in relation to, the far more successful Cameron leadership (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.425; Hayton, 2010b; Heppell and Hill, 2010). Once again, such an approach has the same potential for reading history backwards, as those who tend to over-emphasize the leadership failures of the period, compared to the relative success Cameron enjoyed just a short while later. However, Hayton and Heppell (2010, pp.429-430) should be praised for highlighting some of the strategic actions of Duncan Smith, particularly his decision to implement a policy review process and more detailed party political research.

Until Hayton and Heppell began to lead a degree of revision of the period, if Duncan Smith's tenure had been covered at all, it has usually been seen as little more than a two year long mistake along the road to the arrival of David Cameron, or the realization that the party needed to change or 'modernize' (see for example Denham and O'Hara, 2007a, p. 181; Quinn, 2008, pp. 193-194). To view the 2001-2003 period simply as a mistake does it a great disservice, and it implies the leadership were either (ideologically) blinkered, or oblivious to the need for the party to change; or even if the was realized, helpless to achieve it. What the Conservatives needed to do to address their malaise is also taken as written in stone, they needed to move to the centre, and 'modernize' and

they failed to do this. Once again, this downplays structural constraints and places too much emphasis on party change being driven by the leadership.

Similarly, Duncan Smith's personal and leadership limitations are a prominent feature of the literature, his speech making (right down to the 'frog in his throat'), party management and organization are all subject to scrutiny, and he is almost universally found wanting (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a, pp.139; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c, p.727; Denham, 2009b, p.229; Bale, 2010, pp. 135-165; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.433, Hayton, 2010a).

The very tone in which Duncan Smith is discussed is almost universally dismissive, Bale's chapter on the period in what has become the definitive text is entitled 'Simply not up to it' and refers directly to Duncan Smith's leadership abilities, or lack thereof (Bale, 2010, pp. 134-193). For Snowdon, the 2001-2003 period is one where the party was 'staring into the abyss' and this was largely due to Duncan Smith's personal and leadership failings (2010, pp. 75- 119).

It is also worth highlighting that this is how Duncan Smith's opponents portray him, with Blair dismissing the Conservative Leader as 'doing his work for him': Blair doesn't even deign to label him as weak, or having poor judgement, as he does with Major and Hague respectively (Blair, 2010, p. 71; and see Campbell, 2008, pp. 645- 651; Mandelson, 2010 pp. 348- 349; Seldon and Kavanagh, 2005, p. 414). Rawnsley mentions how lucky Blair was with the opponents he faced, a commonly used argument for successful political figures, but it is used to highlight how Blair was especially lucky to face Duncan Smith at a time when Labour faced many serious issues over Iraq in particular (2010, p. 222). The point is not that these arguments are wrong, but that both Duncan Smith's opponents, and his successors, have an interest in maintaining them, and writing-off a two year period of party history as being blighted by leadership failings, it is not only excessively agential, but also downplays the constraints acting on Duncan Smith and the wider party political environment, which was hostile for the Conservatives.

It is also commonly argued that Duncan Smith was fatally flawed because he had rebelled in the parliamentary votes over the Maastricht Treaty. Although there is a degree of truth in this, it should also be remembered that this was used to justify the rebellion of others, not offered as impartial analysis (see Norton, 2005, p.39; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.427; Baker and Sherrington, 2004, p. 356). Other candidates for the leadership during this period also had a more recent record of rebelling, but this is overlooked, and any (behind the scenes) disloyalty of other candidates would likely have affected them in a similar manner (Rawnsley, 2010, pp. 41-53). Duncan Smith is also referred to as inexperienced, and this is deemed a factor for his failure to better manage his party. It should be remembered that he had been a shadow minister (social security and defence) for four years under Hague, and this is a similar or greater amount of front-line political experience than some party leaders have had.

Whilst these reasons are given for explaining Duncan Smith's inability to lead the party, or manage the figures around him, it also serves to highlight individual failings at the expense of a more detailed analysis of the context he was in. Such analysis also absolves some of those around him of blame, and in so doing downplays personal rivalries due to ambition as much as ideology that undermined him as leader. In this regard, those accounts that do examine Conservative party divisions during this period tend to do so numerically, or on ideological grounds, or based on parliamentary voting and rebellions. During Duncan Smith's leadership there were rebellions against the leader, particularly relating to the adoption of children, but also House of Lords reform and the invasion of Iraq (see Cowley and Stewart, 2004b). However, personal rivalries and the difficulty the party leadership faced in both managing the party, and attempting change, in the face of such a dominant Labour government are downplayed.

Despite much of the existing literature emphasizing Duncan Smith's own failings as a principle reason for the party's problems during this period (see Hayton and Heppell, 2010), there is also paradoxically, one prominent argument that stresses structural factors whilst overlooking others. The procedure for electing Conservative leaders, created by Hague in an attempt to shore up his own

position as leader is seen as unsuitable, the principle reason Duncan Smith was chosen in the first place, and also why he struggled as leader (see Alderman and Carter, 2002, p. 584; Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp. 53-64; Denham, 2009b, pp.227-229; pp.53-64; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, pp.427-429; Heppell and Hill, 2010, pp.36-51).

Duncan Smith's election represented the first occasion on which this procedure was used, and it was praised as a way of democratizing Conservative Party leadership elections (Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp. 79-80). However, the split system, which sees MPs select through a series of ballots, their top two candidates for the wider party membership to vote on, is seen as encouraging compromise candidates to get through the various stages, tactical voting to eliminate other candidates; and most seriously allowing the possibility that a leader may be chosen by the party membership, who didn't have the support of a majority of the parliamentary party (see Walters, 2001; Cowley and Stewart, 2004; Denham and O'Hara, 2008; Denham 2009, p.229; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.429).

It is a curious series of arguments that once again, seem to absolve the party's MPs of blame for selecting Duncan Smith, and it acts to damn a leader as lacking the support of his party considering he was chosen after successive ballots of MPs, and a two-thirds majority of the party's voluntary party (Alderman and Carter, 2002). What is worse, is once again, the element of reading history backwards, and how this can subsume further analysis: Duncan Smith was leader of the party for two years, not just a leadership election, it is too easy just to blame the election procedure.

What little discussion there is of ideology during this period is again largely based around Duncan Smith's own right-wing reputation, his Euroscepticism, and the divisions within the party over its direction (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.429-30; Hayton, 2010b, pp. 495-496). In particular, Duncan Smith is described as a Thatcherite, and there is often mention of his having taken over Norman Tebbit's old constituency, and in particular his Eurosceptic voting record (Baker and Sherrington, 2004, pp. 356-357). It is surprising that a man who was relatively unknown prior to 2001, and who hadn't held a role in the previous Conservative government was seen as more tainted by the period

prior to 1997 than those who preceded or succeeded him and who had been involved with previous Conservative governments to a greater extent.

Once again, this overlooks the context of the period and clouds the analysis of the way Duncan Smith began his leadership with a pledge to ‘change the party’, and fight for the ‘centre ground’ (Duncan Smith, 2001b; and see Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.430). Duncan Smith’s failure to achieve this is attributed to the leadership failings discussed above, but also to ideology, and implies he didn’t understand the need for party change, or in the language of this thesis, improving party statecraft. It also gives the impression of the 2001-2003 period being little more than a continuation of the problems that beset the party under Hague (see for example Broughton, 2004, p.352). There is a danger in this narrative, because it emphasises Duncan Smith’s ideology as the reason for the poor performance of the party, despite clear indications in the language he used upon becoming leader, that he realized the party needed to talk less about Europe, and fight on the centre ground. Once again, this argument absolves other senior Conservatives of responsibility for the problems the party faced, and is excessively agential in the way it deals with the wider party political context, and difficulties that would have faced any leader trying to change the party.

As outlined above, the existing literature on the period of Conservative history between 2001 and 2003 is deficient in a number of ways. The first problem is how little attention it has received at all: there are comparatively few academic or popular accounts of this period. Secondly, of the attention it has received, very little addresses the period in its own right, in many cases it is examined in relation to later periods of Conservative history, and in particular in relation to the party under Cameron which is seen as more successful; or as a continuation of the factionalism from before 2001. A third problem, and the most serious, is the extent to which some accounts highlight agential factors, and in particular Duncan Smith’s failings as a principle cause of the party’s problems during this period; although there is one prominent line of argument that emphasizes structural factors and the importance of the Conservative leadership selection procedure. What is required is an approach

that draws together these themes, analyses the period in its own right, and places it within the party political context to understand statecraft failure under Duncan Smith.

### ***2003-2005: The Conservative Party under Michael Howard***

Three themes dominate the literature on Michael Howard. The first is that he was regarded as a strong and experienced leader, in contrast to his predecessors. The second is that this period represents a 'false dawn' meaning that the Conservatives could have done better in the 2005 general election, given Labour's governing and internal problems. The literature argues they didn't because of the third theme, namely the way the party ran a bad election campaign on the basis of a core-vote strategy in 2005. These themes are outlined here. As with the 2001- 2003 period, there is relatively little literature focussing solely on this period. Furthermore, much of what there is concentrates its attention on the general election, and the subsequent leadership election at the end of Michael Howard's leadership.

When Michael Howard became Conservative leader in 2003, the party was in a mess. Duncan Smith had just been humiliatingly forced from the leadership after senior MPs went public with calls for him to go. Howard became leader unopposed as colleagues rallied round his candidature for the sake of the party. As a result, the internal disputes and dissent that had dogged the previous two leaders seemed to evaporate, and the Conservative Party appeared more united than it had done for some time (Roth, 2004, p. 362; Seldon and Kavanagh, 2005). The fact that Howard became leader by acclamation is seen as a key factor that significantly strengthened his position compared to Duncan Smith, who had failed to win the support of his parliamentary colleges under the formal leadership election procedures (see Green and Cowley, 2005, p. 47; Roth, 2004, p. 362; Seldon and Kavanagh, 2005; Bale, 2010 pp.194-196). However, this has the potential to considerably understate the limitations of such a mandate because although over half the parliamentary party nominated him as a leadership candidate, he was not subject to any form of democratic contest and received no democratic legitimacy. It also ignores the fact that people chosen to be a 'safe pair of hands' are expected to be just that, had Howard tried to be too radical, and not had a comparative and quick



improvement in the party's performance, it's likely this mandate would rapidly have deteriorated (see Norris and Wlezien, 2005, p.662). It was fairly obvious that given his background, and his age, in combination with the way he was elected, that other potential leadership candidates had stood aside to allow Howard to 'steady the ship' (Bale, 2010, p. 195-196; Snowden, pp. 127-129). However, this also required the other potential candidates to delay their own ambitions, and Howard, and those around him, would have been aware of that.

Once anointed, Howard is regarded as having quickly established himself as a strong leader. He performed well at Prime Minister's Questions, getting the better of Tony Blair in several of their early exchanges, and received favourable media coverage (Rallings and Thrasher, 2004, p. 394; Roth, 2004, pp. 362-363; Green and Cowley, 2005, p.56; Evans and Anderson, 2005, pp.819-820; Lambe, Rallings and Thrasher, 2005, p.338-339; Price, 2010). Howard is even seen as having achieved a modicum of success in distancing himself from his past as one of the Major government's most prominent figures (Roth, 2004, p. 365). However, there is a degree of paradox here, because because of his stronger leadership, and seemingly more united party, in light of the performance in the 2005 general election, the judgement on Howard is more severe (Seldon and Snowden, 2005a, pp.146-147; Crick, 2005). It is interesting that this analysis both reinforces agential arguments about the autonomy a party leader has to lead at any particular time, and it also focuses on the election as a way of assessing Howard's performance, obscuring a more detailed analysis of the whole period.

In contrast with the 2001-2003 period, after 2003 the Conservatives receive more attention in relation to the governing Labour Party. Whereas under Duncan Smith the Conservatives are regarded as being in such a mess that there's little point locating them in the wider party political landscape, after 2003, because they are seen as more united and strongly led, this becomes a factor once again (see for example Wring, 2005; Seldon and Kavanagh, 2005). In addition to this, Labour is seen as being vulnerable because during Howard's time they missed some economic targets, but in particular the situation in Iraq deteriorated further, and the government seemed to be in difficulty

because serious questions were being asked about the legitimacy of the case Labour made for the invasion. Divisions within the Labour Party over the invasion of Iraq had also been further exposed and were particularly targeted at their leader, which raised the prospect of leadership disputes between Blair and Gordon Brown which would remain until 2007 (Whiteley et al, 2005, p.811).

Howard is regarded as having performed poorly, because he failed to capitalize on the problems affecting the Labour government, particularly Iraq which the Conservatives found difficult because they had supported the invasion (Seldon and Snowden, 2005a, pp.140-142). Yet the problem with the literature is the way Labour's 'problems' are stressed, and contrasted with the Conservatives' failure to capitalize on them (see for example Dorey, 2006, pp. 152-153). In this light, disenchantment with Labour, although this often means Blair, is emphasized because of the damaging political effects of the Iraq War and its deterioration into sectarian conflict, and which in combination with domestic protests opposing top-up tuition fees gave the appearance of an unpopular government (Seldon and Snowden, 2005c, pp.729-730). Perhaps it is unjust to suggest that there may be a degree of normative bias in the way the Labour government is treated, and commentators attribute too much significance to the impact of these events on the electorate, important though they were, because of their proximity to the issues. It is also difficult to draw a direct line between mass protest and genuine government unpopularity amongst the wider electorate (see BBC News, 2003h). It is argued here that Iraq and top-up fees were important issues, but they were not issues of great saliency for much of the electorate compared to the economy and public services; and they were also difficult issues for the Conservatives to capitalize on because firstly they supported the Iraq war (Wring, 2005, pp. 717-718) and secondly trust in politicians as a whole was deteriorating at this time (Stayner, 2004, pp. 433-434; Kettell, 2006, p. 143-158).

Opposition parties have often gained false hope from evidence that a mid-term government is unpopular, only to find that this is rather different to *electoral* unpopularity or that support will switch to them as a result (Sked and Cook, 1993, pp. 578-587; Rosen, 2011, pp. 155-158). Whilst there is evidence that there was a growing sense among the electorate that the expectations of 1997

had not been fully met by Labour, which was always likely to happen given the scale of expectation, this should not be confused with dissatisfaction with the Labour government over specific issues of electoral saliency (Green, 2011). On the issues that still carried far greater electoral saliency, like the public services and the economy, Labour still retained a significant polling advantage, so it is dangerous to place too much emphasis on the how important the Conservatives' attempts to capitalize on Iraq really were. Furthermore, the issues which gained most coverage for the damage they were doing to Labour, actually affected their leader, Tony Blair, much more than the wider party (Powell, 2010, pp. 260- 289; Price, 2010, pp. 350-356). If anything, this also obscures a more careful analysis of the Conservative Party because it places too much importance on an analysis of their performance in debates on Iraq, at the expense of the more electorally significant aspects of the party statecraft.

Above all, the treatment of the Conservative Party, and in particular Howard's leadership, is judged according the 2005 election, and what is widely regarded and criticized as a misguided core-vote strategy (Seldon and Snowden, 2005, 731-736; Denham and O'Hara, 2007a, pp. 178-185; Quinn, 2008, pp. 195). The Conservative campaign has come to be seen as dominated by a concern with asylum and immigration, which commentators and analysts attribute to Howard's right-wing ideology, or because of a desperate need to shore-up the Conservative 'core-vote' in an election they couldn't win, or perform as well as many thought they should (Wring, 2005, p. 719). This is usually reinforced because Howard drafted in Lynton Crosby to direct the party's election campaign, and he is associated with the issue following his work on three successful election campaigns for the former Australian Prime Minister John Howard (Wring, 2005, p. 719; Dorey, 2006, pp. 154-156; Snowden, 2010, pp. 149-151).

There are three problems with this argument. The first is that the dominance of the core vote theorem concentrates analysis on the latter stages of the Howard leadership, and reduces the way the party engaged with other issues as either secondary in nature or disingenuous, because they were never really committed to them. Secondly, there is a difference between a 'core vote strategy' and

pursuing policies that appeal to your party's core vote for other reasons; it can be a way of attempting to increasing potential support for the party by campaigning on issues where it has greater credibility (see Quinn, 2008, p. 190; Green, 2011, pp. 760-761). Finally, it is also an argument that is excessively agential, because it places too much emphasis on the ability of the Conservative Party to directly challenge Labour either on the centre-ground, or on the issues of greatest saliency to the electorate, especially in the time available between late 2003 and an election in the first half of 2005. In this thesis it is argued that the 2005 general election campaign needs to be placed in greater context and that the Conservatives tried to find a way to tackle labour's dominance of the key electoral issues, but failed to make much progress in part because of strategic and tactical errors, but also because of the hostile party political environment they faced. In the absence of this, for good statecraft reasons they played to their strengths, but that is rather different to pursuing a core-vote strategy, or pursuing a right-wing campaign for purely ideological reasons.

One further problem with the literature relates to a point made at the start of this section, and that is the tendency for the 2003-2005 period to be assessed in relation to the period after 2005, as was the case with 2001-2003. In particular there is an inconsistency in the way the leadership election which saw David Cameron become leader is analysed. Howard is widely seen as having paved the way for Cameron to become leader as a result of his delay in standing down after the defeat in 2005, and the rapid promotion of a number of young 'modernizers' in the months prior to the election (Crick, 2005, p. 472; Bale, 2010, pp. 229-254). This is curious, because it seems to contradict those arguments which either claim Howard was ideologically incapable to understanding the need to change the party; or that he thought believed in a core vote strategy. This thesis argues that this action shows that Howard both understood the need for the party to change, both upon assuming leadership and prior to the election, but that he was also aware of the obstacles he personally, and his party generally faced in doing this. It supports the notion that changing or reformulating party statecraft requires more than just the right policy mix, and not just that the party realized it needed to change as a result of a bad campaign, and shocking defeat in the 2005 election.

As outlined above the literature on the Conservatives between 2003-2005 is deficient in several areas. Little of it concentrates on the period in its own right and too great an emphasis is placed on the general election and the way the party fought the election, which serves to obscure a more thorough analysis of the whole two years of his tenure. Furthermore, Labour's problems are exaggerated, as is the ability of Howard to change the Conservative Party. In Chapter 4, these themes are drawn together, and a statecraft analysis will highlight the considerable constraints on the party and its leadership at during this period.

### **1.3.2 Literature 2005 to 2010**

If the previous two periods have received relatively little attention, this picture altered after 2005. It started as a trickle, then a steady flow, and it remained so until the time of writing as the Conservative Party appeared to be changing and became interesting again. It did not take long after Cameron became leader for the literature on the Conservative Party to grow, and the range and focus of the works has been greater than that examining the years prior to 2005. However, once again, much of the attention has been descriptive, largely journalistic, and not theoretically informed. Whilst much of this is good, it does give limited space for both detail and due consideration of the context within which the Conservative Party operated. It is also argued that much of the analysis has paid insufficient attention to the inevitable vagaries of studying a party in opposition, and the rush to publish means that some works have quickly become outdated. This section examines the literature focussing on this period, and concentrates on identifying a number of deficiencies that emerge from the dominant themes and dualisms that typify the coverage it receives. One of the most important areas to highlight is how much of the work on the Conservatives after 2005 has focussed on a specific subject area, whether that is on Cameron personally, ideology, or on policy. Whilst many of these are good, it is argued that the statecraft approach has the potential to draw these strands together.

### ***2005-2010: The Conservative Party under David Cameron***

The attention of the literature from this period concentrates its attention of three main areas. The first is the focus on David Cameron himself; the second are those that seek to define or locate the ideology of David Cameron or the Conservative Party; and the third revolves around party modernization. These three areas are outlined and discussed here.

As with all three periods under discussion here, much attention has been devoted to the circumstances from which David Cameron emerged as leader of the party, and there have been several accounts of the leadership contest, particularly focussing on Cameron's speeches (Denham and Dorey, 2006, pp.36-41; O'Hara, 2007b, pp.39-40; Denham and O'Hara, 2007b, pp.417-419; Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp.133-168). This marks the beginning of what would be a sizable focus in the literature on Cameron, and the significance of his leadership qualities, with emphasis on the extent to which he represents a break with the past (Elliott and Hanning, 2007, p.295). With this however, care must be taken to mitigate the risk of overemphasizing the significance of one person, and rapidity of change; and both ignoring the developments after late-2005, and developments in the wider political context, which largely became more benign for Cameron, relative to his predecessors (Bale, 2009, pp.222). However, it is also important not to reduce the Conservative Party's improvement after 2005 to a consequence of the poor performance of both the Labour Party and the wider economy: a theoretically informed, and contextually rich account is required to avoid reductionism.

There has been much more discussion of Conservative ideology during this period, but this is not unproblematic. It has been largely dominated by attempts to locate Cameron within pre-existing frameworks or schema. Amongst the first of these was Kerr's article examining the 'new consensus' between Labour and the Conservatives following Cameron's election as leader (Kerr, 2007, p.63). Furthermore, there have been a number of attempts to locate Cameron (and the assumption is often that the wider party remains further to the right) on an ideological scale between 'Blairite' and

‘Thatcherite’ (see Evans, 2008, p.313; see also Kerr et al, 2011, pp.206-207; McAnulla, 2010a, p.293; O’Hara, 2007a, p.184).

Whilst these accounts are interesting and informative in their own right, there is also a danger that attempts at such classification risks closing off other lines of inquiry, and being undermined by the inevitable inconsistencies, change and even incoherence of opposition. As a result, there is the potential to downplay the driver of much of the ideological rhetoric of Cameron, which was designed to return the party to electability, not to definitive ideological position. This inevitably involved a degree of deliberate inconsistency to maximize support for, and minimize opposition to, Cameron’s leadership plans. In essence, these approaches have the potential to further emphasize the disconnect between the study of British politics and political practice, and reify the understanding of party ideology (for more on the disconnect see Bevir, 2005).

Leading on from this, there has been a significant focus on Cameron’s strategic thinking, in particular his ‘modernization strategy’ and ‘decontamination strategy’ designed to improve the image of the party and encourage people to look again at the Conservatives (Bale, 2008b, p.277; Carter, 2009, p.234; Green, 2010a, p.668). There are a number of issues with this literature, the first of which is the way it is understood, especially the modernization strategy. It is often treated as though it was a concrete strategy to modernize the party; and consequently when analysed against the statecraft intentions, the extent of its implementation is found wanting (see Denham and Dorey, 2006, p.42; Dorey, 2007a, p.139). The problem with this is that it downplays the rhetorical nature, and strategic aspects of the modernization agenda, and indeed much of opposition politics generally (see Fletcher, 2011 for a consideration of this). For over 20 years, modernization has been a buzz word of British opposition parties yet impact should be judged according to how the modernization strategy impacts upon the way the party is perceived, not whether it has ‘actually modernized’ (see Osborne, 2010).

One further aspect of the way the process of 'change' and modernization of the party is covered, is the assumption that the 'decontamination strategy' was deliberately designed to improve the image of the party in the short-term. Once this was accomplished the assumption in the literature was for Cameron to return to 'red-meat' Conservative policy areas (see in particular Bale, 2008b, p.278). This overstates both the ideological elements of the strategies and of the parliamentary party more broadly. It is argued the party's performance mattered far more than the details. Part of this is based on, and with a degree of hindsight, the supposed 'move to the right' which Cameron made in the summer of 2007 (Bale, 2008, p.278; Dorey, 2009, p.263; Snowden, 2010, pp.243-282). However, it is argued that the ideological aspect of this move was very much secondary to both normal fluctuations in the relative performance of the party and Labour's tactics after Gordon Brown became leader. Furthermore, it seems strange that there is an assumption that because the previous three leaders of the opposition had 'moved to the right' during their tenure; it was almost predetermined that Cameron would suffer the same fate. Contextual factors were subsumed into a factor of party ideology.

Throughout Cameron's leadership, and in particular following the election result in 2010, much attention has been devoted to the performance of the Conservative Party. Based largely on polling data at several points since 2005, it has been claimed that the Conservatives weren't doing well enough in the polls, and more recently that they failed to do as well as they could have in the election (see in particular Curtice, 2009, p.182 for expectations of the election; and see Green, 2010a, p.686). Again these are interesting, but care needs to be taken to ensure that an air of certainty isn't injected into the assumptions behind the analysis. There was no certainty that the Conservatives should have been better placed to win in 2010; and there is a danger in attributing too much to analyses of the previous historical positions of parties and their subsequent electoral performance.



## **1.4 The Research Process**

### **1.4.1 Introduction**

This section briefly examines the origins of the research questions this thesis seeks to address, before attention turns outline some of the meta-theoretical assumptions upon which the analysis proceeds and the methods used to conduct it.

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, this research stems from many years of interest in British politics, and Conservative Party politics in particular. This remained undimmed despite the negative connotations associated with the Harry Enfield ‘Tory Boy’ label that was attached to any young Tory; and the later consternation from academics that any right-minded<sup>3</sup> individual undertaking doctoral research could even vote Tory, let alone join the party.

As a party member and activist for several years before commencing a politics degree, and becoming a local councillor part way through that degree, questions about the reasons why the Conservative Party was dominated by a sepulchral atmosphere, seemingly destined to remain in opposition, were quite likely to be of interest. Confronting this situation was the plethora of ‘advice’ in the form of popular comment about what the Conservative Party needed to do to regain a sense of electability, and it is this paradox that intrigued me. In essence, like many doctoral projects, this began from a personal interest in trying to understand why the Conservative party languished in opposition for so long, despite some ‘obvious’ solutions to the Party’s problems. The focus of the research evolved considerably during the course of the research undertaken, in part driven by the Conservatives moving from languishing in opposition, to eventually returning to office in coalition. As a result, it covers the partial recovery of statecraft, as well as statecraft failure.

### **1.4.2 Informing Of Methodology: Ontology and Epistemology**

Much of Chapter 2 is concerned with the methodological assumptions that form the basis for the empirical chapters that follow. However, in this section it is worth exploring how this thesis engages

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<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, an easy riposte to that statement...

with a key area of meta theoretical debate. Grix refers to ontology and epistemology as “to research what ‘footings’ are to a house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice” (Grix, 2004, p. 57).

The ontological and epistemological foundations upon which research is built have come to be the starting point for any discussion of the research process and serve to inform the methodology and methods used in political science research (Burnham et al, 2004, pp. 23-29; Sayer, 1992, pp. 46-84). It is worth briefly outlining the implications of this for statecraft, because it is argued in Chapter 2 that many of the criticisms it has attracted stem from the ambiguous nature of the ontology and epistemology Bulpitt based his research on (see Buller, 1999). Buller contends that the statecraft approach is compatible with a realist meta-theoretical approach; which this thesis agrees with, but also presents the case that much of the applied work using a statecraft approach has already, albeit implicitly, been located on realist foundations.

As argued in Chapter 2 the statecraft approach is compatible with, and this thesis is based upon, realist principles (see Buller, 1999). As a result, it has a foundationalist ontology which holds that that the world exist independently from individual understanding of it, that social phenomena have causal powers, and that we can make causal statements about them (Hay, 2002, pp. 61-62). Epistemologically, a realist approach contends that not all social phenomena or structures can be observed directly, and may even present a misleading appearance (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, pp. 30-31). Despite this, “positing their existence gives us the best explanation of social action” (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p. 30). Nestling at various points along the scale between positivism and interpretivism, realists are concerned with “combining a modified naturalism with a recognition of the necessity of interpretive understanding of meaning in social life” (Sayer, 2000, p. 3).

The combination of a foundationalist ontology which allows for the search to “uncover causal links which explain the relationship between outcomes and the processes which generate change” allows for great complexity or ‘depth ontology’ and necessitates interpretation and explanation rather than just description of social phenomena, because generative mechanisms may not be directly

observable (Kerr, 2003, p. 122). In addition to this, when interpreting the interaction of structure and agency that comprise social phenomena, it is necessary to allow for hermeneutics which provides for “an understanding of the differential meanings which agents infer upon their actions” and the context in which they operate<sup>4</sup> (Kerr, 2003, p. 123; and see Marsh and Furlong, 2002, pp. 18-19). The statecraft approach discussed in Chapter 2 builds on these ontological and epistemological foundations and provides the framework for the analysis in this thesis.

### **1.4.3 Research Methods**

The range of research methods available to critical realists is, depending upon the subject being examined, wide, and those utilized in this thesis are discussed here. (see Sayer, 2000, pp. 18-19). Whilst the subject under investigation may narrow the field available to a particular set of questions, this thesis draws on a number of evidential sources. Because the analysis here is focussed on a party in opposition, rather than the typical use of statecraft to study government, there is no trail of legislation or government action to examine. In opposition, policy positions are usually more ethereal, based to a larger extent on rhetoric rather than paper, subject to change and the level of commitment to them can be more difficult to gauge (Fletcher, 2011). However, it is argued that party rhetoric is important in the formulation or reformulation of party statecraft. Speeches and in particular the media (print, and latterly, increasingly internet) allow for this to be examined in the absence of the more concrete trail of legislation although which has the potential (mis)lead the researcher into a hunt for policy consistency that ignores wider statecraft.

#### ***Polling Data***

Quantitative data is not drawn on directly, but secondary polling data is analysed qualitatively. Whilst the use and reliability of polling data can be frowned on, it does have utility for statecraft analyses. Rather than being treated as a factual assessment of a party’s performance at any given time; polling data is used as a way of gauging aspects of party statecraft between elections. In this sense it gives an indication of how parties are performing relative to each other, and also how they

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<sup>4</sup> Questions of structure and agency are discussed in greater length later in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

perform in particular parts of the party political process and policy areas (Butler and Kavanagh, 2002, pp. 119-122). Where possible, data from sources that consolidate data from a range of polling companies and compilers is used, to minimize the chances of basing statements on eccentric or biased data. It used by politicians themselves<sup>5</sup> and the media to assess party performance, it is also contemporaneous to the events being studied, and is consequently beneficial for analysing the components of party statecraft (Burnham et al, 2004, pp. 81-83).

### *Secondary analysis of literature*

Existing academic literature relating to the period under study is analysed under the statecraft framework. As discussed in the following chapter, the statecraft approach was formulated as a way of drawing together a macro-analysis from the common themes of the existing (interdisciplinary if appropriate) research where possible (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 19- 20). This has to be done with care, and it is important to maintain an awareness of the explicit or more likely implicit perspective from which existing literature is written. Conservative Party policy documents are used where available, as are biographies, diaries, scholarly and semi-scholarly articles written by political figures, insider and participant accounts. All of these entail benefits and potential dangers (for a discussion see Grix, 2004, pp. 130-137). Party documents are obviously just that, they often have policies or at least a perspective to promote. Political biographies and insider or participant accounts may have an ‘axe to grind’ or they may exaggerate their role or the culpability of another (Richards, 1996). It is also the case that being an insider is no guarantee of interpretive accuracy when attributing causation for political and social phenomena, but despite these failings, they give insights into areas that would otherwise be difficult to study (Burnham, et al, 2004, p. 169; Gamble, 2002, pp. 141-142). Conservative Party archive material is subject to a general 30-year rule, and although in some circumstances access to material from between 1983 and 1997 may be applied for, everything post-1997 is closed (Conservative Party Archive, 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that whilst politicians often claim to be ignorant of polling data, or they seek to undermine polling data that negatively presents their case, in my time as part of a local campaign strategy team small scale centrally funded polling was undertaken both to assess ‘marginality’ of seats (for targeting purposes) and to test issues (see Price, 2010).

## ***Media***

The print, and now increasingly internet media, forms an important part of the evidential base of this thesis. The use of news ‘reports’ and commentary may be encumbered, not just as a result of the individual’s own perspective in writing the article, but also with varying degrees of political baggage, and will usually conform in the general sense, with the bias of the newspaper or media organization it is published in (Grix, 2004, p. 134). The traditional advice to ensure one draws on media sources of equal quality, and from a range of political bias has merit, and is adhered to here in the use of all of the English national broadsheets to some extent (Grix, 2004, p. 134). However, the tone of the articles across the media can be just as important as the quality and bias of the analysis. This is no place for a discussion about the relative influence of the broadsheet or tabloid media (on politicians or the public) but the reaction of papers across the spectrum provides a vital and often near immediate and contemporaneous reaction to a party’s performance (see Grix, 2004, p. 134). Indeed, along with polling, the media provide the most significant way of assessing party statecraft, or at least the popular reaction to it, ‘in time’ and between electoral cycles. It is also of importance to political leaders themselves, whether that is with their attempts to garner support from sections of the media, or the extent to which party officials, if not party leaders, test to measure the response of the media to certain actions or proposals (Price, 2010).

## ***Participant Observation***

Grix describes how in many instances a researcher will draw on at least some form of observation, and this is the case with this thesis (2004, p.103). As already mentioned, this project originated, at least in part, from a personal interest and involvement in politics, which provides a degree of privileged<sup>6</sup> participant observation to the mix. As a participant and an observer I have been involved in politics as a local councillor, a party member, an association officer, a campaign team member, a strategy group member<sup>7</sup>, a regular attendee at party conferences, and a member of policy orientated independent groups aligned with the Conservative Party. It is rare to meet anyone involved in

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<sup>6</sup> I’m not entirely sure privileged is the correct word to describe delivering a ‘dawn raid’ of leaflets at 5am on election day or being told to ‘go away’ in colourful language after disturbing someone’s evening rest with a canvassing call.

<sup>7</sup> Which included a glimpse of the Ashcroft campaigning apparatus.

politics who doesn't seek to embellish, at least a little, their involvement and influence in the process, for some, being around politicians is like being close to 'celebrities' is for others. I had little influence in many of these matters, but it does provide access to discussions, conversations, briefings, and even the general 'mood of the party' that I would not otherwise have had, these are drawn on in subsequent chapters.

Participant observation can be problematic, and it is worth exploring some of the issues it entails, and how they relate to the work here. The ethical problems of participant observation can be substantial (see Turnbull, 1994; Coolican, 1999, p. 75 and p. 114). Many of these concerns are mitigated here because the political involvement came first. I did not seek to infiltrate a group for the purposes of observing them; although I have asked questions, and carefully listened to some individuals, that in the absence of my research interest, my sanity might have suggested I avoid. It is also the case that in most of the instances where I could claim a participant observer role, those around me were aware, even if only in general terms, that I was a research student, with an academic interest in the subject matter, I did not seek to deceive anyone about that. In addition, perhaps most importantly, there are a few things I could mention or reference that would be a breach of trust to those I worked<sup>8</sup> with, because it would be revealing things that were quite clearly said to me, or observed by me in confidence. It should also be noted that some of the events in question, for example conference events and conference fringe events were essentially open to the public or journalists subject to accreditation and not private events which might entail greater ethical concerns.

It is important to acknowledge that my role as a participant observer comes with its own baggage. I am interpreting events, and that interpretation may not be shared by others. In line with the discussion of ontology and epistemology earlier in this section, and however much I might try to set aside my own beliefs, they will inevitably cloud the assessments I form (see Marsh and Furlong, 2002, pp. 18- 20 for a discussion of hermeneutics).

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<sup>8</sup> In a voluntary capacity.

## *Interviews*

Elite interviews have not been utilized in this thesis. Whilst interviews can be an important evidential source, they are also problematic, in the general sense and the specific sense for the statecraft approach and period under investigation here (for a discussion see Burnham et al, 2004, pp. 205-220; Grix 2004, pp.125-128; Walliman, 2001, pp. 234-240). In many circumstances the general problems associated with interviews can be mitigated against to some extent, whether that is through interviewing several elites and triangulation to overcome deficiencies of memory; individual bias, self-aggrandizement, or self-justification (Seldon, 1988, pp.8-11; Berry, 2002).

Seldon says that

“Evidence suggests that the least satisfactory group are (ex) politicians who often encounter pathological difficulties in distinguishing the truth, so set have their minds become by the long experience of partisan thought” (1988, p. 10).

Equally problematic can be the considerable training politicians receive in answering, and importantly, avoiding answering questions (Harvey, 2011, p. 433). Whilst a skilled interviewer can seek to surmount this, it is a problem that is exacerbated here because this thesis is to a large extent concerned with a period where the key figures in the analysis currently hold high political office or they and their advisers remain intimately involved in the Conservative Party or current government. Whilst access problems relating to some of the figures may be overcome, their need to maintain established narratives will be strong; and several key figures involved in the 2001-2010 period have already given accounts of their actions, which they are unlikely to deviate from (Richards, 1996). There is also one further consideration, which is certain to be more controversial. Although other considerations are important, the statecraft approach assumes that political leaders are principally concerned with gaining and retaining office (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 19-23). No current politician, and few former politicians will openly admit this is their principally political motivation, they will cite ‘doing what is right for Britain’, acting in the ‘national interest’, ‘making a difference’, or ‘righting wrongs’ as prompting their interest in politics (for example Cameron, 2009d; Cameron, 2010b; Sparrow, 2009; Wintour, 2010). Others, will often attribute a political leaders choice of action to ideology, which is doubtless important, but overtly seeking office has Machiavellian and negative connotations (although see Powell, 2010). Ethically, I would have felt obliged to inform

interviewees of the basic premise of the approach, which they would have either disputed, or equally likely, put them on their guard. It can only be assumed, but this is potentially why statecraft analyses of more contemporaneous events have not traditionally been based on elite interviews (see for example Bulpitt, 1986; Bulpitt, 1988; Bulpitt, 1992; Buller, 2000; and see also Bulpitt, 1983; Stevens, 2002; Taylor, 2005).

## **1.5 Conclusion**

This chapter began by outlining three questions which this thesis seeks to address. The questions ask: why the Conservative Party languished in opposition for so long, despite the torrent of advice about what it needed to do to recover; why core vote strategies are seen as so important for understanding the period; and why the Conservative Party seemed to recover so quickly after 2005.

After outlining these research questions, the existing literature of the period has been discussed and explored, and it is argued it fails to adequately provide answers to the questions set. Some problematic aspects of the literature are common throughout the 2001-2010 period, in particular the lack of theoretically informed work on the Conservative party at this time. Much of the work is descriptive and does not proceed from an explicit theoretical or conceptual position. It is also the case that many of the analyses concentrate on specific aspects such as the personalities of the leaders at various points between 2001- 2010, ideology, or policy. It has been argued that many of these place too much emphasis on either structural or agential causal factors by concentrating on individuals or processes, or abstracting the study of the Conservative party from its context. These can only provide a partial explanation of the Conservative Party at this time, because they are only concentrating on certain aspects of the period. What is needed is a theoretically informed approach that seeks to draw together these aspects of Conservative history and assess them in terms of their proper context: the party political context and environment at the time.

The modest attention the 2001 to 2005 period receives sees two dominate themes emerge. The first is that the leadership of Iain Duncan Smith was so poor that it virtually predetermined the party's



failure that followed because he simply wasn't up to the task of leading the party. This is then linked to the process used to elect him as Conservative Leader, which was structurally flawed in the way it allowed a candidate to win the leadership, without majority support of the parliamentary party. The literature argues the process was so flawed that it allowed an incapable compromise candidate to prevail. The second theme dominates the post 2003 period and that is the emphasis that is placed on the core vote strategy that Michael Howard is regarded as having pursued in the 2005 general election. Both of these have been explored in this section, and it is argued that both serve to close off a more detailed analysis of the party and the party political context at this time and can only provide a partial answer to the questions this thesis seeks to explore. The statecraft approach adopted in this thesis overcomes this by studying the period in its own right, and in concentrating on how the party sought, but failed to return to, an electable position and highlights the importance of the party political environment and constraints on the Conservative Party at this time.

After 2005, the emphasis changes, but the existing literature is still deficient. As the party is seen as changing the search for consistency, especially in relation to the ideology of the party or its leadership, overlooks the reality of a political party seeking to return to electability. It is argued that studying the Conservative Party under Cameron from the perspective of the statecraft approach that proceeds from an assumption that political parties principally seek office, has the potential to overcome the disconnect between the study of ideology and the practice of politics by political parties in the existing literature. Cameron was principally, though not solely, interested in returning the Conservative party to office, in a dynamic and constantly changing party political environment. The search for consistency misses this point and provides a superficial account of party change by stigmatising inconsistency which rather than a sign of leadership failure, can occur for sound strategic or tactical reasons.

Finally, this chapter finishes with a section exploring the research process. Here the meta-theoretical assumptions that underpin the approach are rendered explicit as ontological, epistemological, methodological factors and research methods are explored. The statecraft framework outlined and

developed in the next chapter, and applied in the empirical chapters that follow is based on critical realism and draws on a range of research methods to address the key areas of the existing academic literature that it has been argued are presently deficient.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Statecraft – Theoretical and Development**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The main substance of this chapter is to outline the conceptual framework that will be adopted in order to facilitate a better understanding of the Conservatives between 2001 and 2010: the statecraft approach. This section begins by introducing the statecraft approach and explaining why it is adopted here, before moving on to introduce the main themes of statecraft. It is argued that it is an approach that is perfectly suited to the task in hand as it was developed with specific applicability to examining how the Conservative Party has sought office. It is an influential and widely cited approach, and this is explored as the existing literature on Bulpitt's statecraft is surveyed. This is done in a linear and chronological way to emphasize the development of the statecraft approach over time, it was not static, and it is argued this has contributed to some of the criticisms of the statecraft approach as later work has been overlooked.

Moreover, because Bulpitt's work and the work of others, offered developments to the initial statecraft framework Bulpitt originally introduced, these developments need to be incorporated into any contemporary attempt to apply the framework. The limited explicit detail Bulpitt provided about the methodological assumptions that underpin the statecraft approach raised as many questions as it solved, and also contributed to many of the problems statecraft is associated with. As a result, it is argued that by 'reading between the lines' and drawing on Bulpitt's empirical work to infer the methodological assumptions in greater detail allows the refutation of some of the criticisms that have been associated with the statecraft approach. It is argued that statecraft is not an intentionalistic or excessively agential approach, as has usually been claimed, but is in fact compatible with a dialectical account of the interrelationship between structure and agency, and this is explored in some detail. Finally, the adapted statecraft framework that is used in the empirical chapters that follow is outlined. The result is a statecraft approach to the study of British politics that has been rigorously scrutinized, clarified and improved and has much to offer the study of the Conservative

Party between 2001 and 2010. It provides an analysis of the period from a perspective that has been neglected: how the Conservative Party sought office.

## **2.2 Statecraft: An Alternative Approach**

Bulpitt's statecraft approach is adopted because it was developed, in part, with particular reference to studying the Conservative Party, and the party within the wider field of British politics. It is an approach that has proven itself highly influential, widely cited, and frequently referred to across a range of problems of British politics, despite only a handful of scholars having continued to advocate his work following Bulpitt's untimely death. Many of the concepts Bulpitt either introduced or propounded continue to find resonance today, and whilst having attracted critical attention, it will be shown that these still have much to offer.

That said, statecraft is far from an unproblematic approach, and it has attracted significant and important criticism over the years. However, as will be detailed, the criticisms levelled at statecraft are of varying degrees of significance and severity, some can be dealt with; others perhaps just acknowledged and attempts made to minimize their impact upon the overall usefulness of the approach. This has led to the development of an interesting paradox. Bulpitt's work is acknowledged as being influential, especially with regard to the study of Thatcherism and the relations between Westminster and local government, yet despite this it is frequently dismissed as being too problematic to be useful (Marsh, 1995). A central contention of this thesis is that the very fact that it has remained an influential and frequently cited approach to the study of British politics merits a fresh attempt to tackle some of its more problematic features. In so doing, it will be argued that in fact, many of the problems of statecraft are less damaging than is often thought.

However, the mere fact that something was developed in order to examine the Conservative Party is not, in itself, sufficient grounds for its adoption here. Instead it is argued that as well as suiting the research questions, statecraft offers a theoretically and conceptually informed way of addressing an area of British political science that has not received the attention it deserves: attempting to reconcile

the practice of politics, with the study of politics (see Bevir, 2005 for a discussion of this problem). Furthermore, it was developed to provide a broad focus of analytical study, which is important, because this thesis, by its very nature, necessitates a broad analytical investigation (Bulpitt, 1996, p. 1095; and see Buller, 2000, p. 6). Whilst the principal focus of statecraft is on parties and their leadership, this is very much through the filter of strategic considerations, context, party management, party change, and the way in which they interact: which seems perfectly suited to the task in hand. Moreover, many of the issues that Bulpitt covered in his various statecraft analyses are the same as those under investigation here: principally how the Conservative Party recovers power, especially after a period when the political landscape seemed distinctly unpropitious. Other frameworks for studying the Conservative Party or the period are not dismissed, the adoption of the statecraft approach is not a repudiation of alternatives, rather it is merely argued that the statecraft approach itself is appropriate here, worthy of re-examination, and development.

### **2.2.1 Bulpitt's Statecraft**

Before outlining the main characteristics of statecraft, it is necessary to clarify a few points. The first of these is that there has never been a systematic single exposition of what the statecraft approach is, or entails, and there are a number of reasons for this. The first is that as Bulpitt used it, it was constantly developing and evolving, largely in response to criticisms, but also because he extended it into other areas of application. Furthermore, a small number of other academics have also adopted the approach, and used it in different ways, often re-interpreting Bulpitt's work in varying directions. This will be returned to below in the literature review, but it is also argued that this melange of uses has been partly responsible for the confusion about what the statecraft approach actually is. However, it is important, and suffice to say for now, that the statecraft approach adopted here is based most directly on Bulpitt's earlier, and seminal work on the Conservative Party, his 1986 article on the first Thatcher administration. However, it is also informed by his later works, and the works of others, especially Jim Buller, and also critics of the approach. Despite this, the way statecraft is used in this thesis is quite different to the way others have used it, as it is adapted to both improve its fortitude and usefulness in the face of critics.

The first point to note is that Bulpitt referred to statecraft as either an interpretation or an approach interchangeably, because that is how it is best seen, and both terms will be used here (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 19). It is frequently criticised for omitting some variables, or neglecting other features of political science, whereas Bulpitt was more concerned with stressing the connections between alternative approaches, than criticizing them per se. It is argued that Bulpitt was simply offering another approach, one which was, and remains useful, and he was not seeking to close off other methods of investigation (see Bulpitt, 1986, p. 19-20). Consequently, what is outlined below is not offered as the only approach to the study of the Conservative Party, but rather, it suits, and has much to offer, in addressing the questions under investigation.

Attention turns to the specifics of statecraft, and the first point to make is probably the most controversial. Bulpitt succinctly states that statecraft is “the art of winning elections, and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office” and the question Bulpitt applied it to was “in what ways has the Conservative Party sought to gain office, govern satisfactorily and retain office within the structure of British politics” (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 21). In fact, the former is more a description of what good statecraft is, because one complicating feature of the terminology is that a distinction has to be made between *a party's statecraft* and *statecraft analysis*. One is the practice, and the other is the study of the same thing, but the terms can become confused and it's usually left for the reader to determine which is implied, but the distinction is significant, and an attempt will be made to render explicit which is referred to here.

The result, is an approach, or interpretation to the study of various aspects of British politics, although in this thesis the emphasis is largely on where this relates to the Conservative Party, which starts from the assumption that parties principally try to win office. Of course, this is far from an uncontroversial assumption to make about the operation of a political party, and one that will be addressed in greater detail below, and qualified to some extent. It is also a ‘high politics’ or more academically, a macro-approach and elitist in nature, almost by necessity of the preceding assumption, and what Bulpitt was trying to address (Bevir, 2010, p. 446). The focus was on the

Conservative Party, but largely the leadership, its operation, and relationship to the wider party political environment. Once again, these matters will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **2.2.2 Dimensions of Statecraft**

Attention now moves to what Bulpitt terms the major dimensions of a party's statecraft, and it is these that will be used to provide the framework for the analysis in the following empirical chapters. These dimensions are interesting because whilst Bulpitt introduces them as the components of 'good' statecraft, they are implicitly designed to also be criteria by which a party's statecraft can be assessed. Despite this, they have only once been used in this way before, and on that occasion to British external relations (Bulpitt, 1988). In most other applications of the statecraft approach, the dimensions have been used flexibly, and largely lost in the analysis, and it is argued that adopting a formal framework provides a better structure for the analysis. There are five main features, and they operate in a statecraft cycle, much like an electoral cycle, though the two are not necessarily contiguous with it, nor are they necessarily sequential:

1. Party management. This is a feature throughout the cycle, although it may vary in significance, and covers the whole gambit of party management, including how the leader deals with such matters, or is constrained by them. The assumption is that generally leaders will seek quiescent party relations, but is acknowledged that at times, it may be necessary to "adopt a more positive posture".
2. A winning electoral strategy. This includes creating a package of policies "capable of being sold successfully to the electorate. But also involves finding a programme which will unite the party and stimulate the members' belief that the party can not only (with luck) win an election, but also govern reasonably effectively". "At times of incoherence in the party system it may also involve a stance towards a governing coalition in a hung parliament."
3. Political Argument Hegemony (PAH). "This concerns the party achieving an easy predominance in elite debate regarding political problems, policies and the general stance of government". This isn't synonymous with ideology, but is

“more comprehensive and cruder”. “It refers more to a winning rhetoric in variety of locations, winning either because the framework of the party’s arguments becomes generally acceptable, or because its solution to a particularly important political problem seem more plausible than its opponents”. It can be won in opposition, or government, and lost at any time, and it is difficult to assess its significance, and “it may be “an attribute which the party elites require mostly for their own self confidence and party management”.

4. A governing competence. Government is about more than policies, “it is also about competence”. Policy selection is related to this but Bulpitt rejects the “orthodox stance” that this stems from “ideology, citizen or special interest pressure...”. Policy rejection is as important as selection, and whilst this “may be the result of ideological preference... it may equally well be connected to problems of implementation”. There can be a number of reasons for considering a policy too difficult to implement effectively, and this includes domestic and foreign policy factors.

5. Another winning electoral strategy. This dimension is not directly applicable to this thesis, because in the period studied, the Conservative Party has only managed to (partially) win a single election. Bulpitt placed at least as much emphasis on remaining in office as gaining it in the first place. Instead, an analysis of this dimension will likely have to wait until after 2015 when the full statecraft cycle can be examined.

(quotes above from Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 21-22)

After listing these, Bulpitt goes onto make several more observations to clarify these points. These include the fact it is designed to start with a party in opposition, and the “end game” is a party retaining office after an electoral cycle (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 22). He also says that they can be “achieved (and lost) at any point in the cycle” and that “there is no reason why the electoral strategy



and PAH dimensions should ‘fit’ its operations under the governing competence category” and states competence is of more significance than the others (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 22).

The crucial point for this thesis is that “a party can be assessed in terms of how many of these statecraft dimensions it achieves successfully” (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 22). Despite this statement, as mentioned above, this has only been attempted once before, every other application of the statecraft perspective has adopted an alternative structure, whereas the following three chapters of this thesis examine the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010 explicitly according to a framework provided by this criteria<sup>9</sup>.

One further observation is the extent of the conceptual elements of statecraft, outlined in his seminal paper on the Conservative Party, Bulpitt’s only statecraft work solely focussing on the party’s return to office after 1979. As discussed below, many more remain implicit, but it is common for later authors to use conceptual devices introduced in Bulpitt’s later work, to criticise the earlier work, which is perfectly acceptable, but only so long as this is made explicit. Conversely, it is also common to find critics of statecraft concentrating on the earlier work, and overlooking some of the later developments Bulpitt and others have made. The formula here is to base the framework on Bulpitt’s 1986 dimensions, but draw on later improvements offered by other works.

## **2.3 The Development of Statecraft**

### **2.3.1 Introduction**

After outlining the main features of Bulpitt’s original statecraft approach, attention will now move to a brief summary of the literature on the subject, before it returns to examining the later developments and concepts that are important for a full understanding of statecraft. The first part of this section concentrates on Bulpitt’s work, before moving on to explore how others have used statecraft, and finally covering some of the main criticisms of the approach. The emphasis will be on the areas to which statecraft has been applied, and also the ways it has been developed. It is

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<sup>9</sup> As explained later, some have partially done so (see Buller, 2000).

interesting to note that most advocates and critics of the statecraft interpretation, have concentrated on methodological issues, and less so on the empirical aspects of each other's work. The review that follows proceeds broadly chronologically through the works on statecraft. Whilst this is perhaps not the usual process of a literature review, it is argued it allows a better understanding of the development of statecraft over time, and the difficulties associated with it. It is also important to understand that the statecraft approach is nearly three decades old, and the field of political science has developed considerably in that time. Understanding this, and developing its assumptions and methodology in the light of this is important.

### **2.3.2 Review of Bulpitt's Work**

There are a number of points that need to be rendered clear before proceeding to the detail of Bulpitt's work. The first is that Bulpitt wrote relatively little in a long career, but what he did write has been very influential and influential in a number of areas (Marsh, 1999). This thesis concentrates on his work on British political parties, especially the Conservative Party, but will also mention his work on territorial politics, and the relationship between domestic and foreign policy: all three of which are still influential, and indeed in recent years there has been a revival of interest in his work on territorial politics (see for example Bradbury and John, 2010).

It can be argued that one or two elements of Bulpitt's work represent his magnum opus. The first of these is his book *Territory and Power*, published in 1983, which whilst can be crudely labelled as concentrating on central-local government relations, goes far beyond that by introducing new terminology, re-working established concepts, and offering an account of the development of these relations and novel explanations for them, (John, 2008, p. 3). Bulpitt introduces many concepts in this work that will go on to feature prominently in the statecraft approach, such as the centre and periphery, which once again points to the elite based, and 'high politics' and 'low politics' perspective. This is the perspective that Bulpitt adopts, which concentrates on the interaction between the two concepts, formal and informal, institutional and value based (John, 2008, and see

Bulpitt, 1983). It also introduces the term 'governing code[s]' which would later come to feature in the statecraft literature, despite it not being mentioned in Bulpitt's 1986 article.

Bulpitt argues that the "political processes within which central-local relations operate" have been neglected, largely because of the normative bias of the literature which favours the local over the central (Bulpitt, 1983, pp. 49-50). As a result, Bulpitt makes the case for the alternative approach, one which examines the linkages and power relations between the centre and the local, but from the perspective of the central (Bulpitt, 1983, pp. 49-57). He defines politics, and the focus of his research very broadly, encompassing a vast array of components that are cumulatively termed 'territorial politics'. Consequently, a macro approach is required to study so many things at once, and the centre, the capital, and the elites there are the principle focus, because concentrating on the peripheral can only compute a partial image of territorial relations (Bulpitt, 1983, p. 57). The central question Bulpitt asks is "how has the centre managed its periphery over time? And, following that: in what circumstances has effective central management been threatened?" (1983, p. 57).

Bulpitt answers the question by tracing the history of central-local relations from the eleventh century to the first Thatcher government, charting the changing relationship, drivers of that change, and the implication it had for the centre in particular (Bulpitt, 1983 and see John, 2008). The specifics of the answer aren't necessary here, but the structure of the analysis is, and several points can be highlighted. It includes a degree of institutional analysis, especially the way history becomes solidified in institutions, and potentially reaffirmed, in what some have claimed links Bulpitt's work in with the efforts to 'bring the state back in' that was emerging at the time he was writing (see Bevir, 2010). It also mentions statecraft, although its focus is the process of statecraft, rather than using it as an analytical tool. He is interested in the centre's statecraft, which is broadly the way the centre governs, and its operational or governing codes, which are very crudely the rules by which they seek to pursue statecraft, and hope to achieve (Bulpitt, 1983; see Bradbury and John, 2010, p. 302; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 77 and also see George, 1969 for one of the earliest uses of this concept).

A number of these concepts, and the general approach and application of the analysis of *Territory and Power* would later become associated with the statecraft approach itself, both explicitly and implicitly. Once again, this will be further explored below, but it is also necessary to mention one other feature of Bulpitt's work, namely his desire to render the limitations of such analysis explicit; he was not reticent in highlighting the problems associated with his approach (Bulpitt, 1983. pp. 57-60; see Bradbury and John, 2010).

This work was followed by Bulpitt's highly influential work on the first Thatcher administration. 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft' (1986) is still widely cited in works on Thatcher and Thatcherism, and represents his most prominent piece of work (see for list of users Marsh, 1995; Bevir, 2001; Rhodes, 1988; Skidelsky, 1988; Marsh et al, 1999). The theoretical aspects of the work are dealt with above, and below, but the empirical content will be briefly outlined. This article represents one of the first ventures into what would later develop into a body of work questioning both the degree to which the first Thatcher government represented a break with previous governing styles; and also the extent of coherence and consistency of purposed attributed to that administration (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 19-39, especially pp. 19-23 and 35-39). However, the emphasis was on offering an alternative to the dominant and orthodox approaches to the study of Thatcherism at the time, stressing the links between the perspective adopted and the message produced (Bulpitt, 1986, pp.19-21). Despite being associated with leadership, his principle focus is the Conservative Party, under the temporary leadership of Mrs Thatcher, and how they sought and achieved office and governed (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 21).

It is difficult to do justice to the analysis given the space available, but Bulpitt examines the extent to which monetarism differs from the old 'Keynesian consensus' and ultimately argues "there is precious little difference between monetarism and the *politics* of Keynes' demand management" (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 32-33). The use of 'the politics of' is the operative clause in this argument: he claims that they were both used because of their relevance, and at the time of their use, they were adopted because they offered the potential for improved party statecraft by depoliticizing aspects of

economic management (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 32). Ideology is not dismissed, it is linked, but Bulpitt argues that practical political considerations have been neglected when examining the subject of supposedly sizable shifts in British economic management (1986, p.32). It is argued that this is an important, and overlooked aspect of the statecraft approach, ideology is not ignored, although it may be argued it is downplayed; but Bulpitt does encourage consideration of other variables.

Monetarism was seen as becoming increasingly relevant and appealing due to the economic situation of the 1970s, and as the Keynesian consensus was believed to be contributing to complicating government, in particular the Heath government (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 32 and see Hay, 1996). In the same way, Keynesianism appealed to the Conservative Party in previous decades because of its politics once again helped depoliticize economic management (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 25-32). The Conservatives were believed to be in a difficult position in the 1970s, especially after the collapse of the Heath government, and questions were being asked about whether they really were the 'party of natural government' that had often been claimed (Seldon and Ball, 1994). Monetarism offered a way of re-establishing a degree of relative autonomy, crudely simplifying statecraft, and the prospect of office (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 33).

It is argued that this isn't an intentionalistic argument, nor an excessively agential one (discussed further below) as some have suggested. There was no certainty it would work, but it seemed to offer a solution, and one that was acceptable to the Conservative leadership, if not all of the party. Furthermore, up to the end of the first Thatcher government, which is as far as Bulpitt goes, he doesn't argue Thatcherite statecraft was perfect; there is a discussion of the things that complicated it, from Labour's 'technical monetarism', party divisions, the ambiguity of what the party meant and planned, and specific industrial disputes (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 33-34). He also emphasizes the role performed by contingency and luck, emphasising events such as the 'winter of discontent', specific relations with unions, and the devolution question: "in the last resort statecraft requires luck as well as good management" (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 34).

After these two pieces of work focussing on domestic politics, Bulpitt then went on to use statecraft, or statecraft-based approaches, to investigate the relationship between domestic policy and foreign policy, in two further contributions (a chapter and a journal article). The first is particularly concerned with “in what ways, and for what reasons, did the first two Thatcher-led administrations seek to manage the impact of external forces on the domestic political scene” and by this it is suggested, in a way that has a minimal deleterious impact, or a positive impact, on wider statecraft (Bulpitt, 1988, p. 181). This is the only statecraft work that concentrates on the statecraft cycle, and its criteria as the basis for the analysis. It uses the statecraft framework to argue that the domestic management of external relations is neglected, that governments may pursue their own interests in external policy, and that in the late 1980s the Thatcher governments found it necessary to engage in a number of external relations in order to support their domestic relative autonomy (Bulpitt, 1988, p. 202). The ‘pursuing their own interests’ mentioned in this work has led to criticism, although it is argued here that such a statement has a different meaning when the context of the article is considered. Bulpitt was referring to leaders engaged in foreign relations, and pursuing their interests in that regard it is assumed, means acting to benefit their statecraft, not another aspect of their personal interests.

However, the interesting part of this paper, from the perspective of this thesis is the section outlining the theoretical assumptions Bulpitt presents at the beginning. Six are listed, of which four are directly relevant and include: claiming that the analysis should highlight a ‘principle actor designation’ (PAD); it assumes a degree of relative autonomy for the ruling party elite; that “party leaders in office operate within a structural framework... that yield both opportunities and constraints”; and that where possible politicians will behave rationally (Bulpitt, 1988, pp. 183-186).<sup>10</sup> A number of these assumptions have proven controversial and problematic; much as Bulpitt openly admits they will, and they will be referred to below (see Bulpitt, 1988, pp. 185-186).

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<sup>10</sup> As discussed below, this is a notion of bounded rationality

Bulpitt's article 'Conservative Leaders and the Euro-Ratchet: Five Doses of Scepticism' in *Political Quarterly* has proven remarkably prescient. It details some aspects of the Thatcher government's relations with the European Community (EC/EEC/later EU) and in particular her government's reasons for signing the Single European Act (SEA) and some coverage of the Treaty of Maastricht (TEU). The argument presented is that the Thatcher government saw an appeal in the SEA because it offered advantages to their domestic statecraft, as he claims had consistently been the case with Conservative leaders. Although this article does not give a systematic and formal statecraft analysis, there are elements of one emerging in the text (Bulpitt, 1992, pp. 258- 265). The paper also outlines some of the early and future dangers of such an approach for the British political elite as a result of a 'ratcheting' effect of EC integration, and highlights John Major's weakness in relation to this (Bulpitt, 1992, pp. 261-270). Bulpitt returns to a notion of the governing code "a set of precepts about the problems and methods of governing Britain. This code must be distinguished from party doctrines and specific government policies" (Bulpitt, 1992, p. 265). Bulpitt again acknowledges that these are both difficult to frame and analyse, but briefly, consisted of political leaders' assumptions about the nature of a problem, and how to rectify it, or minimize its impact: in this case Britain's external vulnerability, a preoccupation with minimizing the impact of this and retaining national office (Bulpitt, 1992, pp. 265-266).

Two of the final pieces of Bulpitt's work considered in detail here are a pair of conference papers, presented a year apart, and fairly similar in both content and structure, although there are important differences. The two papers presented at the Political Science Association are of crucial importance for statecraft theory, despite criticism of their lack of 'polish' (Stevens, 2002). It is however, important to remember that they are conference papers, and they are brief, and shorter of detail than some of us may wish. Some of the concepts are important, albeit subject to criticism, but can be developed to improve the statecraft approach in this thesis. To ignore or downplay this is to do Bulpitt a significant disservice and excludes a number developments and important points of clarification contained within them. The first paper (Bulpitt, 1995) is principally a theoretical exercise, and makes the case for historical politics as well as presenting some methodological

options for such an approach that are compatible with statecraft theory. The second paper (Bulpitt, 1996a) is also theoretically driven, and also concentrates principally upon historical politics, developing the topics introduced a year previously. However it also presents a more detailed case study applying a combination of the ideas presented in both papers and building upon his earlier work on the statecraft approach.

The case for historical politics features in much of his work, and is not so much a call for more history, but more historically informed political science. He contrasts this call with what he describes as ‘presentism’ “an obsession with the here and now, with contemporary politics” (Bulpitt, 1995, p. 512). Both papers also alight upon the ‘micro-obsession’ in much of contemporaneous political science of the time, which is of course, the opposite of high politics, or macro-politics Bulpitt concentrated on in his own work (Bulpitt, 1995, p.1096; Bulpitt, 1996a pp. 511-512). Bulpitt also introduces some fresh analytical concepts, the first of which is the Natural Rate of Governability (NRG) which is an attempt to provide a link between his work, and the growing body of academics investigating the structure and agency problems in political science at the time (Bulpitt, 1996a, pp.1095-1096). He also introduces a methodology of MITGRA: macro, in-time, governing, regime analysis, and statecraft is presented as a way of achieving this (Bulpitt, 1995, p. 510). However, in these works Bulpitt also changes the emphasis of statecraft slightly, and rationality becomes more prominent, as do governing codes, and ideas and policies are explicitly downgraded for the first time (Bulpitt, 1995, p. 519). There is also a return to the language of ‘the court’ which had not featured so strongly, or at all, in some of Bulpitt’s work after *Territory and Power*, and designating the ‘court’ which is a development of the ancient notion of a court counselled monarch, as the principle actor to be studied (1995, p. 519).

The notion of a court surrounding leaders (and influential figures of all kinds) has fallen out of favour somewhat due to the negative connotations it attracts because of the obscure secrecy of courts in practice and the somewhat Machiavellian overtones associated with the operation of ‘courts’ (Machiavelli, 1999, pp. 76- 78; Powell, 2010, pp. 83-85). Bulpitt envisioned and used the notion of a



court as a unified actor for the purposes of analysis, principally in order to address what he regarded as the problem of 'principle actor designation' (1995, p. 519). This has attracted criticism, because the precise definition of how the court is composed, and whom it comprises is likely to be difficult to ascertain and define and in practice the members of the court are unlikely to be of the same mind, even if they act as such collectively (Buller, 1999, pp. 703-704). It is argued that the use of the court becomes little more than a term that refers to the leader and his team of close staff, and trusted colleagues and advisers.

Indeed, Machiavelli and his modern day imitator Powell both argue that the real danger associated with a court comes from it being comprised of 'flatterers' or 'yes men' who lull a leader into a false sense of security. Powell's own insider account written by someone at the heart of Tony Blair's court highlights disputes and disagreements (Machiavelli, 1999, p. 76; Powell, 2010, pp. 83-83). Seen in this light, it is not obvious that the use of the court adds much explanatory value to the statecraft approach this thesis adopts, beyond its use as an established shorthand for a close and trusted group of colleagues and advisors that surround a leader. It does feature in this thesis, because a close-knit and supportive court often seems to surround successful leaders, and this is highlighted in the empirical chapters. However, this only serves to raise a further 'chicken and egg' question because it is just as likely that strong and successful leaders attract a court because they are strong and successful, as it is that a strong and cohesive court helps to make a leader successful.

The main empirical contribution of the latter paper is a brief application of this approach to a case study of the post-war consensus arguing that there were greater continuities between the periods in question than often acknowledged, and questions how radical some of the changes during the period were (Bulpitt, 1996a, pp. 1105-1105). He also returns to the issue of rationality, although this time he is more explicit about a notion of bounded rationality. Despite that is clearly what was always intended, critics had assumed he earlier referred to a strict, and more unrealistic, notion of rationality in his earlier work (see 1983; 1988).

Both of these articles, and the piece of Bulpitt's work covered in the final article discussed here: "The European Question: Rules, National Modernization and the ambiguities of *Primat der Innenpolitik*" (1996b) refer to political support systems, which are also mentioned in his 1983 work, but are not explicitly present in some of his statecraft analysis (although see 1992; and 1996b). They are variously referred to as either "political support mechanisms, or politicking, devised to facilitate polity management" or "zimmer-frames for hard-pressed governors" which is one way he believes of viewing the EU and Britain's relationship with it (Bulpitt, 1995, p.519; Bulpitt, 1996b p.215). The analysis of the relationship between Britain and the EU is examined from this perspective: Britain's membership, and further integration was considered a way of resolving some of the governing problems facing Britain in the years after 1945 (Bulpitt, 1996b, pp. 233-256). The linked notion of depoliticization would later be developed by others, but both it, and equally the act of deliberately politicizing issues, are important features of statecraft, although they are perhaps less obviously applicable to parties in opposition (see Burnham, 2001 for a detailed account of depoliticization). However, parties in opposition also draw on rules, ideas and institutions to re-enforce their statecraft by seeking to politicize or depoliticize issues they believe will most benefit them.

### **2.3.3 The Work of other Authors**

This section turns to the work other authors have produced on statecraft. Again it proceeds chronologically to facilitate a better understanding of the development of the form it takes in this thesis.

The first, and it is argued most significant contribution to the statecraft literature examined here comes from Jim Buller (1999). In his article 'A Critical Appraisal of the Statecraft Interpretation', Buller provides the first detailed assessment of the approach, and although it doesn't address the empirical results of previous analyses, it does explore a number of the problems associated with the approach, and summarizes many of the criticisms of others (1999, pp. 700-706). However, his main contribution to the literature stems from his discussion of the ontological and epistemological

aspects of the approach. In particular he concentrates on accusations of ontological reductionism and the way statecraft fails to adequately address questions of structure and agency, and downplay ideas (Buller, 2000, pp. 700-704). He then moves onto discuss the epistemological problems of the statecraft interpretation, and a number of methodological concerns related to both the difficulties associated with collecting evidence either for the assumptions the statecraft approach requires, or the investigations and arguments the proponents of statecraft seek to advance (Buller, 1999, p. 704). However, as will be argued below, and indeed Buller partially acknowledges this, of the two major contributions he makes, the first is rendering explicit the ambiguity in Bulpitt's statecraft, rather than taking it in a new direction (1999, p. 704).

The second major contribution of Buller's work is the way he directly associates Bulpitt's work, and the statecraft approach with realism as a way of reducing the dangers of reductionism (Buller, 1999, pp. 705-708). After outlining the realist perspective, Buller goes onto suggest: "in fact, a closer inspection of Bulpitt's empirical discussion of territorial politics in the UK indicates a position much closer than his theoretical discussion would suggest" (Buller, 1999, p. 707). The argument presented below emphasizes and extends this position, namely that it is equally possible that a re-examination of some aspects of Bulpitt's statecraft, can highlight that he was far less reductionist, agential, or dismissive of structures than is often suggested. That said, Buller's suggestion of explicitly accepting a realist underpinning for statecraft is useful and informative.

There is also a book by Buller which examines 'National Statecraft and European Integration' between 1979 and 1997 (2000). Buller examines the UK's relationship with the EC/EU from a statecraft perspective, however most of the methodological aspects of the work are the same as, and stem from the earlier article mentioned above. Buller examines the effect of Europeanization on Conservative Statecraft, the statecraft considerations of the party leadership at various stages, and finally the problems for the Conservative Party that would stem from UK-EU relations in the late-1990s (Buller, 2000). Buller also explicitly states the realist underpinnings of the statecraft approach he uses, and applies in the empirical sections (Buller, 2000, pp. 14-16). However, he

doesn't directly deploy Bulpitt's statecraft criteria as a framework for the analysis, instead the chapter narrates the period in question, and at the end there is a brief exploration of the impact on PAH and party management (Buller, 2000, pp. 63-66 and pp. 82-86). The way the statecraft framework is deployed in this thesis differs from that which Buller deployed because the components are used to create a systematic framework for application, rather than as a way of summarizing a discussion of statecraft as a whole.

The above is a somewhat different response to Buller's comments than that made by Stevens, who dismisses them rather out of hand. He says Buller "offers an elegantly written and stimulating account of statecraft, locating his arguments in a philosophical discourse. However, Buller's reformation of Bulpitt does not aid the arguments." (Stevens, 2002, p. 121). This seems a rather remarkable way to treat what amounts to the only systematic appraisal of the theoretical aspects of the statecraft approach at that time. In fact Stevens goes on to outline a long list of problems with Bulpitt's statecraft approach, from the way it downplays contingent factors, which this thesis disputes, to a criticism of a macro perspective (Stevens, pp. 121-123). In essence, Stevens dismisses the bulk of Bulpitt's approach, and proceeds to conduct a statecraft approach of his own, applied to the Major government, which is very different from that which Bulpitt, Buller, or this author would recognize.

Andrew Taylor's book chapter "Economic Statecraft" (2005, *Palgrave Macmillan*) is both an interesting and stimulating account of the 'economic statecraft' of the Conservative Party after 1945. Whilst it acknowledges Bulpitt's 1986 article on page 134, it does not proceed to use a statecraft framework for the analysis, nor does it use Bulpitt's statecraft criteria. For the purposes of this thesis it is more akin to the other, non-Bulpittian applications of statecraft in the sense that it concentrates on how a government manages the economy (Taylor, 2005, pp. 137-150). Some of the themes are familiar, and are referred to in the subsequent chapters, particularly as Taylor covers some aspects of economic statecraft after 2001. However, in terms of theoretical development of Bulpitt's statecraft, it has little to offer this thesis.

Finally, as already mentioned above, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in Bulpitt's work 'Territory and Power' and its application to territorial politics in the UK. In 2010 a number of authors produced papers on this, and again they are worthy of mention here because they offer some responses to Bulpitt's approach to territorial politics. Of these Bradbury (2010) and Bradbury and John (2010) are especially worthy of mention because of their attempts to demonstrate that statecraft has much in common with new institutionalism, and highlight Bulpitt's reaction against the dominant behaviouralism contemporaneous to his time of writing. Bradbury also introduces a notion of path dependency in the development of territorial politics, something this thesis argues also has a place in the statecraft approach adopted here (For a counter argument see Bevir 2010).

## **2.4 Wider and Specific Criticisms of Statecraft**

Before moving on to briefly examine how the statecraft approach will be used in this thesis, some of the criticisms of it require a more detailed examination. One of the problems associated with compiling a list of criticisms of the statecraft approach is the surprising lack of explicit treatment it has received, especially prior to Buller's very interesting appraisal of the work, discussed below. Many of the criticisms, which highlight some genuine problems, consist of a page or two of a paper or chapter which focuses on a wider issue, limiting the detail of the discussion. Furthermore, others in part at least, have become more serious as the field of political science has progressed in the years since the statecraft approach was developed; but it is argued this doesn't preclude statecraft from being updated.

There are few direct criticisms of Bulpitt's empirical work, but those that do occur discuss the impact of exceptions on the way Bulpitt classifies central-local relations (Rhodes, 1988, p. 31, Stoker, 1995, pp. 102-104) and they highlight occasions when central politicians have been directly involved in local, or low politics issues (Stoker, 1995, p. 103 ), or they argue he attributes too much significance to the actions of a particular individual, or the intentions of a group of individuals (Stevens, 2002).

However, of greater interest here are the criticisms of the statecraft methodology. Although it is later argued that some stem directly from a misreading of Bulpitt's work, and some from a failure to 'read between the lines' as it is necessary to do given the small quantity of work Bulpitt produced on the issue. Yet, this is not to suggest all of the criticisms are misplaced, for they are not. Although statecraft has a number of problems, the argument is that some can be ameliorated. Buller has suggested some ways of achieving this (Buller, 1999); whilst the deleterious effects of others can perhaps only be partially negated by acknowledging them. However, a summary of the main criticisms follows.

Rhodes also praises Bulpitt's "stimulating contribution" to political science, but argues "inevitably such a sweeping analysis poses problems, many of which are acknowledged by Bulpitt" (Rhodes, 1988, p. 31-32 and p. 33). He goes on to list two serious issues, both of which are impossible to resolve completely, but it is argued they can be reduced below a level that negates the wider utility of the statecraft approach. He firstly refers directly to Bulpitt's own admission that "the drawback of all macro-political studies is that 'the supporting data for many of these arguments is much less than perfect'" (Bulpitt, 1983, p. 239; Rhodes, 1988, p. 33). This it is difficult, if not impossible, to refute completely, but it is argued that research based on a broad number of methods, utilizing diverse sources can minimize the impact of this problem. However, as Bulpitt also says, the macro approach requires the author to "know a little about a lot" and as such, the choice of focus can always be questioned; it is just up to the author to justify the choice of interpretation (Bulpitt, 1983). He also criticizes Bulpitt's use of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' politics, claiming that it "has a tautological flavour" and is in practice difficult to define in the absence of attributing areas of interest to the centre (high) or the periphery/local government (low) (Rhodes, 1988, p. 33). This problem is less serious in Bulpitt's statecraft work than his work on territorial politics, because the study of government or a political party is less concerned with establishing a firm definition of 'high' and 'low' politics than it is with what a party's statecraft treats as matters of high and low politics

Stoker also lists a number of concerns, the first mentioned here is a direct criticism of the ‘high politics’ or macro perspective that Bulpitt adopts, and argues is necessary in order to conduct a statecraft analysis. He suggests that “inevitably tend to simplify and neglect counter tendencies” (1995, p. 103). Again, such an approach will always be vulnerable to such a charge, but there is nothing in a macro approach that specifically excludes counter tendencies, but the selection of which to include, rests on the author’s judgement, much as in any research. Bulpitt justified his parsimonious approach on the basis of the greater understanding of the context it provided, but this would not be universally accepted.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Stoker questions the wider methodology of the statecraft approach, especially the way it deduces elite ‘ambitions’ (1995, p. 103). Rhodes also alights on this subject: “not only is evidence scarce because of government secrecy, but the code is implicit and ill articulated if ever made public” (Rhodes, 1988, p. 33). Again, this is a serious problem for the statecraft approach, and one that cannot be eliminated, it can only be left to individual authors to justify the evidence they present in conducting the analysis. It is also argued it is not solely a problem with the statecraft approach, rather it must necessarily affect any approach that deduces something about the intentions of political leaders, and political science would be much poorer for ignoring this avenue, or just assuming what politicians stated as their intention actually was so.

The manner in which Bulpitt gives primacy to practical political factors has also attracted critical attention: “The chief problem with Bulpitt’s analysis is that it is totally politicised; policy change is driven by strategic political and electoral judgements, the economic context in which such choices are set is largely irrelevant” (Marsh; 1995, p.14). Kerr and Marsh also go on to later argue “the key problem with the politicist interpretation is that it over-emphasizes the role of Mrs Thatcher and more generally, of agents as against structures. As such it pays little attention to the way in which broad economic forces constrained the conservative government’s actions” (Kerr and Marsh, 1999, p.173). Marsh also goes onto classify his approach to Thatcherism, and places Bulpitt’s statecraft in

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<sup>11</sup> This perhaps locates statecraft at the parsimonious end of the ‘parsimony- complexity’ trade off that Hay outlines (Hay, 2002, pp. 29-35).

the unidimension category, yet he does argue “Bulpitt offers the most interesting version of this position and the most politicist explanation” (1995, p. 3).

A number of points can be made in response, the first of which is that Bulpitt probably wouldn't have overly objected to the accusation of statecraft being 'politicist' and indeed this author doesn't either. It is however wrong to assume that any politicist account necessarily has to overemphasize the importance of the leader (in this case Thatcher). Instead, Bulpitt sought to emphasize a range of political, and politicking factors, of which while the leader is the most significant, it is far from the only one (Bulpitt, 1986). Bulpitt argued that such considerations were lacking in academic literature, a gap he sought to remedy, and that this is something that still has a place today.

However, to claim that statecraft pays little attention to economic forces must be due to a misunderstanding of what Bulpitt sought to do. Firstly it is argued Bulpitt makes it perfectly clear that while party leaders compete to offer more plausible solutions to governing problems, they also operate within a structural and institutional environment, of which there is further discussion on structure and agency below. However, Bulpitt's article on the first Thatcher administration devotes five pages to discussing the Keynesian Consensus (1986, pp. 23-28). He then devotes two pages to examining how the impact in the 1970s of “series of changes in the structure of British politics had occurred...” further discussing the emergence of “pseudo Keynesian economic strategy” and Heath's attempt to make Britain more efficient via policies of “entry into the EC, industrial relation and taxation reforms” (1986, pp. 28-29).

Bulpitt then proceeds to examine the emergence of monetarism, and again, the emphasis is on why it appealed to the Conservatives in the 1970s. Bulpitt charts macro economic policy, supply side measures, tax cuts, cuts in public expenditure, the Medium Term Financial Strategy, and the relationship between government and other institutions (1986, pp. 33-35). Crucially he says “by the end of 1980 most of the practices associated with [monetarism] had either collapsed or showed signs of collapsing” (1986, p. 35). This is clearly not an author, or an approach, that regards the economic



context as largely irrelevant, and as with many critics, it could be that Marsh reads too much directly from Bulpitt's admittedly ambiguous methodological section, and overlooks Bulpitt's empirical work. Alternatively, it could be just that Marsh and Kerr object to economic factors being considered from the perspective of their political importance.

Bulpitt may not have explicitly stated the importance of the economic context in which agents operated but any reading of his empirical works should leave the reader in no doubt that economic factors are preeminent in shaping the context. Bulpitt places the emphasis on how political leaders try to find solutions to these so that they are better placed to compete for office, rather than directly interact with the economic context; it is not irrelevant to the approach. Indeed, it would be interesting to find any account of governing that actually said the economic context is largely irrelevant. This stems in part from Marsh overlooking the structural elements within Bulpitt's work.

This section now moves on to consider a number of the significant assumptions and concepts within the statecraft model in greater detail. It will proceed by taking the most contentious assumptions of the statecraft approach, and in light of the critical treatment they have received, explore how they can be improved, and developed. The areas discussed are the way statecraft engages with questions of structure, agency, and the ideational. Whilst they are examined under separate headings, there are clear linkages between all three.

## **2.5 Structure and Agency**

The structure-agency debate has become one of the most prominent subjects for political science in recent years, and statecraft's engagement with it has been one of the principal sources of critical attention directed at the approach (see Bulpitt, 1996a, pp. 518-519 and Buller, 1999, p. 701 and for a wider discussion of the issue see Carlsnaes, 1992; Hay, 2002, pp.83-134; McAnulla, 2002). It is commonly regarded that the statecraft approach emphasizes the agential, and ignores structural

factors to the extent that it has been accused of “giving the impression of a band of politicians who always end up achieving their objectives in the end” (Buller, 1999, p. 701).<sup>12</sup>

However, it will be argued that Bulpitt did not ignore structural considerations, nor is statecraft an agential approach to political science. That said, there are difficulties with the statecraft framework, and in part these originate from Bulpitt’s desire to provide limited detail on the methodology of the approach, which ultimately left many questions unanswered, and a partial account even heightened some criticism. Yet, the case will be made that there is a degree of disconnect between some of the critical attention Bulpitt’s theoretical work has received, and the empirical work he produced: in other words, by reading between the lines, some of descriptions of statecraft’s problems are seen to be less serious.

Despite being an important area of debate within political science, some have questioned the importance the issue is given. Bulpitt, however, was not one of these academics; instead, in all his work he makes a point of briefly outlining the assumptions and limitations of his approach (see for example: 1986, pp. 21-23; 1988, pp 183-185; 1996, p. 518). He did seem to imply that he didn’t want an abstract discussion about structure and agency to dominate his work, and at one point does refer to the structure and agency debate as ‘otiose’ although it is argued this refer to attempts to treat it as a resolvable issue, rather than its utility as a way of rendering research assumptions explicit (see Bulpitt, 1996a, p, 1095). This may have also been compounded by a desire to concentrate on empirical work. If anything, his attempts to answer his critics by giving a little more detail about the assumptions underpinning the statecraft approach proved counterproductive as it left many questions unanswered.

However, as it is argued at several points in this chapter, Bulpitt’s original statecraft work emerged in the early 1980s at a time when the *formal* discussion of structure and agency was still in its

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<sup>12</sup> This is a particularly remarkable assertion given that Buller refers to Bulpitt’s treatment of the first Thatcher government as an example of this; yet Bulpitt is known as one of the first to highlight the incoherence and inconsistencies and u-turns that are one of the defining features of the period (see Kerr, 2001; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Marsh et al, 1999). It demonstrates an unwillingness to read between the lines.

infancy (see Giddens 1984; Wendt, 1997, pp. 339-341). His early, and arguably most influential works on the statecraft approach do not contain explicit discussions of structure and agency, but those from 1988 onward do, presumably in response to criticism, and Bulpitt's attempts to counter charges of intentionalism (see Buller, 1999, p. 701 and Rhodes, 1988, pp. 31-34).

However, as even the most powerful advocates for the importance of questions of structure and agency acknowledge that it has always been present in political science, but it was largely implicit and poorly conceptualized until authors like Giddens, Archer, and Jessop sought to advance and formalize various dynamic conceptions of the relationship which went beyond the dualism of structure and agency (see for example Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995; Jessop, 1990; Hay 2002, pp. 83-90). Many dualisms have featured prominently in political science debate, and whilst strictly structuralist or intentionalist accounts have been rare, in the 1970s contemporary Marxist theory witnessed a polarization between positions, which Giddens in particular sought to transcend with a dialectical approach to questions of structure and agency (Giddens, 1981, pp. 26-48; and see Hay, 2002, pp. 116-119).

It is argued that both implicitly in his empirical, and later explicitly in his conceptual work, Bulpitt makes it clear that he rejects an agential or structural approach to political science. If anything, in various guises, Bulpitt was always interested in the dynamic relationship between things, whether that be central and local government or Britain's relationship with Europe<sup>13</sup> and the wider world (see in particular, Bulpitt, 1983; Bulpitt, 1992). In his article on the first Thatcher administration the "crucial question is in what ways has the Conservative Party sought to gain office, govern satisfactorily and retain office within the British structure of politics?" (1986, p. 21). Later he says, "party leaders operate within a structural framework which...yields both constraints *and* opportunities" (1988, p. 185).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The term Europe is used principally in with reference to the European Economic Community or the European Community and later the EU.

<sup>14</sup> The omission of a small part in the middle of this sentence is because this work refers to foreign policy analysis, not to conceal or alter the meaning of the sentence, and it is a theme that is repeated throughout Bulpitt's work.

As a consequence, it can be inferred that a principle interest of Bulpitt's analysis was on agents but he regards the 'agent' as the Conservative Party as led by Mrs Thatcher, not Thatcher herself: although both can be classed as agents for the statecraft analysis.<sup>15</sup> However, that doesn't seem to imply that Bulpitt attributes a causal primacy to agents in the practice of politics he is actually studying; the reason people assume he gives agents causal primacy is because he mentions 'intentions', 'strategy' and 'rationality' which are discussed below.

Attempting to locate the statecraft approach within the current debate surrounding structure and agency is likely to be contentious. If we accept Buller's assertion that statecraft is potentially compatible with a realist approach, which he convincingly argues, then this may help because it fits with, and has influenced the main ways structure and agency is currently conceived (Buller, 1999, pp. 705-707). If anything, it could be argued that going a little further than Buller, and locating the statecraft approach within critical realism could advance the discussion further.

Briefly, realism is grounded upon the foundationalist ontological assumption that there is a real world, that it exists independently of an individual's knowledge of it and that structures have causal powers (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, pp. 30-31). When it comes to studying these structures, some cannot be directly observed or worse still, it is possible that what can be observed may offer a misleading picture of the structure or its implications and impact (Hollis and Smith, 1990, pp. 205-207; see Marsh 2002). Despite this limitation, there is still utility in inferring or positing the existence of structures that are not directly observable as this leads to "inference to the best explanation" (Hollis and Smith, 1990, p.207).

Marsh and Furlong go on to outline how the modern critical realism goes further, and recognizes that our understanding or interpretation of structures or social phenomena impacts upon outcomes and this may also be fallible, misleading and 'theory laden' (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p. 31). They

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<sup>15</sup> It is also important to see that the Conservative Party can also act as a structure. It quite obviously provides constraints and opportunities for its leaders, and Bulpitt refers to party divisions in this way (see Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 33-36).

go onto to highlight how this leads to a notion of structures which constrain and facilitate rather than determine outcomes, which again, is in line with Bulpitt's own stated position (Bulpitt, 1996a, pp. 1095-1096). This is important in the context of this thesis on a number of levels. In, acknowledging that both 'reality' and the way reality is constructed are important contributes to a more sophisticated notion of structure and agency, that informs the subsequent chapters of this thesis. It helps with the understanding of how politicians' actions can be fallible, and counters the notion that statecraft is intentionalistic.

In realist and critical realist circles, there are two dominant approaches to dealing with the assumptions researchers make about questions of structure and agency. The morphogenetic approach developed by Margaret Archer, but based on the work of Roy Bhaskar and the strategic relational approach developed by Jessop and subsequently Hay show many similarities. They both praise the work of Giddens, which also merits consideration here. His attempt, to go beyond the traditional and competing positions on the scale of structuralism versus intentionalism with his preference for viewing structure and agency are internally related forming a duality (Hay, 1995, p. 197). Giddens's structuration approach is premised upon this duality of structure: notion that structures provide both constraints and opportunities and that society is produced and reproduced by agential action: "Social structures are both constituted by human action, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution" (Giddens. 1976, p. 121).

The problems with Giddens's approach have been well documented, and largely revolve around the assertion that the claims he makes for his approach, are not borne out by his notions of structuration, the duality of structure and in particular the methodological bracketing he adopts. Methodological bracketing is necessary because Giddens holds that it is rarely possible to capture the complexity of structural and agential factors at once, so he requires the researcher to 'bracket off' one whilst examining the other (see Hay 1995, pp. 197-199). Further to this, the way Giddens treats structure and agency as ontologically intertwined or mutually constitutive is difficult to operationalize, if one has to be bracketed of from the other for analysis. As Hay says, this means his attempt at creating a

duality, has to be reduced to an analytical dualism (2002, p. 120 and 124). In contrast, for others the very notion that structure and agency are mutually constituted serves to conflate the two which makes analysis of the relationship between them problematic (McAnulla, 2002, p. 279).

In statecraft terms, it seems likely that Bulpitt was influenced by the early development of a formalized dialectical approach which was what Giddens claimed to offer when he referred to the underlying assumption of the statecraft approach seeing structures as offering both constraints and opportunities (1988, pp. 185). However, most of Bulpitt's empirical work is rich in detail of the interaction and interrelationship of what can be called structure and agency, and the very purpose of his macro and historical approach to political science is to counter those who abstracted political phenomena from its context (1996a, pp. 1095-1098). This hardly seems compatible with the process of methodological bracketing, for example, the context, or structure and its interaction with agential action is key for Bulpitt's analysis of the way political leaders have sought to win office or govern.

Assessing how statecraft might relate to either the morphogenetic or the strategic relational approach is more problematic, and indeed, there are similarities between the two (McAnulla, 2002, p. 285). It is likely that a case could be made for statecraft being compatible with either approach, although doubtless such a claim will raise objections from some quarters. The morphogenetic approach is premised on a distinction between structure and agency; they should not be conflated but instead it is the interrelationship of the two over time that is important (McAnulla, 2002, p. 285). Archer's morphogenetic cycle begins with a pre-existing structural context which is the product of previous interaction between structure and agency. This acts to influence significantly agential action and interaction but it does not determine it, rather it provides the constraints and opportunities for social interaction to occur. The result of agential action serves to change the structural conditions, which Archer calls structural elaboration, whether this be to a tiny barely noticeable extent, which resembles no change at all; or at other times, it may result in significant change; either way this forms the structural context for the cycle to begin again (Archer, 1995 and see McAnulla, 2002, pp. 286-287).

In many ways, Archer's approach seems to fit quite well with statecraft, it stresses the importance of time, and the deeply structured political environment in which politicians act and seek to grapple with, whilst acknowledging all of the limitations associated with the critical realist about how well agents can understand their structural context (Hay, 2002, pp. 124-125). In his critique of the morphogenetic approach Hay highlights a tendency for the cycle to present a somewhat agency-centred sequence at one point, but later that it implies "a residual structuralism punctuated only periodically yet infrequently by a large and unexplicated conception of agency" (see Hay 2002, p. 125 and 125). However, if anything, the statecraft cycle, and perhaps Bulpitt's notion of the natural rate of governability, which it is argued, offers a notion of continuous interaction between structure and agency could work to overcome Hay's criticism of Archer's episodic and disjointed view of agency, and presumably agential interaction with structures (Hay, 2002, p. 127 but see Archer, 1995, pp. 247-257). Alternatively, it may just serve to reinforce it.

In this sense, party leaders find themselves in a deep, complex, and densely structured environment which provides constraints and opportunities. However, it also offers a way of acknowledging the importance of factors such as ideas and ideology because Archer attributes importance to these by distinguishing culture from structure as a way of avoiding the conflation of the material and ideational (Archer 1995; and see McAnulla, 2002, pp. 287-288). In the way the statecraft framework is used in this thesis, and drawing on the work of Buckler and Dolowitz, one of the interesting aspects of studying party leaders in action is the difficulty they have resolving ideological and what could be termed cultural issues facing the party (internally and externally) with the wider political structural conditions confronting it. The statecraft cycle may also offer a way of framing a morphogenetic cycle because in the right circumstances it provides a guide to a start and finishing point of the analysis (usually elections).

However, whether the way morphogenetic approach sees structure and agency separate and distinct entities is compatible with the way a statecraft analysis charts the continual interaction of structure and agency is questionable. In particular, operationalizing the morphogenetic cycle in the study of

party political interaction and government poses many questions about the selection of where the various points of the cycle begin and end. It also raises questions about whether such an approach can really cope with the constant dynamic nature of such a subject area. The party political and governing landscape is almost constantly dynamic, even if this is usually only to a relatively modest extent.

There are many factors such policies, announcements, 'events', mistakes, scandal, and the interaction of political parties that could be regarded as almost constantly altering the structural conditions party leaders face. The research would have to be careful to ensure that the selection of the time frame for the cycle of analysis to ensure that it adequately captured the way social interaction led to structural elaboration. Conversely, the morphogenetic cycle may offer something to statecraft analysis because it could clarify the way political leaders can at times appear to struggle with the form structural elaboration takes. It can be argued that a significant part of the literature on statecraft has been concerned with party leaders and governments coming to terms with a changing structural environment, whether that be in relation to Britain's place in the world following World War II, relationship with Europe, or the change in British governance (for example Buller, 2000; Bulpitt, 1988; Bulpitt, 1992). Coming to terms with what Archer terms structural elaboration has often proven problematic for party leaders, although there may be a multitude of reasons for this, from a lack of understanding of the situation to the difficulty of dealing with a multi-layered structural environment.

The strategic relational approach developed by Bob Jessop and later Colin Hay is third of the prominent ways of conceptualizing the relationship between structure and agency. Rather than see structure and agency as ontologically separate, the distinction is just analytical, as one cannot exist independently of the other (Hay, 2002, p. 127). For the researcher, a strategic relational approach places the emphasis on the dialectical relationship of structure and agency, and although they may be separated for analytical purposes, they are viewed through their relationship with each other



(Hay, 1995, pp. 200-2001). Furthermore, as Hay puts it, “what constitutes a structure is entirely dependent upon our vantage point” (1995, p. 200).

Once again, it is an approach built upon critical realist foundations, and as with the other approaches discussed here, structures serve to create both opportunities and constraints, and agents will have imperfect knowledge of them. However, Jessop and Hay refer to the strategies and options that may be preferred by the structural environment in which agents act, and that structures can “conceived of as nested hierarchy of levels of structure that interact in complex ways to condition and set the context within which agency is displayed” (Hay, 1995, p. 200; Jessop, 1990, p. 129). In combination, this is seen as creating a strategically selective context, within which there are agents who pursue strategic action- and it is the dialectical relationship between the two that is the novel and interesting focus of attention for the strategic relational approach (Hay, 2002, p. 129; Jessop, 1990, pp. 259-261).

Hay asserts that:

"In one sense, this is obvious. A government seeking re-election is likely to find itself in a position of strategic choice as an election approaches (relating not only to the campaign it might fight, but also for instance, whether it should seek to engineer a pre-election boom). Yet, given the nature of the (strategically selective) environment in which it finds itself (given what we know, for instance about its tenure in office, the state of the economy, the strategic choices made by contending parties...), certain strategies are more likely to be rewarded at the polls than others" (2002, p. 129).

Hay goes on to assert that despite this seeming obvious, it is “scarcely acknowledged in the existing literature on structure and agency” (2002, p. 129). This may very well be true, but the case could be made that this is a feature of the empirical work of Bulpitt (and many others). Even if it’s not explicitly stated in his summary of the assumptions on which statecraft is based, and indeed Hay does acknowledge that Jessop use of the strategic relational language is built upon what may be “sociological truisms” (2002, p. 129). Potential examples are mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, but whether that is the way the Conservative Party has engaged with Europe at various times proactively because it was viewed as offering strategic advantages to the party and country; or a more recalcitrant attitude towards it at other times when the reverse has been true (see Bulpitt, 1992;

Buller, 2000). Another example could be the development of British central-local government relations. The timeframe of this that Bulpitt covers witnesses considerable changes in the size, extent and role of the British state, yet it remains a centrally dominated structure, and even today with discussions of localism and increasing regional and local autonomy, the centre seems set to continue its dominance (Bulpitt, 1983 and cf. Bradbury, 2010).

Interestingly, whilst the emphasis of statecraft's critics is usually on the agential side of these examples, and this is important, but equally the political environment could be seen to be strategically selective. In the case of Britain's relationship with Europe, and the Conservative approach to this subject, Bulpitt and Buller are interested in the way at points during the 1970s and 1980s Europe seemed to offer governing and electoral advantage (Bulpitt, 1992; Buller, 2000, pp. 69-97). The Conservative approach to Europe wasn't structurally determined, but it was seen to offer, amongst other things, a potential remedy to what was termed Britain's relative economic decline, and as a way of supporting or entrenching Conservative policy (see Buller, 2000, pp. 37-43; Sked and Cook, 1993, pp. 148-150). So, what has been viewed as an agential approach, is, at least empirically, very concerned with the context in which politicians act, and if anything, rather than the Conservative approach to Europe being determined by intentional action by agents, the context seemed strongly to favour what in effect amounted to further European integration in relation to other policy options.

Indeed, a central argument of this thesis is that it is erroneous to view the statecraft approach as agential. As part of this it must be remembered that statecraft is usually a historical approach to politics, although there is nothing intrinsic that inhibits a predictive element to it. As such it is important that the analysis is what Bulpitt termed 'in time' because at the time the strategic action the political leaders took, was not determined, or inevitably 'right' or 'wrong', but it can appear this way (or as Buller claims, that politicians always achieve their objectives in the end) if one reads history backwards, or allows hindsight to colour the analysis.

Furthermore, there are many layers to this context, and it is argued that the statecraft cycle helps organize the analysis of these; although care should be taken to ensure that it doesn't also exclude some aspects from analysis, the components of the cycle have to be broadly conceived. In this regard, the elements of the statecraft framework can be seen as organizing layers of structure-agent interaction, although it must be made clear that they do not in themselves represent the actual layers of structure. So in this regard, political argument hegemony includes amongst other considerations, the relative state of the completion between parties' policies, individual performances, whether policies selected resonate with the electorate, and with the level of support of the membership of the party proposing them. It is argued that consideration of these issues is compatible with a strategic relational conception of a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, operating on many levels.

The strategic relational approach also allows for the possibility for strategic action to be only at the intuitive level, and for it to be the result of habitual or unreflexive acts as well as those which are obviously and explicitly strategic (Hay, 2002, p. 133). Equally, actors may exhibit strategic learning, as they gain a better understanding of their environment; and the result of the dialectical interaction will have an effect upon the context, and future structural environment and once again, this may very well be unintended, unforeseen, or undesirable (Hay, 1995, p. 201).

Of course, in the case of party political competition and government, these notions are complicated, and if anything, this thesis will argue that it is often the unintended consequences that are most telling; but also that strategic learning is both multifarious and can sometimes be frustrated by constraints from one aspect of the strategic context which negate attempts to learn from another.

It is in this area that party political electoral competition becomes fascinating, because in the following chapters attention is directed to the way the Conservative Party seemed incapable of what can be termed strategic learning. In reality, it is argued that this was due to the complex interaction of multiple layers of structure. The lessons of electoral defeat may have suggested one course of

action, for example for the Conservatives to pledge greater investment in the NHS, or concentrating less on Britain's relationship with Europe. However, doing so whilst labour dominated on these issues was likely to bring little additional support for the party. This in turn raises questions about the viability of such policies, potentially causing divisions and disenchantment within the party; and that it collides with the need to minimize the damaging splits that had also had a deleterious impact on the party. In essence, there can be a conflict between the interaction of various levels of structure and agency, and this complicates strategic learning, or at least the ability to act on it. Of course, as with most of what has been discussed in this section, it is possible this may be compounded by a misreading of the situation, or concentration on one aspect of strategic learning, at the expense of another.

If anything, given the discussion above, it is the notion of the multiple layers of structure and agency interaction, which is the most important assumption to acknowledge with regard to statecraft. When considering one aspect of the interaction of a strategically selective context, and a strategic actor, for example with regard to electoral strategy; reference must also be made to other layers of this interaction, for example party management. Bulpitt highlighted how there may be inconsistencies between the various elements of the statecraft cycle, and these inconsistencies can have the potential to be very revealing about the success or failure of a party's statecraft (see Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 34-37).

It is obviously impossible to know what Bulpitt would have made of the current state of the conceptual debate about matters of structure and agency, or if he would have agreed with this interpretation of his work. However, in for the purposes of the way statecraft is deployed here, whilst it is argued that all of the approaches discussed in this section have advanced the debate, an acknowledgement of the strategic relational underpinnings of the statecraft framework offers the best fit, and greatest utility.

## 2.6 Intentionalism

Leaving aside the difficulty of deducing elite intentions, discussed above, the very mention of them is taken to equate with statecraft being intentionalistic, and subsequently agential in operation. Hay described the intentionalist position as “explaining political outcomes simply by referring to the intentions of the actors directly implicated” (Hay, 2002, p.110). McAnulla further describes it as “the explanatory focus thus is on agency, with structure...given secondary status”. In other words, ‘structure’, if it is mentioned at all, is only ever taken to exist as an effect or outcome of individual action (2002, pp.276-277). Of course, neither Hay, McAnulla, nor many others see this as a common position, it is the extreme point on a scale between structural and intentionalistic approaches to political science (Hay, 2002, pp.110-111 and see Hay, 1995, p.195). However Hay also lists some other features of a typical intentionalistic account as being concerned with “presentism” and the “concepts of structure, constraint and context are...largely absent” (Hay, 2002, p. 112 and p. 110). Bulpitt however, explicitly rejects presentism, and rails against it in favour of historical politics: context is crucial in statecraft analysis, and it is crucial in the later chapters of this thesis, and any account that proceeds along the same lines (see Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 2002)

The basic position statecraft proceeds from is to explore how political parties and their leaders have sought to gain office. It is their intention to gain office; yet there is no inevitability about this intention being realized. And this is one of the problems that potentially stems from the fact that Bulpitt was interested in historical politics: he is studying things that have already happened (see Bulpitt, 1995; Bulpitt, 1996). The criticism Buller highlights with regard to politicians always achieving their objectives in the end ignores the fact that Bulpitt is studying something that has already happened; and he also refers to periods when politicians did not achieve their objectives, such as the Heath government (1986, pp. 28-31).

## 2.7 Rationality

When Bulpitt introduced a notion of rationality into his analysis in 1988, he argued it is “an analytical can of worms, opening the way to all sorts of problems, confusions and criticisms” (1988, p.185 and see Bulpitt, 1996a, pp.1096- 1097). In this Bulpitt was remarkably prescient, and it might almost have been better had Bulpitt not ventured down this avenue, however, Bulpitt’s rationality assumption is not quite what it seems. His critics have interpreted the use of rationality literally as if “The mainstream variant of rational choice theory assumes that individuals have all the rational capacity, time and emotional detachment necessary to choose the best course of action no matter how complex the choice” (Ward, 2002, p. 68). However, once again this is a position at the extreme end of the spectrum, and Bulpitt explicitly outlines a notion of ‘bounded rationality’ based on the work of Simon (Bulpitt, 1995, pp. 518-519; and see Simon, 1978).

Yet even this notion of rationality is problematic, in its strict sense, and it is argued it is important to examine how Bulpitt qualified the his use of rationality. Firstly, Bulpitt’s assumption is that parties and their leaders, will rationally seek to gain and retain of office, specifically discussing there will be ‘mistakes’, ‘general cock-ups’, and ‘u-turns’ (Bulpitt, 1986; 1986b). Yet whilst this only partially dispels any misunderstanding about how strict Bulpitt’s assumption of rationality was, his empirical work goes further. A brief scan of his work will easily dispel any idea of strict rationality. Bulpitt charts Britain’s relationship with the EC/EU and the way it was originally intended to enhance Conservative statecraft; but in the long term, would prompt unimaginable and very much unintended consequences, for the party (1992; 1996). Monetarism he argues was also adopted to facilitate and improve the party’s statecraft; yet it failed, and he refers to nearly a century’s worth of examples like the gold-standard, and adoption of elements of Keynesianism, when the party did something to improve its statecraft, only for it ultimately to have the opposite effect (see for example 1986, pp. 23-39; 1996a, pp. 1098-1104).

Indeed, the weak form of rationality Bulpitt uses, demonstrates the imperfect knowledge politicians have, the importance of structures, and yields insights into change by demonstrating that parties can

sometimes advocate something they believe will assist them in seeking office, but ultimately discover it doesn't, or even has a deleterious effect. It is argued critics have read far too much into this element of Bulpitt's work, and that it amounts to little more than saying an agent sets out to seek and retain office; but they do so in the face of structural constraints. Constraints that may, and almost invariably do constrain, because they are dynamic and imperfect knowledge, he also highlights the role of opponents, who will have a significant effect on this (1995, p. 519).

## **2.8 NRG**

As touched on above, a further aspect of Bulpitt's work on structure and agency appears in one of his later works. In a 1996 conference paper, Bulpitt introduces a further concept to the mix, something he calls the 'natural rate of governability' (NRG). For some, this has been seen as a radical departure from his earlier work, but it is argued it is little more than an attempt to elucidate his earlier thinking (cf. Buller, 1999, p.702). However, it's necessary to note that Bulpitt provides just a single paragraph of detail on the NRG within a page of wider discussion of structure and agency; so, once again, the treatment of it here requires some reading between the lines. It's also worth noting that Bulpitt also introduces the notion of the NRG in the light of what seems to be his dissatisfaction with what he saw as the general state of the debate about structure and agency. Perhaps in a sense of frustration, it is in this paper that Bulpitt makes his brief comment about the what amounts to the structure-agent debate being 'otiose'. He does so whilst also saying that it is "unresolvable and, consequently will always be an essentially contested issue" and also that "no purely structuralist explanation of political behaviour is either possible or one offer" (Bulpitt, 1996a, p. 1095).

He doesn't say so explicitly, but it seems safe to say that in light of his reaffirmation in the same article that structures can yield both constraints and opportunities, the same also applies to purely agential explanations. From the tone and content of the section on the structure-agent problem within the 1996 paper, it may be possible to detect a degree of exasperation, not because the problem

doesn't have merit, but because of the difficulty associated with operationalizing research once its underlying assumptions have been specified.

He finds most of the existing debate surrounding structure and agency ambiguous because “although it provides us a list of things to look for, it provides no ready and easy general stance on the problem” (1996, p. 1096). However, he does go on to explain how some attention to matters of structure and agency is required for the type of macro analyses into which statecraft falls, because of the very nature of such a broad approach: the range of structures in particular can be vast (Bulpitt, 1996a, pp. 1095-1096).

The basic elements of the NRG stem from a notion that “in any period [structure will] grind out or deliver, a natural rate of governability” (Bulpitt, 1996a, p. 1096). In turn, this natural rate of governability will ‘confront’ political actors, and they will have a degree of ‘relative autonomy’ which is shaped by how much choice they have about “which aspects of the NRG they will prioritise” (Bulpitt, 1996a, p. 1096). It is also assumed that the “NRG will not be static: in some periods it will be lower than others” and Bulpitt also seems to provide a way of assessing political leaders, which is discussed later.

That is the extent of Bulpitt's explicit discussion of the tenets of the NRG: an interesting and appealing concept, but only explored in scant detail. If we unpack it a little, there is a natural rate of governability which yields constraints and opportunities to varying degrees, if we take two contrasting periods this can be interrogated further. Whilst it is doubtless open to contestation, and a charge of over simplification, it could be assumed that the periods after 1997, or perhaps even more so after 2001<sup>16</sup> were periods when the natural rate of governability was fairly high or benign especially as the economy performed well.

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<sup>16</sup> Conscious of what follows, and that without care picking two periods of Labour government as exhibiting a relatively high NRG might be seen as reinforcing the notion that statecraft is a Tory approach, downplaying Labour achievements... this could equally apply to say to the period following the 1955 election.



Bulpitt only refers to the relative autonomy of actors being at times low (and presumably at other times high) but by virtue of being a relational concept, the NRG may also be high or low, or at some point on the scale between the two extremes. At other times, for example after the 1979 general election, or even after 2008, the natural rate of governability may be seen to be lower or less benign with the country (and much of the Western world) beset with economic problems (see Rawnsley, 2010, pp. 123-139). It's difficult to know how widely Bulpitt would cast his net when considering what contributed to 'governability'. For example did Bulpitt intend it to apply just to matters of 'high politics' like the state of the economy or how quiescent foreign relations were; or did he intend it to apply to, for example, the majority a particular government has or periods of ideological or paradigm change.

It can only be inferred, but it is probable the broader conception was more appropriate, and it would seem unlikely any assessment of governability would be adequate if it didn't include such considerations, because the size of a government's majority has often been claimed to impact on a party's ability to govern (for a discussion of these issues and the Major government, see Clark, 1998, pp. 410-420). Bulpitt does give one example which seems to confirm the broader interpretation when he discusses Britain being a "difficult polity to govern in the absence of the 'can do' culture of the Lloyd George coalition" in the 1920s (1996, p. 1101). Another potentially contentious example of this could be the often-implied claims that *ceteris paribus*, the Major government would have been less troubled had the Conservatives secured a greater majority in 1992 (see Clark, 1998, pp. 410-420).

Whilst the NRG provides the context, the agential side must surely mean that the actions of agents may improve the NRG, or conversely worsen it, and consequently their own level of relative autonomy from it. To Buller, this just succumbs to the same charge of reductionism, in the same way as he dismissed Bulpitt's other statements about structure and agency (Buller, 1999, p. 702). Interestingly, Buller's main concern here is that "the problem with Bulpitt's approach is that agents

will also make mistakes” when it comes to defining structures, and this undermines the NRG (1999, p. 702 and see Archer, 1995, p. 176).

However, Buller’s judgment seems rather harsh. Once again he says the problem with this position is that it “enforces the image that agents have a perfect understanding of structures (and with this, can always manipulate them eventually)” (1999, p. 702). At least part of this criticism seems to stem from Buller’s reading of an earlier Bulpitt paper when he discusses the “circumstances in which it may be convenient to leave the definition of structure at any one time to the designated principle actor” (1995, p. 519). Buller does acknowledge that despite mentioning this, Bulpitt does not deploy this methodology; but it should also be noted, Bulpitt doesn’t use this line of argument in the paper that introduced the NRG either, despite Buller linking the two (Buller, 1999, p. 703). Once again, attention should be drawn to Bulpitt’s acceptance to the importance of ‘mistakes’, ‘U-turns’ and ‘Cock-ups’ which certainly goes some way to indicating that he certainly didn’t intend for statecraft to be based on an assumption of perfect agential knowledge (1986, p.20).

Furthermore, reference has already been made to Bulpitt’s empirical work which contains many examples of just this, and also important considerations such as path dependency, ideology and habit which can contribute to what become classified as mistakes or errors (see for example Pierson, 2000).

When Bulpitt refers to actors having a relative autonomy to pursue their preoccupations, he does later clarify that he intends this to mean preoccupations with the NRG, rather in the more general sense (1996, p. 1098). Whilst the use of the word preoccupation might raise eyebrows in some quarters, in essence it refers to what today might be termed the ‘big issues’ facing a government-similar to Bulpitt’s governing code. However, perhaps preoccupation does have some merit for analysis of those policy areas where preoccupation with certain subjects or policy issues has seen to be damaging to a party’s statecraft; although, once again, path dependency and the political cost of

abandoning policies can act to reinforce the notion of a politician being preoccupied with something<sup>17</sup>.

The way Bulpitt used the NRG is also interesting. Whilst it is a shame Bulpitt wasn't able to develop the notion of the NRG in the short period between its introduction and his death, he does provide a short case study which very briefly mentions the NRG, but doesn't apply it as a systematic methodological concept (1996, pp. 1098-1005). Instead, it is used as an extra concept within the statecraft approach, designed to highlight, or clarify the interaction of structure and agency. In Bulpitt's case study, the NRG in Britain during the inter-war years presented many difficulties, principal among them being the economic situation of the period, but also external security concerns. The NRG is not quantified, but during this period "Britain was now recognized to be a difficult polity to govern effectively" (1996, p. 1101). In light of this, the governing objectives (codes) of the time were to govern competently, and achieve a degree of relative autonomy through a cautious rules based approach principally based around maintaining confidence in Sterling, avoiding foreign entanglements, and depoliticizing government involvement in the economy (Bulpitt, 1996a, pp. 1100-1105).

Having outlined Bulpitt's notion of the NRG, attention will now turn to exploring how it can relate to an updated version of statecraft. It is argued that with some tweaking, and interpretation, it strengthens the foundations of the statecraft approach. The NRG seems compatible with the sophisticated approach to the structure- agency dilemma discussed above. If, for example we consider potential similarities between the NRG and Jessop's 'strategically selective context' with a little extrapolation a number of parallels emerge.

Firstly, it could be argued that much like Jessop, Bulpitt brings a notion of agency into structure, and vice-versa: the NRG necessarily provides an 'action settling' and a 'situated agent' as the a notion of a natural rate of governability is fairly meaningless without both (see Jessop, 1990, pp. 124-130;

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<sup>17</sup> A potential example could be the Poll Tax, which seemed to become an irrational preoccupation for the Thatcher government, although it statecraft terms it could be argued that once the decision to pursue the policy is made, there are costs in terms of competence, PAH and strategy in reversing it. Much like a notion of path dependency, changing course is not always straightforward. (see Pierson, 2000).

Hay, 2002, p. 128). Secondly, Bulpitt discusses the NRG confronting agents, and actors working to achieve a relative autonomy from this. In his empirical work, this seems compatible with the notion that the NRG favours certain strategies to confronting it over others. It doesn't determine the strategy, and Bulpitt briefly examines strategies designed to confront the NRG in the inter-war case study mentioned above such as a return to the gold standard, management of the currency, tariffs or free trade, a more active economic policy in light of the depression, or a depoliticized approach (1996, pp. 1101-1102). Whichever strategy is chosen, they are competing (or perhaps some are complimentary) strategies that are favoured by the context, but actors have varying degrees of autonomy as well, but it is the interaction of the two that is important.

It could be argued that any government will face particular governing problems, and this will inform, to varying extents, government policies and action. Hay uses the example of a general election, and how in a strategically selective party political environment, certain strategies adopted are more likely to bring electoral reward than others (2002, p. 130). To a significant extent, this is just what Bulpitt was concerned with: parties seeking to gain a relative autonomy from the NRG by attempting to construct 'good statecraft' and that good statecraft has to be designed (or couched in the terms) of confronting the governing issues of the day.

Their success or failure in this regard will impact upon party credibility, how competent it appears, but also serve to shape the future (strategically selective) context, the NRG, and presumably there is also scope for strategic learning, although there is no certainty the 'right' lessons will be learnt. Bulpitt very briefly mentions 'deep' and shallow 'structures' and how shallow structures may or may not become part of a deeper structural environment, which doesn't seem to preclude the notion of the NRG being transformed or reproduced as a result of structure- agent action, and that is certainly how it is viewed in this thesis (see Bulpitt, 1996a, p. 1096).

On the agential side, despite Buller's claim that it cannot account for mistakes, the NRG seems compatible with the same realist notion of the limitations of agential understanding discussed above.

Partial, imperfect knowledge; intended and unintended consequences; and structurally embedded actors attempt to operate within, and address, improve, or mitigate the statecraft challenges the NRG presents. There is no certainty that actions will improve the NRG, and they may well worsen it, or create new problems, for example as a result of a foreign intervention or unpopular policies, and this all occurs within a competitive party political environment.

Equally, there is no reason why agential preferences should be fixed, as the problems facing a government change, whether as a result of one or a myriad of reasons such as an external shock, government actions, the action of opponents; so might the strategies political leaders pursue to address the NRG. This is much as Hay claims for the process of change in the strategic relational approach (2002, p. 131). Bulpitt's account of the first Thatcher government shows this very process as he charts the changes in Conservative strategy and statecraft during the 1980s. Changes in economic policy in light of the failure of early attempts to control the money supply; the vacillating relationship with Europe are the grander examples. A political party's broad objectives in addressing the NRG may remain the same, even if the policies for doing so alter (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 29-37).

In a section entitled 'Government by Apprentices' Bulpitt discusses the collapse of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as resulting principally from a combination of it not working to address the problems it was designed to address and the NRG worsening. Part of the failure is attributed to the 'deeper malaise' but also it is seen as "involving important policy mistakes, the emergence of significant problems not initially perceived or predicted, and difficulties posed..." (1986, pp. 35-36).

As a result, just about every major economic indicator worsened, and statecraft changes were required, but Bulpitt goes to great length to highlight how these changes were "...neither very easy nor rapid, and the outcome was a general stance less coherent than in the early period" and taking place in a "political climate unfavourable to the Conservatives"<sup>18</sup> (1986, p. 36). Interestingly, the

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<sup>18</sup> Bulpitt provides far more detail about this combination of forces (1986, pp. 35-38).

changes in the party's statecraft included adjustments of personnel, a greater role for supply sides economics, a move away from allowing market forces to determine the exchange rate, and claims that the failure previously set MTFS targets didn't matter, and what amounts to the government downplaying its transformative aspirations (a common strategy for a government in trouble) (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 32-37; Clark, 1998, pp. 385-410).

A brief summary of the situation, drawing on multiple Bulpitt works, might be: A combination of difficult problems influenced the NRG emerging in the years running up to 1979<sup>19</sup> can be seen as serving to influence the Conservative Party to look for new statecraft strategies as a way of returning to office, and achieving some degree of autonomy in office. Alternative political and politico-economic strategies become more acceptable for consideration, and their advocates also gain voice (see Hay, 2002, pp. 161-163). This context (perhaps strategically selective) and in particular the experience of previous governments, particularly the Heath administration, but also the Labour governments of the 1970s, served to make some strategies more appealing to the Conservative Party, so there is something resembling strategic learning.

There are also changes to the political environment, traditionally argued to be Britain's (relative) economic decline and economic and industrial problems culminating in the winter of discontent which make the Conservative statecraft more appealing, even if some aspects of it weren't particularly clearly mapped out (see Kavanagh, 1989, pp. 63-101). However, once in office, the Conservative strategies for confronting the country's problems rapidly run into problems. The NRG deteriorates, and this could be seen as the result of the combination of a vast range of factors including the policies being inappropriate, misapplied or not going far enough, the global economic environment, or unexpected consequences.

It could perhaps also be seen as the Conservative leadership learning the wrong lessons from the country's problems, whether that is because of ideological blinkers, the restrictions of policy options

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<sup>19</sup> Bulpitt would say this had its origins in and after the period around 1958-1964, rather than the traditional 1970s Post-war consensus thesis (see for example: Morgan, 2001, pp. 4-6; and cf. Kerr, 2001).

available that fit with the party's ideology, or the result of placing excessive faith in the arguments of the advocates of various available policy options. In the face of growing problems, and a deteriorating NRG, statecraft changes are both required, and made, in an attempt to stem the damage, albeit often on an ad-hoc basis, it could be argued because the hostile NRG complicates the autonomy available for statecraft reformulation (see Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 37-38).

Then, Bulpitt argues that after 1982, and by the time of the 1983 general election, more coherence in the government's line was apparent with "manifesto commitments to more radical changes for local government, the unions and nationalized industries..." (1986, p. 38). Significant additional factors, including those that were unforeseen, such as the Falklands<sup>20</sup> effect, a divided Labour Party, and the emergence of the SDP<sup>21</sup> feature in the analysis- there is nothing in the NRG or statecraft approach to preclude them, indeed they are important (1986, p. 26). Whilst doubtless contentious, the concept of the NRG and statecraft discussed in this way, seems perfectly compatible with a dynamic and dialectical notion of the relationship between structure and agency discussed above.

However, the question remains about what the NRG brings to statecraft besides clarifying the approach to the structure and agency dilemma. In this thesis in particular, with the focus on being principally on a party in opposition rather than government, it doesn't seem directly applicable in the sense Bulpitt implies it should be used. However, if it is seen as a way of operationalizing a dialectical approach to structure and agency, it does help to focus and frame the analysis of a governing party; and at least to some extent, an opposition party must address many of the same issues as the governing party when it (re)formulates its own statecraft. In this way, it's not claimed that the NRG is any better than a strategic relational approach, nor that it can be reduced to a strategic relational approach: it's a way of locating and examining a strategically selective context.

Furthermore, it does offer something to the actual analysis, because Bulpitt does say:

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<sup>20</sup> Unless, as some have, some of the responsibility for the invasion of the Falklands is attributed to the government's naval and defence policy changes and planned cuts. (see Hastings and Jenkins, 1997, pp. 56-61).

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that the emergence of the SPD is not usually regarded as assisting the Conservatives in securing election victories in 1983 and 1987, but there were those at the time who thought the creation of a centre-left party a danger to the Conservatives (see Bulpitt, 1986, p. 36).

“... we must assess the behaviour of political actors not simply in terms of the extent to which they reach their publicised goals, but the degree to which they effectively confront the varying levels of the natural rate of governability... in different time periods” (1996, p. 1096).

This takes the concept of the NRG beyond a device for framing the analysis, into one that assists in the assessment of party statecraft. Of course, once again, this is likely to be debatable, and just as with statecraft generally, judgements about the NRG are likely to be contentious; as are judgements about how well a party confronts the NRG. However, the ultimate, although not the only, way of assessing statecraft is whether a party wins office, and/or retains office, but with a little extrapolation, this part of the NRG assists in the evaluation of parties in opposition by assessing them relative to their context.

There is a danger that it could be seen as confirming the alleged problems of statecraft, if, for example, it was seen as a way of excusing the culpability of a party or its leadership for its failings. However, British political history offers plenty of examples of periods where governments or parties are regarded as having performed well in difficult circumstances, or badly when times have been regarded as being benign. Any examples here will likely be contested, and are for indicative purposes, but could include the Atlee and Thatcher administrations as examples of governments that confronted the NRG they were faced with in difficult circumstances. Conversely, the administrations of Lord Liverpool, or the Conservative governments between 1951 and 1964 are sometimes seen as periods of missed opportunity or ‘thirteen wasted years’ in the later case (see for example Tiratsoo and Tomlinson, 1998).

Equally, parties in opposition are already, at least to some extent, judged along the lines of the NRG. In the media, there were examples of a feeling that the Conservative Party could have been expected to do better in 2010 than it did given that it was facing a government that had experienced significant economic problems, and a deeply unpopular prime minister (see for example Snowdon, 2010, pp. 409-412). The same could be said of the Labour Party in 1992, which is sometimes judged as having thrown away an election victory against a government many had expected it to defeat, in



part because of misjudged eve of election policy statements and the actions of its leader (see Sked and Cook, 1993, pp. 581-587).

These are just indicative examples of how parties and their leaders are already judged according to the context that confronts them, it's hardly a novel or radical notion. What matters more than whether you agree or disagree with the all too brief discussion of the cases above, is that this commonplace informal judgement about the relative performance political parties is formalized in the NRG.

However, it is still a concept that poses greater problems of applicability for parties in opposition than those in government. For a party in government, assessing its published goals, and how well it performs in achieving them relative to the context it operates in might not be straightforward; but in opposition, parties are often very cautious about publishing their goals in any detail until an election approaches, and sometimes they maintain that position even then (see Fletcher, 2011). This complicates the researchers job, because the pronouncements are less even concrete than those of a government, but this same obstacle faces anyone seeking to analyse a party in opposition and judgements have to be made between the often changing rhetoric and firm 'goals' (Fletcher, 2011).

When studying a party in opposition, the NRG also offers some potential use for the analysis of the government it is competing with. In a competitive party political environment, the performance of the parties is relative- there are a finite number of seats, and for one party to do better, another (or others) has to do worse. As a result, like party statecraft, often a party's interaction with the NRG will be relative to the other parties. Governments might win when the economy is bad because they are seen as 'doing a good job in the circumstances' or because another party might do worse. Conversely a government might potentially lose when some things are improving, either because it's not seen as doing enough, or because another party offers a better alternative (see Jeffreys, 2005). In the same manner, the NRG may be useful when examining an opposition party that wins an election,

because assessments can then be made more easily between stated objectives, and the areas of the NRG prioritized.

However, for the study of parties that are in opposition, and remain so, it has to be reduced to considering a party's performance relative to its context; and relative to the government's attempts to address the NRG. In essence, it informs a statecraft analysis by stressing the importance of assessing statecraft performance relative to the context in which it operates.

## **2.9 Ideational**

An objection may be raised to this based on the way statecraft treats ideas, and the ideational, and this is another problematic area. Buller argues that statecraft's treatment of ideology "would seem to rule out the possibility of politicians pursuing policy ideas without consideration for their impact on the broader political strategy being followed" (1999, p. 703). It is argued that this, once again, stems from the need to distinguish between Bulpitt's criteria for 'good' statecraft and statecraft analysis. Bulpitt neither excludes ideology, nor does he say directly that it is unimportant, he just subsumes it in the statecraft criteria of PAH, which he says is more 'comprehensive concept than ideology' (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 22). He also states that "what a party does in terms of these various dimensions may not be coherent" which one might presume may allow at least a little room for ideas to be pursued that don't fit within the wider framework, and Bulpitt mentions some potential examples of this (1986, p. 22; 1986, p. 33).

Buller suggests that statecraft cannot explain "Major's willingness to spend billions of taxpayers money in a failed attempt to keep sterling in the ERM" and yet later goes onto say that trying to prevent Britain's exit was an attempt to avoid looking incompetent, by being forced out (1999, p. 703; and see 2000, pp. 157-160). It seems somewhat strange that he offers these two contrasting arguments in a relatively short space of time.

Indeed, it is argued here that a notion of path-dependence and competence helps partially explain how ideas implicitly were, and should now be regarded as being treated by statecraft. It certainly offers a way of understanding why politicians sometimes seem to cling onto ideas that are harming their wider statecraft. They do so to avoid the penalty of changing, and the damage it often does to competence. (for a discussion of path dependency see Pierson, 2000 or Peters, 1999, pp. 62-64). This also helps address Stoker's concern about the way some policies succeed and some fail, and argues when it comes to implementation, and refutes the suggestion that it "pays little attention to the dynamics and explanation" (Stoker, 1995, p.104).

Indeed, building on the historical legacies Bulpitt referred to as culminating in institutions, Bradbury has advocated introducing a formal notion of path-dependency into Bulpitt's work on territorial politics as a way of explaining the developing relations between central and peripheral institutions (Bradbury, 2008). It is argued that a concept of path-dependence should also be introduced into the statecraft framework. This clarification will inform the statecraft formulation applied later in this thesis.

However, this hasn't particularly advanced the position regarding the selection of ideas. It is argued that it is unsatisfactory to simply regard ideas as being selected solely on the basis of perceived electoral advantage. Bulpitt's work on party politics doesn't explicitly say that this is the case, it is just inferred from the way he subsumes ideology within PAH. However, Bulpitt highlights what are often thought of as periods of wider political change, such as the 1970s, when new ideas, like monetarism which existed before the late 1960s, but were "politicised and made more relevant to policy makers" by the wider economic situation (1986, pp. 31-32). However he doesn't draw a direct line from "economic theory and political practice" but suggests the process is filtered through politicians deciding it offers statecraft advantages in its potential to address the perceived problems of the economy (1986, p. 31). Indeed, Bulpitt devotes considerable attention to discussing Keynesianism and monetarism, two fairly significant ideas in twentieth century British politics

(1986). In this sense ideas are filtered through a statecraft lens, as potential solutions to contextual factors and governing and electoral problems.

However, this still doesn't answer all the questions about how statecraft treats ideas, because it is argued yet another level of filtration needs to be considered. If nothing else, it should be acknowledged that Conservative politicians will be predisposed, at a basic level, to some policy options over others. However, the circumstances, or (even NRG) in which they find themselves may shape the significance of this. For example, in a difficult structural context, or when parties are faced with unpromising electoral circumstances, it may prompt a wider search for a solution, than if the situation was more benign (see Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009; Bevir, 2010). Although, it may equally be the case that a government in a strong position may cast its net wider because it feels it has the relative autonomy to do so. This may also partially explain why some parties have seemed to refuse to adapt to policy positions that harm their statecraft. An example might be the Conservatives reluctance to adopt a minimum wage policy for over two years. Despite it being popular with significant proportions of the electorate, they made no effort to convince their own party and adopt it (Dorey, 2003, pp. 125-146).<sup>22</sup> Accepting this possibility doesn't weaken the assumption that political parties and their leaders seek to gain and retain office, it just acts to pre-filter the policies available to pursue this.

Even if this argument is not accepted by statecraft's critics, it may be possible to explain an element of the relationship between ideas and a party's particular statecraft by reference to both party management, which may constrain the available options, and the wider PAH position, if they are to resonate. It is argued that Buckler and Dolowitz offer an stimulating account of how party ideology develops and is renewed, including the melange of factors that both contribute and constrain this, and the necessity of it to be carefully managed with reference to history, party members, and established ideologies (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009, p11-30). Whilst this is not the same argument as Bulpitt presents, he does explicitly mention the way parties and their leaders make reference back

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<sup>22</sup> Although, again, it may be possible to offer a purist statecraft interpretation that might fear the implementations of such a policy causing the loss of jobs, as the Conservatives did at the time, and impacting on competence.

to more 'successful' times and the ideas associated with them, and this suggests that history and tradition also help filter the ideas party's adopt (1986, pp. 23-35; 1996, pp. 1098-1100). The reverse argument is also present in Buckler and Dolowitz, namely that in certain circumstances, a party may seek to 'break' with the past in order to distance itself from failure. Although it is necessary to maintain some links: there is not a blank slate (2009, p. 14; and see Bevir, 2000, p. 281 for the case that ideology can be modified in unlimited ways).

The inclusion of ideology within PAH also has other implications, because it is argued that PAH is a relational concept, and as a consequence it may be necessary for a party to adopt a position that reflects this. If another party has a degree of PAH, or has it in certain policy areas, it is possible that this both limits certain options that might be ruled out, and also encourage the selection of alternatives in order to differentiate the two parties. Whilst this clarifies and develops the way statecraft interacts with ideas, it also complicates things, but it is argued the statecraft approach is stronger for acknowledging this.

He also examines the inconsistency of the first Thatcher government's policies; a contradiction resulting from the failure of monetarism and MTFS: Bulpitt certainly did not imbue the politicians he studied with perfect knowledge. Nor did it assume the ability to always realize its intentions, or agents have primacy over their context, indeed, any such account would have to provide a very novel way of explaining how any government ever lost an election. Part of this confusion also stems from the ambiguity over the difference between what can be termed 'good statecraft' and statecraft analysis. It is argued that the statecraft approach can be equally applied to the study of good, and bad statecraft; to success and failure. The assumption that party leaders seek to gain and retain office in no way assumes they will, it is just a location from which to begin the analysis. Bulpitt outlines how the elements of a party's statecraft like PAH and a reputation for competence can be won or lost, he may be best known for studying periods when the party won, but the alternate is not prohibited. Indeed, it is argued that the statecraft approach can be used to provide fruitful insights

nto why parties don't achieve office, or indeed lose office, and this is the focus of the following chapters.

## **2.10 Statecraft Framework and Application**

The final part of this chapter turns to the way statecraft will be utilized in this thesis. Taking Bulpitt's statecraft as its basis, and drawing on what has been discussed above, an updated and improved version of statecraft is outlined. The result is a perspective that retains the best elements of Bulpitt's statecraft, but builds on, develops, and improves it by rendering the underlying assumptions more explicit, and adapting the emphasis of the concepts. The result is a statecraft approach that will be used to yield fruitful insights into the way the Conservative Party sought to, and failed to, win office after 2001, before finally gaining office in 2010 as part of a coalition.

The analysis that proceeds from Chapter 3 takes the four<sup>23</sup> major dimensions of statecraft as its framework, so each chapter is divided into a section examining party management, strategy, political argument hegemony and competence. In this way, the component parts of statecraft form both a framework that structures and orders the analysis, and an approach for explanation by highlighting the importance of these four factors, but also crucially their interaction with each other, and with the wider party political environment<sup>24</sup>. It is important to emphasise that the four statecraft component parts should not be viewed separately, except for analytical purposes: for example, a loss of competence is likely to lead to increased problems for party management and attempts to compete for PAH if the electorate or the party themselves lose confidence in a party as a result. It might be possible to do well in one area, and badly in another, but there will be a constant dynamic relationship between and within the components. In the statecraft cycle presented in Figure 1 below, this is shown schematically by demonstrating how each component of statecraft has a positive or

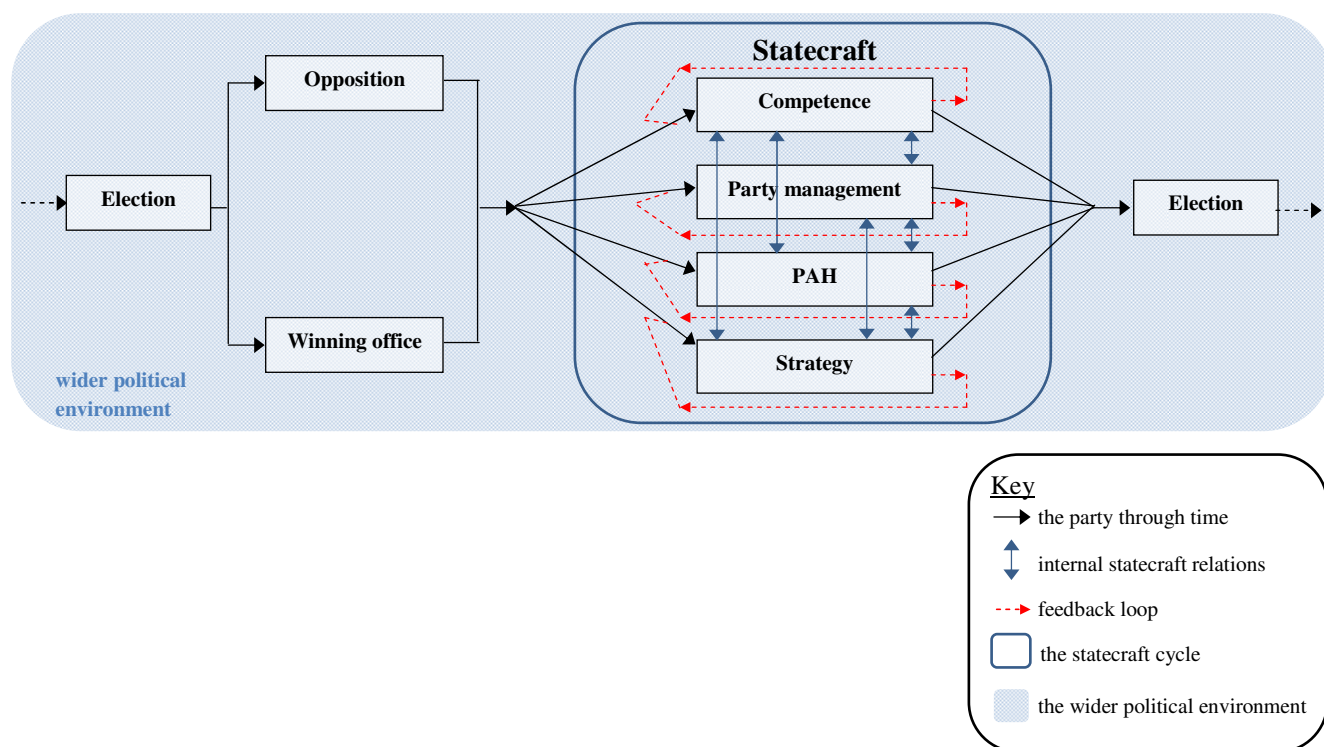
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<sup>23</sup> The fifth is excluded because it is 'another winning electoral strategy' which cannot be applied to the period studied here, and also because election strategy has been broadened to encompass wider party strategy, not just the strategy used as an election approaches.

<sup>24</sup> This is a broad and simplified way of referring to the fact that the statecraft of one party has to be crafted and adapted within a context that has other parties who will craft and adapt their statecraft- so there is a dynamic relationship between parties; parties also have to interact whilst attempting to formulate their own approach to address the governing problems, issues, events, crises etc. This is also referred to as 'political factors'.

negative feedback loop depending on a party's performance in each area, and relative to the wider party political environment, showing that positive performance enhances that area, whilst a negative performance in an area will have a negative feedback effect. Equally, the diagram shows that each component area of statecraft has a constant dynamic interrelationship with the others, although this is flexible in practice and they may not always impact on the other elements, for example losing a reputation for competence might prove more damaging to overall statecraft than internal party management problems. Once again, this is also likely to be dependent upon the wider party political environment in which all this takes place. For example if a party's reputation for competence suffers due to the leader's performance, whilst its opponent party's leader is regarded as competent, *ceteris paribus*, this will have a greater negative impact on the statecraft of the party performing badly than if both parties perform badly in this area, due to the complex relationships in place as it will highlight the deficiencies of the poorer performing party<sup>25</sup>.

**Figure 1. Diagram of statecraft cycle**



The diagram is designed to show potential pathways that may occur and the relationships that may develop during the statecraft cycle. All of this occurs within a complicated, unpredictable, and

<sup>25</sup> Only one party's statecraft cycle is shown in the diagram for simplicity, but each party will have its own statecraft cycle which forms part of the 'wider party political environment' that surrounds the diagram.

deeply structured party political environment of which party leaders can only have partial and imperfect knowledge, and where they have to compete with other party leaders in the same position.

This emphasis on the dynamic relationship between the various aspects of a party's attempts to compete for office *and* the dynamic relationship this has with the wider party political environment is one of the key benefits of the statecraft approach. As outlined in this chapter, it is a theoretically informed approach that specifies what is being examined and how it should be examined. In the past, statecraft has been somewhat unfairly regarded as emphasizing the agential, however, applied in this way, the statecraft framework as used here also emphasizes the constraints on party statecraft. As a result it ensures a balanced approach to matters of structure and agency, including the use of the NRG concept discussed earlier in this chapter, and accentuates the dynamic relationship between structural and agential factors by placing a party and its leader in appropriate context. The focus of the analysis might be from the perspective of a party and its leader, but that in no way asserts or implies causal primacy to the actions of a party or its leader.

For example, a bold or radical approach to strategy might serve to create greater party management problems than a cautious strategy if the party's MPs are divided about the best direction for the party to travel in. A party leader will have to consider the impact any decision may have not just on each statecraft area individually, but also what effect they might have on each other as a result; and this can be a positive or negative effect. Even if consideration is given to the likely impact of an action, given the limitations of knowledge, information, and unpredictable wider political context, there may still be unintended consequences, indeed there frequently will be, otherwise crafting party statecraft would be considerably straightforward. It is not necessary for a party to achieve success in all statecraft areas in order to secure office (and certainly they do not need to achieve perfection in any area), and success in one area can be achieved or lost at any time. This thesis examines opposition, as discussed below, and as a result it may not be possible for a party to achieve a predominant position in some components of statecraft which can only be fully achieved in government, in particular these might relate to competence and PAH. It could be argued that even in



1997, when Labour's statecraft was far superior as a whole to the Conservative Party's statecraft, there were still doubts about how competently the party would govern in office, given the length of time it had been in opposition and lingering memories of its previous experience in government<sup>26</sup> (see Jeffreys, 1995).

Neither is it a 'tick box' checklist of things that will ensure a party gets elected, as some seem to have believed, because a party's statecraft will be in opposition to the statecraft of other parties, and it will have to constantly (if very subtly) adapt to the changing political environment, as shown in Figure 1 and explained in detail above. Indeed, in this way, the relationship within one party's statecraft, and the relationship between one party's statecraft and the statecraft of its opponents as part of the wider party political context also shows how change and adaptation constantly (though at different rates) takes place as part of a dynamic process. As used here, it is a way of examining a party's performance in seeking office, relative to other parties and the wider party political environment. It also provides a way of comparing different periods of party history in a consistent fashion, and 'in-time' rather than extracted from their wider context. As a result, the statecraft framework deployed here remedies a deficiency in the statecraft literature, and adds to the limited body of literature devoted to opposition generally (see Fletcher, 2011). However, it does more than this, because it is argued that the very fact that the statecraft framework examines how parties seek office, something that is often neglected, and does so from a macro-perspective, means it has much to offer. Rather than concentrating on specific aspects of Conservative policy, or leadership issues, statecraft draws together the relevant aspects of how parties seek office, and examines them 'in time' and in relation to the wider party political environment. It also emphasises the interaction of structure and agency, and how this impacts on the ways parties seek office rather than just emphasizing agential or structural factors to provide a rich account of Conservative history between 2001 and 2010.

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<sup>26</sup> The same was true of Labour in 1964, and these doubts can only be fully dispelled or reaffirmed by actually governing (see Jeffreys, 1995).

As has already been mentioned this thesis is concerned with a period when the Conservative Party was in opposition, whereas previously statecraft has been applied only to parties in government. Bulpitt highlighted the importance of opposition for party statecraft because it often represented an opportunity for a party to change or reformulate its statecraft which was not usually available in office (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 30-34; and see also Fletcher, 2011). However, despite this, statecraft analyses have traditionally focussed on a party in office, with at most a brief prologue of any opposition period that may have preceded it, although in his article on the first Thatcher government, Bulpitt did outline the development of what became known as Thatcherism prior to 1979, (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 23-29). This thesis seeks to rectify this deficiency by making statecraft in opposition the focus of the attention, in line with Bulpitt's desire to investigate "in what ways has the Conservative Party sought to gain office... within the structure of British politics" this forms the basis of the analysis here; albeit with a different time frame (1986, p. 21).

As a result of studying a party in opposition, some of the statecraft dimensions require adaptation, for example Bulpitt's 'governing competence' and 'electoral strategy' are adapted to just 'competence' and 'strategy'. consequently, in this thesis the concepts are somewhat broadened because it is argued a party's reputation for competence extends beyond what it does in terms of governing to included many factors encompassing for example presentation, leadership, a leaders speech making ability, policy selection, wider competence of the party's senior figures; and this will be relational with the competence of other parties. A party or a party leader who struggles to establish a reputation may also find this undermines efforts to improve other areas of party statecraft.

Party management considerations essentially remain the same as Bulpitt regarded them, both in and out of government; although the absence of some powers of patronage, and potentially a greater importance of party whipping if government legislation is at stake mean the tools available to the leadership differ. However, party management is not concerned so much with the everyday interaction of leadership and party. Although this may be important at certain times, the pursuit of

statecraft is concerned with either minimizing the deleterious impact of party management factors on the wider statecraft, or if the party is united and supportive of the leadership's strategy maximizing the benefit of party management that might result from either comparisons with another party that is less united, or just the improved appearance of the party itself from being more united.

Although the title of strategy has changed, in practice this component remains similar to that used by Bulpitt, most aspects of a party leadership's attempts to formulate a statecraft approach are strategic, and parties will be preparing for an election well before the formal election campaign begins. This thesis draws on the work of Buckler and Dolowitz (2009) to highlight the way attempts to adapt strategy usually proceed by drawing on elements that are consistent with a party's traditional policy or ideology, but amalgamated with something that takes it in a new direction. This process does not just occur at election time, but throughout the parliamentary cycle.

Bulpitt questioned whether PAH served any greater purpose than to boost party morale (Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 22). However, in the framework used here, the concept is broadened considerably. It is argued that PAH should not only consider the position of a party's arguments in terms of how they are viewed in elite opinion or the media, but also questions of saliency and credibility should be directly incorporated. As the work of Green has shown, it is not just the message a party delivers that is of electoral importance, it is the credibility the party has to deliver that message that can sway voters (see Green, 2005). As discussed earlier in this chapter PAH includes considerations of ideational factors, as a significant part of PAH is the competition to portray a party's policy solutions and rhetoric as offering the best solutions to the country's problems, but it goes beyond this to include factors such as the credibility as part of what Bulpitt termed a 'winning rhetoric'. Once again, PAH, as with all of the statecraft components, it is a relational concept as there is a constant contest between the parties to win or retain it, whether they are in office or opposition and this can drive the constant adaptation, or change in a party's statecraft.

Throughout the empirical chapters that follow, the emphasis will be on how these component areas of statecraft interact with each other, and with the wider party political environment to examine how the Conservative Party sought office between 2001 and 2010.

## **2.11 Conclusion**

This thesis is concerned with understanding and explaining how the Conservative Party has pursued office between 2001 and 2010 in answer to the research questions posed in Chapter 1, and this chapter has outlined the theoretical approach used to conduct the analysis. In introducing the statecraft approach, developed by Jim Bulpitt, and used by him and a small number of other academics, it is argued that it is perfectly suited to the task because it focuses on how parties seek to gain and retain office.

The statecraft approach Bulpitt outlined has been critically examined in light of developments in political science since its introduction, and in order to address a number of the criticisms levelled against it. Traditionally the statecraft approach has been regarded as excessively agential, intentionalistic, downplaying ideology, and unable to explain change; all of these claims are challenged and refuted. The emphasis is on clarifying and re-interpreting Bulpitt's true meaning, based on the limited detail he provided about the assumptions underlying statecraft. Clarification and reinterpretation may not sound grand enough for the amount of discussion it has received here, but it is crucial. Bulpitt was usually open about the assumptions he made, but provided very little detail about them, and it is argued this has led to a widespread misunderstanding of what statecraft actually is. In particular it is argued there is a disconnect between the way Bulpitt's explicit theoretical work has usually been judged, and the empirical work he actually produced. As a result, an attempt to 'read-between the lines' and extrapolate has enabled a more comprehensive<sup>27</sup> and improved account of what the statecraft approach entails is offered, which draws on critical realist

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<sup>27</sup> At the risk of sounding pretentious, much like Skocpol once said, "some books present fresh evidence: others make arguments that urge the reader to see problems in a new light" this chapter has also argued that the statecraft approach deserves to be seen in a new light (Skocpol, 1979, xi).

assumptions, a dialectical approach to structure and agency, includes consideration of the ideational and thereby remains faithful to Bulpitt's original approach.

Building on the premises and theoretical assumptions explored throughout the chapter, the statecraft framework used in this thesis is outlined based on Bulpitt's work, but adapted to the circumstances to be addressed. An approach that has been influential and widely cited in relation to other eras of Conservative history is clarified and improved to provide an original contribution to the literature on the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010 that concentrates on the period from a perspective that has been absent from much of the literature: how they sought office.

## **Chapter 3**

### **2001 to 2003 - The Conservative Party under Iain Duncan Smith**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The general election of 2001 was clearly a disaster for the Conservative Party: it's well known that they made a net gain of just a single seat over the four year period, and Labour still commanded a vast majority of 167 seats in the House of Commons. The Conservative election campaign in 2001, remembered best for William Hague's 'Keep the Pound', was widely derided and ineffectual and he stood down as leader as soon as Labour's second landslide victory was confirmed. Comparisons were made with the position Labour was in after the 1983 election<sup>28</sup> and the atmosphere in the conservative party was sepulchral<sup>29</sup>. Some argued at the time that the Conservative Party should have done better, and should have done more to learn the lessons of their defeat in 1997; and that those lessons seemed too obvious to have been ignored (see for example Roth, 2004).

This is the background to the analysis included in this chapter, and it was into this context that Iain Duncan Smith became leader in September 2001 after prevailing in a divisive leadership contest. He promised to make his party the 'party of ideas' and 'campaign on the issues that mattered to people' and to bring his party together; and all of these things seemed compatible with improving his party's statecraft position. Yet a little over two years later he would be deposed by his own colleagues in a coup.

The first section of this chapter examines party management, beginning with the leadership contest from which Duncan Smith prevailed, and which would prove controversial and divisive. It argues that whilst Duncan Smith appreciated the importance of party management, he was faced with a daunting task, and one which the party political environment and his own failings made much

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<sup>28</sup> Although the Conservative position was worse on many measures as they won fewer seats and received a lower share of the vote than Labour had in 1983 (see Sked and Cook, 1993, p. 432).

<sup>29</sup> I can't say I've ever enjoyed canvassing, but in the years around 2001 it was a grim task, and the local campaigners were demoralized. The only other times I've been called so many unpleasant names was when I admitted to being a Tory at my first PhD social.

harder. Rather than the party management position improving, it worsened during this time and served to undermine attempts to work on other areas of party statecraft.

The second section explores strategy during this period. It is argued here that Duncan Smith did demonstrate some strategic thought, and in particular his policy review process was designed to both assist in making the party seem credible and make them able compete on policy issues. However, it was only a partial strategy, and this weakened its impact on wider party statecraft. The vacuum left in Duncan Smith's leadership by the length of time the policy review process would take to reach fruition also served to emphasize failings in competence, and party management.

The third section explores political argument hegemony (PAH), and this is the area that was impacted most by the failings in the other three statecraft components. Faced with a dominant labour government, that had just had its mandate renewed and received endorsement for its previous four years in office, competing for PAH was always going to be hard for Duncan Smith. However, the continuing problems of party management, a strategy that was both incomplete and wouldn't produce results until Duncan Smith's position had already become untenable, and a lack of competence, would mean the party's PAH position went backwards.

The fourth section alights upon competence, and as already intimated, the competence position of the Conservative Party and its leadership deteriorated during this period. Iain Duncan Smith was widely seen as incompetent, and the party was increasingly seen as divided about their leader and his future. It was this area that would be most damaging. Duncan Smith wasn't seen as either as a winner or a potential prime minister, and this contrasted with Labour who after four years in office were regarded as competent with a strong leader. It would be this above all that led to Duncan Smith's removal, as the party's MPs grew increasingly fearful of facing an election under his leadership.

As will be demonstrated through the analysis that follows, during this period the party failed in three areas of statecraft, and did poorly in the fourth and whilst the statecraft components are discussed individually, it is the combination and interaction of the four areas that is crucial to properly understanding the Conservative party during this period.

### **3.2 Party Management**

This section explores party management between 2001 and 2003. It begins by setting the scene in which Iain Duncan Smith became leader, a situation which saw already prominent party divisions further exposed in a controversial leadership contest. It argues that there is evidence Duncan Smith realized that the divisions in the party were a significant obstacle to improving the party's standing in the polls and future electoral fortunes. Indeed the media devoted considerable attention to divisions during the leadership campaign as candidates were often discussed as each candidate was assessed in terms of who would exacerbate the tensions within the party most.

Since the early 1990s, considerable media attention had focussed on the divisions within the Conservative Party, and these divisions had widely been seen as contributing to the electoral defeat in 1997 and 2001 (Botchel, 2010, p. 1-2). However, Duncan Smith failed to get a grasp of his party, and his management of it failed, partly because of the naïve approach he adopted, but also his own limitations meant he couldn't manage a party which was seen to have other potential (and contrasting) leaders, which their own ambitions, and who it was believed could do a better job.

Compounding this, other aspects of Duncan Smith's statecraft approach, in particular the wider strategy he pursued, merely served to exacerbate party management factors as he alienated sections of his own support base. In addition to all of this was the dominance of the Labour Party. Having just secured a second landslide victory in 2001, boosting Labour's dominance of the political landscape, and favourable Natural Rate of Governability (NRG) meant that the Conservatives faced a hostile political environment. In this context, attempts to alter the party's statecraft didn't bring a consequent boost in the polls, and this in turn further undermined attempts at party management as



MPs worried about the party's failure to make headway. Right to the end, Duncan Smith realized the importance of party management, and that divisions within the party were damaging attempts to improve other areas of the party's statecraft. However, because many of the divisions were based around Duncan Smith personally, and exacerbated by his poor management of the party, lack of success, and the strategy of focussing on making the Conservatives the party of ideas rather than simple ideological issues, he would find party management impossible to grasp.

Hague had announced his intention to stand down as soon as the scale of the defeat became apparent, but the speculation had begun before then. This would be the first test of Hague's new democratic system for electing party leaders, and it would take until September 2001 for the new leader to be chosen. The contest would prove to be one of the most bitter leadership contests of recent times, and the resentment it generated, or at least brought to the surface, would persist after the election had been formally settled. Moreover, as time went on, interpretations of the contest, and the procedure it was based on would only harden as the candidate who prevailed struggled, and increasingly it raised questions as to whether other candidates may have proven better able to lead the party.

It's not uncommon for leadership elections to be feature campaigns aimed 'to stop x from wining' but in 2001 the two most prominent candidates initially, Ken Clarke, and Michael Portillo both attracted significant opposition.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore having two polarized candidates emphasized, and indeed overemphasized, some of the divisions and problems within the party which were based on personal differences and ambitions which were not necessarily representative of actual divisions in the party. With Ken Clarke seen as a pro-European, who was determined not to mellow his own views for the sake of winning, Michael Portillo seen as recently converted modernizer who was seen as abandoning the Thatcherite faith, and Duncan Smith (and to a lesser extent David Davis) who were seen as fervently Eurosceptic. Despite the fact that after 2001 the composition of the party was overwhelmingly on the Eurosceptic end of the spectrum, having polarized candidates crystallized the

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<sup>30</sup> For examples of this, see the 1990 Conservative leadership election or the much talked about, but elusive 'stop Gordon Brown' candidate after Tony Blair resigned as Labour leader in 2007 (see Clark, 1998, pp. 404-411).

view that the party was riven with divisions over the key issues of the day, and also the best future direction for the party.

In the case of Ken Clarke, his Europhile bent was likely to be even less desirable to his colleagues than it was four years before.<sup>31</sup> Not only did this further highlight the issue of Europe, immediately after a widely derided campaign that had focussed on the Euro, it was also used as an example of the party's introspection and flaws of the electoral system Hague had created (for an account of these changes see Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp.49-53; Denham, 2009b, pp.227-229).

Much of the press and polling indicated that Clarke was the most popular and electable candidate, which led to much rumour, including his own public speculation, about whether he had any chance of reaching the final round (Jones, 2001a). Portillo's candidacy also came with similar problems, albeit with regard to the debate about how the party should change, and speculation about how damaging his revelations about 'homosexual experiences' whilst at university would prove (Alderman and Carter, 2002, p.572).

There was also speculation about Portillo's well documented conversion from darling of the 'Thatcherite right' to the leading 'modernizer' and this would undoubtedly deter some MPs from backing him, and water down support amongst the extra-parliamentary party (Walters, 2001, pp.206-217; Green and Cowley, 2005, p.49). Rather than merely being a function of a normal election process, these stories actively served to further damage the party, and any debate about what the party needed to do to make itself electable again was largely overshadowed with continued attention devoted to the divergent visions for the party. Instead, questions about whether the party would accept someone with a bit of a homosexual past, or a Europhile, or someone who'd moved away from Thatcherism, dominated, and this allowed the Conservative Party's opponents to label

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<sup>31</sup> From this author's personal experience, Clarke's position on Europe was the main factor in the decision to vote against him (and therefore with Duncan Smith). Clarke was a popular figure but the worry was that his views on Europe may split the party. I returned my own ballot at the last minute, after agonizing for some time. Of course, it says something that so many of us voted on the basis of who would be less likely to split the party.

them as being further out of touch, riven with splits and preoccupied with naval gazing, not the issues affecting ordinary people (see Alderman and Carter, 2002, p.584).

It is in this context that Duncan Smith's candidacy emerged. Whilst he had been in the shadow cabinet, with the defence portfolio, his public profile was still far smaller than that of Clarke and Portillo, and probably even that of Ancram, and somewhere near that of David Davis. However, he was popular with a significant section of the party (Heppell and Hill, 2010, p.49), and it wasn't a complete surprise he ran; although it must be remembered that at the time, there was speculation about a wide number of potential candidates (Alderman and Carter, 2001, pp. 572-574).

There was a clearly a 'stop Clarke' and 'stop Portillo' contingent amongst the MPs, and Duncan Smith has often been seen as a bit of a compromise candidate (Hayton, 2010a, p.3), but doubts about Portillo's desire for the job, and suitability had also been growing; there was no longer a sense that he was the natural heir to the leadership; and Mrs Thatcher's support for Duncan Smith boosted his candidature (Thatcher, 2001; Alderman and Carter, 2002, p.582; Green and Cowley, 2005, p.48, Snowden, 2010, p.87). However, it is true that out of the three front runner candidates, Duncan Smith probably had the fewest enemies, as Portillo had earned a reputation, as far as some were concerned, as a turncoat, and Clarke was disliked by many Eurosceptics and many in the party thought him to be 'idle' (Bale, 2010, p.143; Snowden, 2010, p.88).

Portillo is also widely believed to have allowed his own agenda to be somewhat hijacked by the persistent media demand to know how much he would change the party. The scrutiny Portillo came under was greater than the others, and despite his initial attempts to avoid giving too much policy detail during the campaign, he eventually answered some, and this led to the infamous quote about his campaign being about "weed, women and woofers" (see Hoggart, 2001b). Alderman and Carter (2002) argue it was a mistake for Portillo to allow himself to say so much about these specific issues, as it detracted from what he was trying to say about public services, and regardless of the truth in that, it does allow us to ponder whether he would have been able manage or stick to such an

agenda had he won (see Alderman and Carter, 2002, p. 576). Despite his long publicised desire to change the party, Portillo being side-tracked in such a way, merely returned the focus to the Conservative Party's out of touch views on social issues, which did nothing to help the party's image. However, care should also be taken when reading directly from a leadership contest to splits within the party. The opponents of each candidate had an interest in attacking the other, it doesn't necessarily mean they disagree in principle with what the other had said.

Once the campaign had properly got underway it became increasingly acrimonious, mostly with campaign teams and associates of the candidates attacking their competitors, and often personally, and as mentioned above, this would cause lingering difficulties between the candidates for some time. However, Duncan Smith's fairly modest campaign, based around what was seen as accepting the need to change and focus on public services, but at the same time remain true to Conservative principles, began to gain traction. As the Portillo campaign faltered, Duncan Smith ended up second in all three MPs ballots. It also played well in the membership ballot, and Duncan Smith did run a very active campaign around the constituencies (Bale, 2010, p.143), something he'd begun before knowing he would be in the last two (Alderman and Carter, 2002, p. 581-582).

Not only did Duncan Smith campaign hard, he showed that he understood the twin aspects of the leadership campaign and displayed some strategic understanding of the need to appeal to the membership, and the wider electorate, and he kept the specifics vague whilst emphasizing his 'Tory credentials' (Alderman and Carter, 2002, pp. 582-585; see Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp.58-64 for discussion of the campaign). In the end, whilst many Conservatives did like the appeal of Clarke's charisma, Duncan Smith performed well, and a large proportion of the undecideds ultimately believed Thatcher's comment in her letter of support for Duncan Smith: namely, that Clarke would cause division in the party (Thatcher, 2001).<sup>32</sup> Duncan Smith's majority in the members ballot was convincing, winning by 155,993 to 100,864 votes with a turnout of 79% although references were soon made to the fact he didn't secure the support of more than a third of the party's MPs (Walters,

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<sup>32</sup> This author was one of these, and it was the popular refrain in my association well before the Thatcher letter.

2001, p.227; Hayton, 2010a, p. 13; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.429). However, whilst this is a factor, and shows the limits of his parliamentary support, it is also something that can be used as an excuse by his opponents for the hostility to his leadership that would later emerge.

Being the compromise candidate is usually seen as a negative label and a sign of the party's divisions. However, with both Clarke and Portillo seen as divisive figures, it is likely that had they won, they would have faced a formidable task to lead a party faced with a very hostile party political context. Duncan Smith's message was simple, he would remain true to Conservative principles, but fight on the issues the electorate cared about such as the public services. He would change the party a little, which appealed to those who realized the need for the party to fight labour on public service issues; but he wouldn't change too much. With hindsight it doesn't sound enough, but at the time it was a successful way of melding the past and future direction the party needed to travel in, without rocking the boat as much as Clarke and Portillo might.

The travails of the leadership election have usually been attributed to the reforms Hague instituted three years previously, but apart from the minor chaos caused by there being no guidance for a tie for last place, as occurred in the first round of voting, and perhaps the fact that the membership didn't get to vote on all the candidates, the process isn't that different to many other parties (for a summary of leadership processes see Ware, 1996). The rancorous and personal arguments between the candidates occurred mostly during the MPs rounds, and it's likely they would have featured similarly under the previous system.

However the membership ballot does pose interesting questions for statecraft, because it is believed the party remained traditionally conservative, and were less enthusiastic about the need to change the party, than most of the candidates indicated they themselves were (Alderman and Carter, 2002, p.577). As a result of this, the argument has been made that Hague, and the Conservative Party made an error in reforming its formal party structures prior to overhauling the party's policy and image, because involving the membership in leadership votes, and policy plebiscites would complicate

changes (Kelly, 2002, pp.39-40; Denham and O'Hara 2008, pp.49-53). With hindsight this seems a convincing argument, and indeed, Labour seemed to have gone through a similar process, but in reverse, and after spending more time in opposition (see Kampfner, 2003).

In reality, it would be a mistake to assume that what worked for Labour, would also have worked for the Conservatives under William Hague. Hague's introduction of a membership vote was an attempt to enhance the security of the leader's position, to give the appearance of modernization after years of damaging speculation about the party's leadership, and the plebiscites were an attempt to settle divisive issues for the party: in effect both systems were implemented to support the leader's autonomy and improve the party's image. It was designed to tackle the principle obstacles to improving the party's statecraft, and is more likely a symptom of Hague and his team underestimating the scale of the problem they faced, and trying to resolve the party's deleterious divisions by structural, rather than policy means, because he believed a detailed policy discussion straight after 1997 would further exacerbate the party's divisions (Peele, 1998, p.141; Green, 2010a, p.2; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.432).

Regardless of the intentions, the resulting leadership ballot did contribute to the problems of the 2001 leadership contest because the candidates had split constituencies to appeal to, and perhaps the Hague changes helped to delay some of the policy, change, and ideological debates the party needed to undertake until 2001 for the sake of avoiding further damage in 1997 and 1998; rather than creating the problem. These had worsened and now the system was deemed a problem. However, Duncan Smith did not seek to make any further changes to the formal structures of the party during his leadership, and indeed he did not seek to use the plebiscite process Hague had adopted on select policy measures (Denham and O'Hara, 2008, p.54). The plebiscites were only ever intended to settle problem policy areas, and with a limited scope, when the leadership could reasonably expect approval for its stated policy. Hague doesn't seem to have instituted them to be a permanent feature of the party's management, and it certainly seems likely they would have been an obstacle to party change, had Duncan Smith or subsequent leaders sought to use them. The main problem with the

leadership election process, as far as many MPs were concerned, was that the victor was someone they didn't believe could win elections, mainly because of his personality traits, and that would make subsequent party management more difficult (Evans and Anderson, 2005, p.818; Hayton, 2010a, p.4).

### **3.2.1 Informal Party Management**

Duncan Smith did try to make some informal changes to the party, some of which would later benefit the party, whilst others would create further problems. His decision to encourage more women and ethnic minority candidates to apply to put themselves forward for the party was largely informal, as no procedural or structural changes were made to facilitate this (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a, p.140). This did attract some negative attention from the media, who argued that only formal changes, as Labour had introduced with all women shortlists, would increase how representative the party was (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a, p.138). Conversely, many Conservative MPs showed themselves to be very sensitive about the issue, the combination of which just highlighted how unrepresentative the party was, doing little to help the party's statecraft and handing a gift to Labour's strategists (Oborne, 2001a). Indeed it is a common feature of Duncan Smith's leadership that he seemingly tried to negotiate the fine line between changing the party's stance on such issues, whilst not alienating or attracting the hostility of his party to such changes, but ultimately ending up satisfying no one. It is one of the interesting features of Duncan Smith's party management that he ended up alienating sections of his own support base, without winning new supporters, as a result of aspects of other aspects of his statecraft which is somewhat the reverse of what leaders are often seen to do.

As discussed further below, Duncan Smith set up a policy review process, and appointed a pollster (Stefan Shakespeare), both of which would ultimately contribute to some of the party's policy programme, although mostly not until after Duncan Smith had been replaced (see Dorey, 2004b, p.372). The one inevitable consequence of this, and it is a common feature of parties when they are in opposition, is that Duncan Smith and his party had to wait sometime for policy detail to begin to

emerge which creates tensions of its own (Assinder, 2002). This conflict was further highlighted by poor party management over the whipping of Conservative MPs on votes over homosexual adoption a year into his leadership, which caused unnecessary disquiet amongst Tory MPs, Duncan Smith basically gave them permission to skip the vote, if they couldn't obey it (Jones, 2002b). Despite this, eight MPs did rebel, a further 35 stayed away for mixed reasons, and a combination of it being a social issue, the extent of the rebellion and the critical comments that were made eventually prompted Duncan Smith to apologize for the whip, further undermining his position (Cowley and Stuart, 2004b, p. 357). To have mishandled the party like this on an issue that wasn't one of 'high politics' unnecessarily emphasised both divisions and leadership weaknesses whilst also damaging PAH and Duncan Smith's wider strategy of fighting on policies that mattered to people.

One of the main problems Duncan Smith faced with party management stems directly from the limited pool of support he could draw on as party leader. Many of his supporters were on the right of the party, and very quickly some of them became concerned by his rhetoric about changing the party, and concentration on the public services, and what was seen as a move away from Thatcherism (Hayton, 2010a, p.12; Snowden, 2010, pp.94-95; Green, 2011, p.758). It has been common for commentators to speculate about Blair, and more recently Cameron, deliberately picking fights, or taking on the extremities of their respective parties to demonstrate vividly how they were changing it (Kirkup, 2010; Watt and Traynore, 2011). Regardless of the truth in that, and there is some, Duncan Smith's statements effectively reduced his own core support as he didn't have the wider support of the party; his support was from the area of the party he was looking to 'escape' from, creating a near insurmountable clash of strategy and party management. He wasn't able to broaden his support in other segments of the party, who either didn't think he was serious about change; still thought someone else should be leader; or didn't think he was a likely winner (White, 2003; Ashcroft, 2005, p.8; Seldon and Snowden, 2005a, p.139).

Members of Duncan Smith's shadow cabinet and leadership team talked about changing the image of the party, to increase the ethnic and gender diversity of the party. It was argued that this would



help counter the party's 'nasty' image, and accusations that the party was 'out of touch' and this was recognized as required to bolster the strategic and PAH elements of Duncan Smith's statecraft and help the party compete with Labour. However, when Lansley and May made the case for this, the figures in the Conservative Party that objected most strongly to this 'Blairite' type of message, where those from sections which supported Duncan Smith. At the same time, because he didn't seem a convincing messenger for changing the party and shaping a more modernized future direction, he didn't secure any more meaningful support from those who supported party modernization.

There were also a number of destabilizing intra party disputes and internal rivalries which were once again exacerbated by the party's poor performance. It is incredibly rare for a leader of the opposition not to face speculation about potential rivals, in recent times it happened to Thatcher, Hague, Duncan Smith, and it is happening now with Ed Miliband as leader of the Labour Party (Robinson, 2010). Parties then have to make a complex calculation about their leaders, and performance, strategy, plans, the electoral cycle and overall party position (see Fletcher, 2011, p. 157). In terms of these considerations there can also be a problem with the party realizing it had made a mistake, in this case it had elected a leader who seemed more likely to lose support than to win it, and the fact that the potential alternative leaders like Portillo and Clarke were starkly obvious. They undermined Duncan Smith's position in both private and public (Murphy and Cracknell, 2001; Ipsos MORI, 2002b; Telegraph, 2002; Snowden, 2010, p.105-106). Duncan Smith clearly struggled with many aspects that are required for a successful leader, and that is serious enough. However, this is made significantly worse when there are obvious figures who are seen as more capable around him, and also that the leaders of other parties are regarded as strong and successful. In an inversion of the way party management is usually considered, the Party's decision to remove their leader without him having faced an election was unusual.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> It is not uncommon for a leader to be forced out but it is uncommon for the leader to be forced out in such an explicit way. See McAnulla (2010b) for a discussion of the forced removal of Duncan Smith.

### 3.2.2 Tendencies

The leadership questions the party faced during this period dominate the party management of the period, because the position of a leader whose position is constantly being questioned by some of his own MPs, the party, and especially opponents and media acts as a lightning rod for discontentment that subsumed detailed consideration of other divisions. This would consume much of the leaders attention, which, given more quiescent party relations could have been spent on other areas of the party's statecraft. (Powell, 2010, pp.239-250).

The wider divisions within the party are more subtle and more complex than they had been before, on some of the issues that had for some time divided the party, there was greater unity; but this was replaced by division of a different kind. This section considers the divisions within the party, focussing on Europe, leadership, and what has become known as the modernization versus traditionalists debate.

The question of party modernization has come to be one of the most prominent areas of interest in Conservative change during the entire period this thesis considers, and will feature at various points. However, pinning down what 'modernization' or 'traditionalism' means, and what modernizers and traditionalists wanted is rather difficult, and they end up being used as catch-all descriptions for anyone who favoured policy and leadership change, or continuity (for a discussion see Denham and O'Hara 2007a). It is argued that this is how the modernizers versus traditionalists debate is best viewed, because whilst there were ideological consistencies between the occupants of each camp, there were also many inconsistencies, of both ideology and purpose. The members of each camp were in effect separated by a semi-permeable membrane which allowed a degree of fluidity of membership although compounded by personal rivalries, and people who wanted a change of leader or style as much as concrete policy change (see Daley, 2005). It is also important to remember that the modernization agenda is nothing new, in the Conservative Party or the Labour Party, for decades advocates of party change have couched it in terms of modernization (see for example Jones, 1995, pp. 78-91). Indeed, it is a mistake to imbue it with too much significance in the general sense,

because the substance of the debate varies considerably over time. It is often used at least as much for its rhetorical and symbolic value- to claim a party either needs to change, or has changed (regardless of the extent to which it has or will). Here it is important to remember that discussions of modernization were wrapped up with the party's stance toward Europe to an extent, although this had more to do with presentation than policy, with leadership and the party's presentation generally, and with social issues, like homosexual adoption and these are discussed below.

### *Europe*

The issue of Europe that had done much to divide the party before 1997, had become a less divisive issue under Hague as the composition of the parliamentary party had become increasingly Eurosceptic (Garnett and Lynch, 2003, pp. 261). The Conservative campaign in 2001 has come to be remembered for Hague's 'Keep the Pound' slogan, which, despite being memorable, failed to gain electoral traction. A combination of Europe naturally becoming less of an issue with the electorate, and the Conservatives, having fought an unsuccessful campaign dominated by the issue, also reduced its saliency as an issue in the party (Smith, 2012, p. 1286).

As a result it became more of a statecraft concern than an ideological concern because there was little prospect of pro-European MPs altering the party's or the leaderships stance on Europe. Whilst there were still Europhiles in the party, they were heavily outnumbered and a more usual refrain was to call for the party to avoid repeating its obsession with Britain's relationship with the EU, and focus on issues of greater consequence to the electorate rather than call for a change to its Euro-scepticism (see Jones, 2001a; Portillo, 2002). It was noted that even Duncan Smith seemed reluctant to talk about Europe at first, because despite his personal commitment to Euro-scepticism, the lesson of 2001 had been learned to some extent, and he didn't need to establish his credentials or position on Europe to his party as Hague had done with a plebiscite (Snowdon, 2010, p. 91). Indeed, at least during the leadership campaign and early in Duncan Smith's tenure, Europe was talked about more from the perspective of the party's need not to talk about it too much, than from the need to talk

about it more; although that in itself just reinforced the idea of the party being obsessed with the issue (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 87-88).

One aspect of the collision of party management and Europe did remain though, and that was the impact of Duncan Smith's involvement in the Maastricht rebellion a decade earlier. Whilst party rebellions do occur, and indeed have done so more frequently in recent years, a rebellion over Europe, and at a time when the party's majority was so small that it threatened to topple the government was not universally approved of, even by some of a Eurosceptic bent (Walters, 2001, pp. 218- 224). However, even this has to be qualified, as whilst some genuinely disapproved of this kind of rebellion, others used it as an excuse to justify their own dissent towards Duncan Smith as leader rather than on ideological grounds. Having a gaping problem like this on a leaders disciplinary record, weakened his authority, and allowed his critics to justify their actions, and concern about his leadership, rather than because they disapproved of his Euro-scepticism.

### *Modernizers versus traditionalists*

This leads onto a more important, albeit harder to define, division in the party: that between those labelled 'modernizers' or 'traditionalists'. This division was not something that began under Duncan Smith, indeed it is intricately entwined with the leadership contest discussed at length earlier in this chapter. On one level, this can be linked into the emergence of Tony Blair, and those who thought the party needed a leader to be a bit more 'like Blair' and those of a more traditional persuasion who found his 'cool Britannia' style of leadership objectionable or assumed his leadership wasn't really genuine or wouldn't endure<sup>34</sup> (see O'Hara, 2007b). It is important to emphasize this, and the element of 'spin' and style that is involved in the way the party discussed modernization. Those calling for modernization of policy should not be conflated with those seeking a change of style or just a stronger leader. Whilst division about how to 'ape Blair' or adopt more New Labour style tactics is not a prominent feature of the literature on party division, it is important because it complicates

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<sup>34</sup> I sat in many association meetings, and listened to many MPs at party events arguing either that we needed a more Blairite approach to doing politics (not necessarily with Blairite policies) or that Blair would be a 'flash in the pan' and we should hold fast, and wait for the electorate to reject him. Blair was young, dynamic, charismatic and liked by celebrities (Wheeler, 2007).

issues of leadership and policy. Some thought that having a leader 'like Blair' presenting Tory policies would be enough; indeed some thought that was what Blair was doing (White and Watt, 2004). However, others favoured an approach that would later come to dominate the modernizers' agenda: they wanted the tone and appearance of the party's message to change, even if they didn't have a consistent ideological or policy platform to do this. For example, Portillo said:

"The lesson I learn from Labour is not that the Conservatives need to have the same policies as they, but that the methodology – doing things that are counter-intuitive and making everything that you say and do consistent with the new message – is something to emulate" (Portillo, 2002).

A number of issues brought these divisions to the fore during Duncan Smith's leadership, and created problems of party management, but as discussed later in the PAH section, it went further than this. To considerable sections of the press and the electorate, these divisions reinforced the notion that the Conservative party was out of touch with the 'modern world' and it is in this sense that the party modernizers are best understood at this time. The issue that is most often seen as bringing this to a head, as already touched on, is that of allowing unmarried couples, including homosexual couples, to adopt. It has become entrenched as a policy area that typified the party as what would shortly after be termed 'the nasty party' and Theresa May herself had included a criticism of the party seeking to "make political capital out of demonising minorities" in her famous speech (May, 2002; White and Perkins, 2002). Although it should be noted that she didn't make particularly clear which minorities she was referring to, and it was made after she had obeyed the party whip on this issue and similar issues (see Public Whip, 2011 for details of her voting record). May's speech was designed to be cathartic, and in the long term it may well have been, although the 'nasty party' label has proven hard to shake. However, at the time, coming shortly after a parliamentary rebellion by a small but influential group, at first it served to reinforce the notion of the party being more divided than it was.

Homosexual and unmarried couples adoption is, and remains, an important social issue, and is not something that this thesis seeks to downplay. It also forms part of a division in the party between those of a more socially liberal, and those of a more socially conservative disposition that has

developed as relevant social issues have become more prominent in British political debate. However, it's a rather different issue to many of the divisions the party has suffered from in the past, and it was a division that was severely exacerbated by Duncan Smith's misguided attempt to enforce a party whip on something many regarded as a matter of conscience (Bercow, 2002). Whilst the Conservative Party has always claimed to support marriage, without, at least in recent years doing much to prove it, and enacted Section 28 a decade and a half earlier, most of the historical divisions in the party had been about matters of high politics such as Europe, the size and role of the state or economic policy (Bentley, 1983; see Jones, 1995, pp. 79- 81). On many of the traditional issues of high politics the party was relatively united:

"The most obvious difference between the post-2001 Conservative Party and that led by Hague was the emphasis on public services and the near silence on Europe, asylum and tax. This marked a concerted effort to concentrate on the issues that mattered most to voters, to restore the party's credibility and earn the trust of the electorate on health and education. A co-ordinated policy review process and the emergence of new Conservative think tanks (such as Policy Exchange) suggested a heightened interest in ideas" (Garrett and Lynch, 2003, p. 261).

However, just like these matters of high politics, the party appeared divided over homosexual adoption for statecraft reasons. Whilst many of those who defied the party whip did so because they had strongly held views that it was the right thing to do, they also tended to couch their justification in terms of the need to show the party understood the modern world, or the world as it now is. If it did not, the party would not be listened to on other policy issues, regardless of their merit, and this is this theme that continued up to the time this thesis is being completed, to be used by those who call for party unity on social issues (see Evening Standard, 2007). The party divisions on a social issue, if anything, highlight the party's statecraft position as much as an ideological one.

Duncan Smith's call for the party to 'unite or die' (Duncan Smith, 2002) is a telling one, and it also demonstrates his exasperation with his party, and part of his party's exasperation with him. Duncan Smith was frustrated because the party was relatively quiescent on issues like Europe, immigration and tax, but divided over his leadership, by personal ambitions and a small number of social issues (Duncan Smith, 2003a). The first three he couldn't do much about, and the fourth issue he both failed to understand how it impacted on the party's wider statecraft, and he was constrained by a

substantial proportion of his party who opposed changing the party's position on social issues like homosexual adoption. In combination, it meant the party appeared more divided than was actually the case, certainly in comparison to the party's recent history.

It has been argued that the appearance of a divided party was exaggerated during this period, and certainly this is the case in relation to the traditional issues of what can be regarded as high politics (Portillo, 2002). However, this was comprehensively undermined by divisions brought to the fore unnecessarily by Duncan Smith's mishandling of the party and the party whip, division over his leadership generally and the increasing realization amongst the party's MPs that social issues could impact on party statecraft as much as matters of high politics. As has often been the case with divisions in the Conservative Party, the issues themselves become intertwined with questions of leadership, conflict of personal ambition, and matters of policy and presentation and problems in one or more aspects of this equation exacerbate the others.

On all of these measures, party management between 2001 and 2003 was complicated. Combined with the increasing realization of the need for the party to change its tone and policy positions, as discussed in greater detail later, it represented a sizable challenge, even in relation to modest changes. Had the party had a leader with greater skills of party management, the appearance of a divided party would have been less damaging, because on many issues the old divisions had lessened; but in the absence of such a leader, there was little prospect of the quiescent party management that is necessary for improvement in other aspects of party statecraft.

### **3.2.3 Summary**

Party management was an undoubted failure for Duncan Smith, of all the areas of good party statecraft this is the one that is most visible as divisions in the party about his position in particular were often played out in public. Duncan Smith was aware of the damage splits on the party had done over the years prior to 2001, few could not be, but his party management and personal failings merely served to create new divisions. He appointed rivals to key shadow cabinet positions after he

became leader, a standard technique for leader trying to bolster support from across the party, but other than that he relied on the respect and authority that should be owed to a leader to foster unity<sup>35</sup>. When this failed, his desperate pleas to ‘unite or die’ and attempts to enforce a divisive whip on the party exacerbated the problems and his weak appearance, so that for much of the two years questions about how long he would remain leader were prominent. This section has also emphasized how other aspects of party statecraft were both made more difficult as a result of the failure of party management; yet Duncan Smith’s attempts to formulate other areas of party statecraft, in particular his strategy discussed below, served to alienate his own support base: it came to represent a vicious circle of negative feedback.

### **3.3 Strategy**

This section examines strategic factors between 2001 and 2003. The first thing to note is the obvious fact that Duncan Smith didn’t survive as leader long enough to test an electoral strategy. However, as argued in Chapter 2, consideration of a party’s strategy should go beyond a narrow consideration of a particular election strategy. Because Duncan Smith was deposed mid-term, it also means that parts of the Conservative statecraft at this time will be underdeveloped. It is not in the interest of any party to publish too much detail about its intentions too early in an electoral cycle, because of the dangers associated with opponents either aggregating the bits they like, or seeking to discredit others. As a result this section focuses on the intentions stated by the Conservative leadership, how this was pursued, and the impact it had on party statecraft. It argues that Duncan Smith did have a strategy, and that in some respects it was a sound strategy for him to pursue. He appreciated the need to campaign on issues of high saliency for the electorate, and he put in place a sizable policy review process to create policy to help with this, and this included researching labour’s failings as a way of countering Labour’s PAH dominance on these issues. A two strand strategy of making the Conservative Party the ‘party of ideas’ and seeking to highlight labour’s failings looked promising on paper. A policy review which would take some time to produce results, leaves a vacuum, and the

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<sup>35</sup> Alan Clark refers to the ‘Lewis Leasehold’ which refers to a former Conservative MP who in 1975 said “the position of leader of the Conservative Party is a leasehold not a freehold” (1998, p. 379). The Conservative Party has a long history of undermining the authority of their leaders, even when they hold the greatest elected office of state.



leadership's rhetoric gave mixed messages about the direction of the party which satisfied no one, fuelled party management problems, and this in turn further complicated the party's strategy and PAH.

The biggest obstacle of all to party strategy at this time was Labour's continuing dominance of the party political landscape. A strategy that has little chance of bringing electoral benefit will struggle to win the support of the party; and this again is compounded if the messenger seems incapable of executing the strategy he has outlined. It was during this period that the party leadership realized that the presentation of the message was as important as the message itself. Tentative efforts, rather than a well thought through strategy, were made to highlight the need for the party to modernize its tone and composition to reflect this, but they also served to exacerbate party management problems presenting the leadership with a problem. In effect, strategy needs to be credibly presented, not just credible. At a time when the party's electoral fortunes seemed likely to remain bleak, there is little incentive to alienate its supporters for little prospect of short or medium term gain. Furthermore, as discussed here, and elsewhere in this chapter, the issue of Terrorism and Iraq was a thorny one for the Conservatives and it continued to present strategic problems for the party for many years. It was a prominent issue, of relatively low electoral saliency upon which the party naturally sided with the government, which meant the party would struggle to capitalize on it or gain an advantage over Labour or Tony Blair.

The Conservative Party didn't fight a general election under Iain Duncan Smith, and the local elections during this time are not particularly useful indicators either of central strategy, or the state of the party, because they are notoriously difficult to aggregate or apply to national circumstances (Wilson and Game, 2002, pp.149-162). However, it is still important to look at the wider strategy Duncan Smith outlined, even if it was not formally tested or according to most, even applied (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005b, pp.258-260; Bale, 2010, pp.158-159). Somewhat paradoxically for a man who had just prevailed in a political party's leadership election, the fundamental problem was that few people thought he was an election winner right from the start (Ipsos MORI, 2003a; Hayton, 2010a,

p.15; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.425), and their number rapidly diminished, and in statecraft terms, this was incredibly damaging.

In the manifesto Duncan Smith produced for the leadership contest in 2001 he concentrates on what can be regarded as traditional Conservative policies, such as the family, volunteering, opposition to the Euro, and tackling crime (Duncan Smith, 2001a). He promises party reform, not of the formal structural kind Hague had undertaken, but instead concentrating on the voluntary party and regional co-ordination, and as part of this, to launch a policy review (Duncan Smith, 2001a). However, in his acceptance speech, after winning the leadership, Duncan Smith stated his intentions as:

"The party I want to lead will be an effective opposition to this government. It will campaign on the issues that matter to people, the things that affect them most in their daily lives that obsess them, these must be the things that obsess us. The state of their public services, health, welfare, education and the environment. We will campaign on these and we will plan to take the government on over these major issues." Duncan Smith (2001b)

There is a difference of emphasis between the manifesto and the acceptance speech, and indeed several of the early speeches Duncan Smith made provide evidence that he understood the need for different strategies for the split constituencies he faced. Like Hague's early speeches, they refer to the need to campaign on the public services (Duncan Smith, 2001d; Dorey, 2004b, p.373; Hayton, 2010a, p.16). Indeed Duncan Smith did continue to talk about the need for the party to focus on health and education throughout much of his Leadership (see for example Guardian, 2002).

The problem was that whilst policy was talked about, the detail was limited, although this is perhaps explained in part by the relatively short nature of his tenure, the early stage in the electoral cycle, the wish to avoid announcing policies too soon, and the inevitable preoccupation with the party management problems as discussed above. Some of Duncan Smith's policy work seems to have been forgotten (see Hayton, 2010a, p.6), or overshadowed because of the generally accepted narrative that his tenure is not something to be proud of, however there are some aspects of it that merit consideration. Three weeks after Duncan Smith became leader he claimed that the party was 'out of touch' with the electorate, and announced that he wanted the Conservative Party to become

the ‘party of ideas’ but there is no evidence of an overarching theme for this which might have engendered faith in the outcome of the review (Womack, 2001).

Duncan Smith and his shadow cabinet announced what they claimed would be the biggest policy review since the late 1970s and comparable to those that came before the Conservatives returned to power in 1951 and 1979, clearly designed to establish linkages between successful policy review periods of the past (Clark and Mather, 2003). Their comparisons with these periods shows there was a sense that they at least understood the scale of the problem they were facing as on both previous occasions the Conservative Party is considered to have faced considerable obstacles to recovering power; and to have undergone significant change to achieve to do so (Womack, 2001). Both of these previous periods also involved the party grappling with important ideas. The exact nature of party change in the early 1950s and 1970s is still debated, but in the former the party had to be seen to come to terms with the welfare state, and in the latter ideas about economic policy were prominent (see Ramsden, 1995, pp. 138-139).

The group involved with the review, and several senior party members would also play a fundamental role in establishing the think tank Policy Exchange, which would be linked and tasked with generating detailed policy proposals, in an attempt to copy the way New Labour used its policy unit to develop long term policies on the public services in the mid-1990s (Economist, 2001a). This process has some similarities to the way Tony Blair and later David Cameron conducted policy reviews (see Hayton and Heppell, 2010 for analysis of Duncan Smith as a precursor to Cameron). However, it should be noted that one problem with the way it began in 2001 was the lack of ‘big ideas’ to prime it, and it was less focussed than Labour’s had been (Economist, 2001a). The absence of a big theme wasn’t necessarily a fatal flaw, but as mentioned above, it creates a vacuum in party policy, which MPs and party members find troublesome and can cause restlessness<sup>36</sup> and it makes opposing other parties more difficult: in essence it leaves a significant gap in the party’s statecraft.

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, at this time (although this wasn’t the only time) this authors experience was that party members would discuss the difficulty of campaigning or canvassing without a ‘theme’ or set of policies and principle to campaign on.

Interestingly, the review was also to be directed by a board, comprised largely of senior MPs, but it was led by Greg Clark, a former Social Democratic Party member, and drew on work from a number of Conservatives and candidates who already had a reputation for wishing to modernize and change the party (see Vaizey, Gove and Boles, 2001, p.150; Snowden, 2010, p.91). Duncan Smith clearly appreciated the need to draw on party modernization, but his only strategy was to do so on the basis of specific policies rather than overarching themes.

Despite the policy review being what many commentators said the party, like many oppositions need in order to return to a position of electability, there is still room for debate about the process Duncan Smith began. Whilst the beginnings of a revisionist view of Duncan Smith's tenure has begun, with people starting to credit him with initiating a policy review that would later bear fruit, it also must be remembered that all of the leadership candidates in 2001 (except Ainsworth) promised to conduct a review; despite this he was the one who actually did it.

Almost immediately the policy review process triggered some concern from a number of MPs who'd supported Duncan Smith's candidature but who became alarmed about the modernizing rhetoric. Whilst only small in number, this would have reminded Duncan Smith of the need to manage the process carefully and complicated the interaction of party strategy and party management (see Cowley and Green, 2005, p.52; Economist, 2001b; see Driver and Martell, 1998, p.7-8). Furthermore, it highlighted the more general problems with policy reviews, namely that they have the potential to be divisive. They can end up being all about the search for ideas to match Labour, rather than, in statecraft terms, focusing on integrating policy and ideas with other aspects of the party's statecraft, as Labour had done in the 1990s and the Conservative Party had done during other policy reviews (Economist, 2001b). At the time, there were even some who were warning the party against becoming fixated with a policy review process:

“What ails the Tories is that, like many political parties stuck hopelessly in opposition—but unlike their true selves—they have come to take ideas too seriously for their own good” (Economist, 2001b; and see Portillo<sup>37</sup>, 2002).

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<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Portillo also expressed his concerns about the party becoming fixated by the search for ideas (Portillo, 2002).

As will be discussed in greater detail below, regardless of whether Duncan Smith was committed to a strategy of changing the party's policy programme, the strategy was undermined because Labour were easily able to portray the party as giving mixed messages, for example, about their support for the NHS, but parallel desire to see tax cuts (McSmith, 2002; Rawnsley, 2010b, p.66). Labour's strategy continued to emphasize the theme that the Conservatives weren't committed to the public services, and would undo the good work they had done, and despite evidence that disenchantment with the extent public service improvement was very slowly increasing, it is a message that resonated with the electorate (Kellenbach, 2002). It also remained very difficult for a party still associated with the public service failings of the 1990s to attack Labour's performance, and also claim to offer an alternative, especially in the absence of policy as the reviews took place.

Duncan Smith understood that the problems with the party's statecraft went wider than just policies. He referred to the problem of the party being 'out of touch' and senior members of his team emphasised the need for the party to modernize. However, it is clear that his strategy was to concentrate on policy:

"Those who say that we haven't recognised our defeat are quite wrong, I have. That is why I am setting up this huge policy renewal process." Duncan Smith (2001b; see Womack, 2001 for quote).

There was a conscious effort to counter the anti-European reputation the party and Duncan Smith himself had. In particular, trips were organized to 'learn from' European countries and how they provided public services and references were frequently made to how things are done in other countries. This showed a concern with public services and presentation, and a way of countering the party's obsession with Britain's relationship with the EU, but the impact of this approach was limited (Economist, 2001c). However, it's also the case that the policies the party did announce served to undermined claims of a strategic shift in the party, especially when their idea of focussing on health translated into allowing patients to take NHS money into the private sector to speed up treatment (Ward, 2002). When an opposition is facing a government with a benign NRG, and a sizable advantage when it came to their PAH on public service policy areas, mixed messages undermined the Conservatives' claims to have changed.

Beyond policy there were occasions when the rhetoric from senior members of the party, including some within his team, like Oliver Letwin, and notably Theresa May's 'nasty party' rhetoric sounded remarkably like that which David Cameron would use after 2005. At the 2002 conference references to the party's lack of female MPs and candidates, the ethnic balance of the party, and the behaviour of some of the party's (past) MPs were used to illustrate how badly the party was perceived, there was even a proposal to form an 'A List' of candidates by Lansley, as a way of improving this (White and Perkins, 2002; Sylvester, 2002; BBC News, 2002b). There was scepticism about this agenda, and this was significant amongst the party membership, and the reaction of some to this agenda amounted to the party presenting mixed messages on this as well. One of the Conservatives main attacks on the Labour government, and Blair particularly, was to highlight his supposed lack of substance, and style and 'spin' to the membership. Remedying the sort of problems May and Letwin outlined could have been linked to an attempt to 'ape Blair'; the party was in no position to link such changes with winning a future election (for debate see White and Perkins, 2002). The link between the message, or party strategy, and the credibility of how it was delivered was understood in these conference debates and pamphlets that were produced, but the reaction to them from the party merely highlighted the dangers and divisions that would result at this time from an attempt to modernize (White and Perkins, 2002). Furthermore, the party had a weak leader, was divided about the best direction to take, and being regarded as the leader of a nasty party is hardly likely to enhance his position, it was a fight Duncan Smith didn't have the support, or authority to take on, let alone win.

There were three significant and interesting documents to come from the review process before Duncan Smith was replaced as party leader. A review of these reveals one which had the outline of the party's likely future policy direction, although the detail is limited, and the others concentrate on detailing Labour's failings and setting out new public sector policies (The Conservative Party, 2002; Clark and Mather, 2003; The Conservative Party, 2003). The combined approach of a policy document including a detailed plan for attacking their opponents shows that there was some appreciation of the need to tackle Labour's dominance of political issues, as well as outline a

Conservative position (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.431), and they received some positive reaction in the media (Economist, 2001d). However, the Economist's headline maintained the theme that permeates almost everything in this period: "Nice(ish) policies, shame about the leader" and this compliment, of sorts, was accompanied by accusations of mixed messages, especially over their initial, and vague, opposition to top-up fees, and commitment to tax cuts (Economist, 2001d). However, it is interesting that the process Duncan Smith put in place contained both a policy review process to produce policy, and to find ways of attacking Labour: both of these are important for strategy and the PAH aspects of statecraft.

Iain Duncan Smith didn't remain leader of the party long enough for a proper assessment of how he would have handled his strategy and policy review programme as an election approached, but it would be endorsed by Michael Howard<sup>38</sup> at the time he became leader and it would form an important part of Conservative policy (Dorey, 2004b, p.377). However, it does seem likely that the policy review process would eventually contribute to the steady and limited recovery of the Conservative Party that occurred after 2003 (Dorey, 2004b, p. 377). Furthermore, many themes that emerged during Duncan Smith's leadership would later feature prominently in David Cameron's policy programme despite his own policy review process. Indeed a recent article by Hayton and Heppell also makes the case for Duncan Smith's policy review process being a precursor to the modernization strategy that David Cameron would pursue after 2005 (see Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p. 425). This argument has some merit, and they are right to re-examine and reappraise the progress made during this period. The whole period has been overlooked and viewed negatively largely because of Duncan Smith's leadership and wider failure; and also through the prism of later success. However, it is perhaps stretching things a little to claim that "Duncan Smith was central to the process of creating the political space in which Cameronism could develop" because it downplays the more important subsequent weakening in Labour's hegemony, and the increased party morale and unity that came during the Howard leadership (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.426).

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Howard was a key figure in the policy review programme (see Dorey, 2004)

As already mentioned there were a number of young MPs and advisers who favoured party modernization involved in dual aspects of the policy review process, and they would remain so after Michael Howard became leader. Indeed they would go on to play an important role after 2005 and in particular Greg Clark, the brains behind much of the detailed research and policy work under Cameron, has been instrumental in David Cameron's Big Society initiative (Hetherington, 2010). However, Duncan Smith also sacked, in controversial circumstances, Stephen Gilbert and Rick Nye, both respected modernizers, both of whom would later return (Economist, 2003c). However, this occurred at an increasingly panicked time for Duncan Smith, and as it was clear his leadership was running into very serious internal opposition.

Credit should be given to Duncan Smith for initiating the first signs of a strategy for the party, and indeed for starting a dual track policy review process very quickly after becoming leader. Duncan Smith and his leadership team also understood that the problems the party faced went wider than policy alone, and that appearance and the credibility of the way the party's message was presented was a serious problem. However, the strategy process was limited by the lack of an overarching theme, party management problems which created an obstacle to party strategy and leadership failings which could not address both simultaneously. However, it seems likely any leader of the conservatives at this time would have faced similar problems if a policy based approach to strategy had been followed. Policy has the ability to create debate and division within a party, and for a party languishing in opposition, and faced with a Labour government that was still seen to be performing well, that was always going to struggle to compete, or gain electoral reward which makes it a well-intentioned but poorly executed strategy. Indeed, and it's probably not something Duncan Smith would take much comfort in, but it is more common for his tenure to be regarded as the nadir of the party's recent history, and something that finally prompted others to accept the need for more substantial change.



### **3.4 Political Argument Hegemony**

It is interesting to consider how seemingly effective Iain Duncan Smith has been at shaping the policy agenda since he ceased being leader, compared to how little impact he seems to have made as leader (Oborne, 2010). Despite the initiating a policy review, and showing some signs of a strategic plan, the Conservative Party barely made any progress with regard to political argument hegemony, (PAH) and actually lost ground as the government continued to dominate the political landscape (see Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.440). This section explores why the Conservatives made so little progress with the political argument in the light of growing disenchantment during Blair's second term (Jones, 2001b). It argues that a combination of failures in the other areas of statecraft, combined with contingent events and a relatively benign NRG for the Labour government meant that competing for PAH was difficult. PAH is one of the hardest areas for political parties to secure, because it is dependent upon getting some or all of the other statecraft elements right, and as outlined in Chapter 2, is relational to other parties. Usually, the failure of the party to make any progress with PAH is attributed to Duncan Smith's own failings, and a divided party and these are undoubtedly important. However, at this stage, the Conservatives were still negatively associated with the 1990s and disenchantment with labour had been overstated (May, 2002). In this way there is also a negative feedback loop between PAH and the other areas of statecraft, as PAH can negatively impact on the other statecraft areas. In statecraft, PAH can be won, lost, or vary over time, but it is not going to be easy for a party to shed its negative image on issues like the public services and the economy, and compete with a successful Labour government that had just secured a large electoral mandate.

So the Conservatives are faced with a hostile party political environment, but as discussed in the previous sections, the party's leadership had an understanding how to confront this. They made some errors, and only had a partial political strategy, but they also had party management problems, and there were serious concerns over the competence of the leader and this made it even harder for the Conservatives to compete with Labour; this section doesn't excuse Conservative failings. However, the point that is often overlooked is that the Conservative Party management and strategy

is made harder by the wider political context in which they were operating. Labour's PAH (along with its competence, and strategy) made it very hard for its competitors, which meant the Conservatives putative attempts to campaign on important policy areas brought little if any electoral benefit; this in turn scares those in the party who are unconvinced by such moves exacerbating the party management problems and making future attempts to compete for PAH more difficult. A party's success in PAH is a great facilitator for improving other areas of its statecraft- success helps control party divisions just like party failure exacerbates them (see Bulpitt, 1986, pp. 21-22). It is this feedback loop that is examined here for the 2001-2003 period.

The constraints acting on the conservative leadership after 2001 must be included in any analysis of PAH during this period. If anything, the defeat in 2001 was worse than that in 1997: the party made virtually no electoral progress, securing only a single extra seat. The Conservative campaign was derided, reinforced a negative image of the party, and the Conservatives had lost six million votes since 1992 (Seldon and Snowden, 2001, p.12; Collings and Seldon, 2001, p.630). Labour's majority was undented, and their position was strengthened by a prized second term: it was electoral approval for what they had been doing for the last four years (see Powell, 2010, pp.239-250). The importance of this should not be underestimated, as much of the early Conservative campaigning against Labour was based on the assumption that they would make a mess of governing, so seeing them emphatically returned was a shock and 'wake-up call'<sup>39</sup>. Conversely, a party that had dominated much of the Twentieth Century, and was once regarded as the natural party of government, was now having its prospects of ever returning to power questioned. The Conservatives were still negatively associated with the 1990s, regarded as out of touch, divided, and more interested in fighting amongst themselves than with Labour (Bochel, 2010, pp.1-2). The NRG for labour was high, and consequently the position for the opposition was hostile and in this context Duncan Smith became leader, faced with a Herculean<sup>40</sup> task. He also became leader 48 hours after the attacks on the World

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<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as party activists we were regularly told just this: Labour were bound to make a mess of governing.

<sup>40</sup> Hercules was atoning for slaying his children, one wonders what Duncan Smith had done to deserve this task, or whether with hindsight he might have preferred to face a series of monsters from Greek mythology.

Trade Centre in New York, confronting him with a huge issue from day one, and which would dominate the political and media spheres for some time.

Labour's election campaign in 2001 was based around its performance in improving the country's public services, and these issues remained of greatest saliency to the electorate in political polling (see Ipsos MORI, 2002a). Labour was trusted far more on these policy areas than the Conservatives. Beyond polling, Labour was seen as having improved the country's public services, and with the exception of the Conservative press, offering more convincing policies in this area (see Price, 2010). The government would also enjoy what later became known 'Baghdad bounce' for both its reaction to the terrorist attacks in New York, and more particularly later for the early stages of the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (Economist, 2003c). This was also an area in which the Conservatives<sup>41</sup> supported the government, and although Duncan Smith's enthusiastic support for the government would later be questioned, it would have been unthinkable for a Conservative leader, and party not to have done so. As an area of high politics, this was very much one that the Conservatives supported (see Seldon, 2010, pp.111-113).

However, Iraq aside for the moment, it was also at this time that the first signs of potential government fallibility on PAH seemed apparent. There was a sense, albeit only slight, which grew after the election that some of the expectations the electorate had of the improvements the Labour government would make, had not been met (see for example BBC News, 2001b). Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, Duncan Smith's policy review process was in part designed to identify these areas, and find ways for the Tories to exploit them.

Towards the latter stages of his leadership, the Conservative Policy Unit seemed to be able to produce some arguments that were able to tap into a growing sense amongst the electorate that public services had not improved as much as people expected (Clark and Mather, 2003, pp.1-5). But once again, the Conservatives didn't benefit from the disaffection with the government because

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<sup>41</sup> With the exception of 15 Conservatives who voted against the second invasion of Iraq (BBC News, 2003f).

crucially there is a difference between expectations not being met, and unpopularity or the search for alternative policies, or examine the offerings from other parties, let alone a Conservative Party beset with problems (see Jones, 2002a). A similar phenomenon occurred with Iraq and the War on terror. As the situation in Iraq deteriorated, Iraq became a millstone around the neck of the government. However, here again, a distinction needs to be made between the damage this did to Tony Blair's reputation, which was far greater than the electoral damage it did to the wider labour government (see Assinder, 2005b). A crisis in Iraq, however serious for British soldiers and Iraqis, is not the same as a crisis in the British economy when it comes to electoral saliency, and although the government at this time did miss some of its key economic targets, the economy seemed 'set fair' as Gordon Brown claimed he had eliminated 'boom or bust' (BBC News, 2001c). One area which was impacted by the situation in Iraq, and in particular the debate about the validity of the prospectus upon which the country went to war, was upon 'trust' in politicians general (Ipsos MORI, 2003b).

The legacy of the years in government pre-1997 was still prominent, and Labour's support remained robust despite declining popularity in polling and some parts of the media (Green, 2010a, p. 676). It would take significantly more than the growing disenchantment with Labour for the Conservatives to benefit electorally. Duncan Smith didn't have his predecessors ability to land 'verbal blows' on Blair, and although his shadow Chancellor, Michael Howard was able to stand up to Gordon Brown in debates in the way Maude and Portillo had struggled to do, this seems to have had little impact whilst the economy was growing (see Bale, 2010, pp.183).

One issue on which the Conservatives did well in polling and the media was the European Constitution (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.441), and their attacks on Blair's refusal to hold a referendum on it were in tune with the majority of public and media opinion. The party even managed to avoid appearing divided over Europe, as the consensus opinion in the party shifted steadily in the Eurosceptic direction, and more traditionally right wing issues like asylum hadn't yet become a preoccupation for the party (Economist, 2003c). However, as discussed earlier, whilst the divisions over Europe diminished, the divisions over Duncan Smith's leadership continued to

undermine the party's message. Apart from a few brief spells when things went well, there was near constant speculation about, and at times open hostility, to his leadership; one could almost say that concerns over their leader was something that united the party (Helm and Sylvester, 2002).

However, the Conservatives position on Europe was a like a double edged sword: it was also an issue of low saliency, but one which the Conservative voice was heard on, and this creates a temptation for Conservative leaders to campaign on the issue of Europe. Duncan Smith (and later Howard) would claim that the media would pay insufficient attention to them when they tried to talk about mainstream issues like the NHS and public services. In contrast, when the Conservatives talked about Europe, the Eurosceptic media, which the majority of it was and is, did listen to them<sup>42</sup> (see Price, 2010, pp. 275-290). Yet, the danger here is that by talking about Europe, the Conservative Party received attention, but little electoral support, and it also served to reinforce the image of the party being obsessed with Europe and obscured Duncan Smith's putative strategy of campaigning on more mainstream issues (see Hayton, 2010a, pp. 6-7; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, pp.431; see Green, 2005). In essence the temptation to seek to capitalize on an issue where the party already had a degree of PAH undermines attempts to gain territory on other areas of PAH and other aspects of the party's statecraft.

In other policy areas, such as Labour's proposal to repeal the Section 28 of the 1988 Education Act, which all but seven Conservatives voted against, in a whipped vote, was taken by some as a sign the party hadn't changed much, and prompted a front bench resignation and disquiet from a number of 'modernizers' (Ingle, 2003, p.147; Hayton 2010a, p.12). This also reinforced the belief that the Conservative Party had not changed much, and provided a direct and damaging policy linkage to the 1980s which labour exploited. The linkages between the message a party seeks to present, and the credibility it is seen as having to present that case has received attention in relation to party change before, particularly with new labour and David Cameron's Conservatives (see Green, 2005). Here Labour's strategy (and the Conservatives helped them) was to portray the Conservatives as being too socially conservative and obsessed with Europe rather than the issues of importance to people;

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<sup>42</sup> Or perhaps also hoped to write a juicy story about splits.

and this also undermined the attempts to gain credibility in other areas as this contrasted with messages about changing the party (see Dorey, 2004b, p.373).

There would also be a small flurry of accusations of sleaze levelled against the government during this period, with press scrutiny of the relationship between the Blair's and Peter Foster, Ron Davies's 'badger watching' walks, a drink driving case, and links between Tessa Jowell's husband and an engine deal for Iran (Doig, 2004, pp. 435- 438). However, the Conservatives also had troubles of their own, with Michael Trend's expenses claims, the on-going Archer saga, and the 'Betsygate' story which finally prompted the removal of Duncan Smith (Crick, 2005; McAnulla, 2010b).

Duncan Smith was cleared of any wrongdoing too late to save his leadership, the damage was done, and again it seems as though both parties suffered from association with sleaze equally (Osborne, 2003), as polling indicated that the trust and honesty ratings of politicians in general continued to dwindle (Ipsos MORI, 2003b, pp. 71-72). It seems likely that the Conservatives were still associated with the sleaze of the Major years, and the government continued to claim that it was what they were doing that mattered more than the accusations of scandal (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.425).

It's also hard to examine PAH without looking at the limited authority Duncan Smith won over his party. As discussed in the section on party management above, the way he was elected leader undermined his position with his own MPs, and he didn't have the personal charisma, strategy, or luck with events, to overcome this deficiency (see Snowdon and Collings, 2004, p.412). His performance was questioned within days of the leadership result (Hayton, 2010a, p.14), and first impressions are important for an unknown political leader. The only characteristic of Duncan Smith's that was even approaching being widely well known, was that he was a Eurosceptic, and his oration, image and style seemed in tune with that, despite his explicitly statements to say his focus would be on the public services (Duncan Smith, 2001c). Much as this is a factor in his leadership,

and competence, it's also a factor with regard to PAH, if the leader doesn't seem to be in control of his party, he's hardly in a position to take on Blair. The splits, some of which were self-inflicted, and the reaction to them, were exacerbated by the wider party situation. Ignoring this overlooks the significance of the wider context of Duncan Smith's leadership.

In addition, it is worth noting again here that some of Duncan Smith's decisions to whip votes were designed to establish his authority and show that he was a strong leader (see Cowley and Green, 2005, p.52, for analysis of self-inflicted problems). Criticism from members of his own party also weakened his position, all combining to undermine any attempt he made to win political arguments (Dorey, 2004b, p.373).

He didn't remain leader long enough to see the results of his policy review process, which, as covered in more detail in Chapter 4, both helped and hindered Michael Howard (Ashcroft, 2009, p.297), but based on the evidence of his performance particularly in relation to PAH during his leadership, it seems unlikely Duncan Smith would have been able to sell the resultant policy ideas. It would have been interesting to see if Duncan Smith could have, or would have maintained his putative strategy of talking about on the public services, or whether he too would have concentrated on issues like asylum, as Howard would do a year later.

There is however a convincing argument put forward by Hayton and Heppell (2010, p.425) in that Duncan Smith did help to lay foundations for Cameron. However, it is argued this was not solely concerned with policy innovation, but about his ability to link some things that were traditionally Tory, with some things that weren't, this is part of a common procedure of ideological change and development within political parties as Buckler and Dolowitz have outlined in relation to New Labour (2009, pp.26-27).

As mentioned at the start of this section, it is interesting to consider how seemingly effective Iain Duncan Smith has been at shaping the policy agenda since he ceased being leader (Oborne, 2010),

compared to how little impact he seems to have made as leader. The Centre for Social Justice he formed in 2004 has been influential in shaping the welfare debate in Britain generally, and for the Conservative Party especially, and indeed it was an area he sought to influence prior to 2001, despite this not being part of his shadow ministry (Montgomerie, 2010e). This does beg the question as to why he seemed incapable of shaping the national policy agenda during his leadership. Part of this must be attributed to Duncan Smith's personality, the poor speech making and his general image, which didn't help to convince people (Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.442). However, as already discussed, to some extent his leadership was overtaken by events. The attacks on the World Trade Centres occurred on the day he was due to become leader, and the Conservatives strongly supported Blair's response to these events, notably with regard to the second invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Liberal Democrats opposition to this war, an issue that dominated British politics for some time, made them look like more of an opposition than the Conservatives (Russell, 2005, p.744). Whilst this failure to shape the policy agenda is traditionally based on Duncan Smith's poor leadership abilities, it is argued that this failure was more complex than that. Hayton and Heppell (2010) refer to Duncan Smith having to operate within an era of Labour hegemony, something that is discussed in all three of the empirical chapters in this thesis. Yet, it's not just a case of leadership failing and Labour's hegemony that condemned the Conservatives to be ineffective at competing for PAH, it is the interaction of the two, and thus provides a negative feedback on the party's statecraft more generally.

### **3.5 Competence**

Out of all the sections of statecraft covered here, the one that has received the greatest coverage in relation to Iain Duncan Smith has probably been the question of competence, or more accurately, commentary on his lack of competence. Few people have given Duncan Smith much credit in this area, and he certainly made mistakes which damaged his own position. However three things need to be considered in relation to his and the party's competence. The first is that Duncan Smith took over a party that was still in a mess, and as argued above, an even worse position than 1997. Secondly, despite the early signs of disaffection with Labour growing, it was still very much an era of Labour



hegemony, and memories of the last Tory government were still having a deleterious effect on the wider party and being reinforced with internal wrangling. Finally, Duncan Smith never managed to establish himself as a competent leader, and certainly very few people thought he was an alternative prime minister. The combination of these three factors, and expectations of an improvement in the party's statecraft position, meant the Conservatives didn't get close to establishing themselves as a credible alternative government; so this section has to be concerned not just with party competence in the abstract, but also place competence/incompetence at this time in context (see Snowden and Collings, 2004, p.416).

Duncan Smith's personal leadership skills were clearly found wanting. At first, he seemed to pacify some of his critics by integrating senior members of his opponents' campaign teams into his shadow cabinet, despite advice that this would be divisive, and at first this went well (White, 2002). However, bringing together figures from across the party's political spectrum, an age old tactic employed by party leaders since political parties were formed to bolster their support, might work well with a competent, strong leader, or when the party seems to be recovering; but here, when things seemed to be deteriorating, it made things worse. Some figures in Duncan Smith's shadow cabinet team were unlikely to have gained preference from any of the other likely leaders, and were loyal despite the performance of the party; whilst others would later be actively involved in removing him from the leadership.

However, as he and the party failed to perform as its MPs expected (they wanted to see an improvement in the party's standing), the personal tensions and tensions over the direction of the party increased (Hayton, 2010a, p.16). As has already been discussed, he made a number of errors in the way he managed the party, and it is argued that later he made a number of mistakes about the way he managed his MPs and relied on the innate authority of his position rather than actively managing them. Rather than simply blaming the election procedure for allowing a candidate to prevail who had only received the explicit backing of a third of his parliamentary party, an equally

significant problem is the failure and inability of Duncan Smith to earn the support or respect of those who didn't back him, and a lack of competence contributed to this.

Whilst it is difficult to quantify given its nature (see Daily Mail, 2003; and see Ipsos MORI, 2003b) from the start Duncan Smith's appearance, his skills at oration, and the strategy he used to deal with negative comments relating to these, also either failed to address the problem or exacerbated it (Young, 2001). Duncan Smith's frequent coughing during speeches, the 'frog in his throat', was commented on within weeks of him assuming the leadership, and often mocked (see for example Hoggart, 2001a; BBC News, 2010b; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.433).<sup>43</sup> It might be a little unfair, and not something he could do much about, but Duncan Smith's balding head was also used to attack him, and explicitly link him to Hague, who was similarly afflicted, people even wondered if a party leader needed to have a good head of hair to succeed (BBC News, 2001a).

The argument often went that he was 'another Hague', without the skilful oratory, again, inferring that the party was stuck in its bad old ways and if anything, had got worse. Duncan Smith's strategy for dealing with this, such as it was, largely depended upon him downplaying the importance of style, spin and smooth oration, claiming what mattered was substance, and he claimed that the electorate knew the importance of that, although polling suggests the electorate either disagreed, or thought he lacked substance as well as style (see Hayton and Heppell, p.431-434 for discussion of relevant polling).

It was over a year before Duncan Smith declared himself the 'quiet man' with epitaph that would come to define his leadership, and at first it did receive some positive coverage (see for example Hughes, 2002). It was a tactic designed to make a virtue out of the obvious weakness in his oratory and presentational ability, and also contrast quiet resolution with the accusations of (louder) spin that the Conservative tried to pin on Labour's leadership. However, his claim to be quiet, but resolute, seemed to be undermined when claims that Portillo had said Duncan Smith's position as leader was

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<sup>43</sup> Lloyd (2003) was of the opinion that "As an actor, Tony may well be phoney. But Duncan is bunkum".

still not secure, so even this attempt to create some autonomy for himself as leader rapidly backfired, and later descended into derision as people started making 'shushing' noises when he rose to speak (Hughes, 2002). It also served to highlight Duncan Smith's problem in this area, and backfired as a way of addressing it. Unfavourable comparisons with his colleagues who were more effective orators, and the contrast with Blair, remained important, further eroding his ability to take on Labour, and compounding the erosion of authority he had over the party (Snowdon and Collings, 2005, p.412; Hayton, 2010a, p.15). Whilst scepticism about politicians and spin was supposedly high, and Blair was associated in polling with spin, he also heavily outperformed Duncan Smith in polls asking about leadership and prime ministerial qualities, showing that Duncan Smith's attempts to sell himself as genuine didn't work (Green and Cowley, 2005, p.53; Ipsos MORI, 2011b). Duncan Smith himself realised that his approach was not gaining traction with his party or the electorate, as demonstrated by his 2003 speech where he attempted to remove himself from his 'quiet man' past by "turning up the volume" (Duncan Smith, 2003b).

Indeed, in his autobiography, Blair says he hardly needed to worry about finding ways to attack and undermine Duncan Smith, because the Conservative Party did that for him (Blair, 2010, p.432). Indeed, this was a key part of Labour's tactics for dealing with the Conservatives by drawing attention to the party's problems, and claiming they were a continuation of the party's problems from the 1990s (see Hayton, 2010a, pp. 10-11). The combination of leadership rivals, and continued personal and public criticism of Duncan Smith, continually put him on the back foot, and also meant he frequently had to defend his own position before he could get on with his own agenda, or go on the attack. This was also reminiscent of the divisions that party had long been associated with, and was linked to Duncan Smith's (slightly) rebellious years as a backbencher in the early 1990s (Walters, 2001, p.220; Norton, 2005, p.39). Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, also wrote that they had hoped Duncan Smith would remain leader of the party for longer, again, because it made Labour's job much easier to have a leader of the opposition who struggled to capitalize on dissatisfaction with Labour (Powell, 2010, p.162-163).

Further to the competence problems Duncan Smith had in establishing his authority over the Conservative Party and fighting Labour, he also demonstrated his incompetence and naivety in the way he managed his party. In particular the way he tried and failed to whip a party into line on something a large part of them disagreed with, especially when it was not a matter of traditional high politics, was damaging because it's rarely good for a leader to be seen as struggling to control his party (see Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.432). Once he'd had his authority tested in this way, and members of his party openly questioned his future as leader (and indeed the party's future if he remained leader) Duncan Smith was frustrated, (see Bale, 2010, p.191). When he had to resort to the infamous 'unite or die' plea, which whatever the merit of the sentiment, merely served to make him look weak, and highlighted his own lack of leadership skills, personal charisma and competence, none of which is good for party statecraft (see Snowden and Collings, 2004, p.412).

The way Duncan Smith managed his own office, and indeed the way Conservative Central Office was run, has also received critical attention. Indeed this area brings into question the competence of the party generally, especially regarding the state of Conservative Central Office when Duncan Smith took over. Duncan Smith inherited close to an empty shell, the only staff retained from the Hague era were there for correspondence, and a single speechwriter (Fletcher, 2011, p.104). It seems rather strange, and indeed likely to cause difficulties for the Conservative Party itself to have had no system in place to help facilitate such transfers of leadership, and it was probably more damaging for someone like Duncan Smith, who had no prior experience of ruining a department of state, or party machinery. Instead of having a structure to help and support him as he assumed the leadership, which would have been bad enough anyway, this happened at a time when imponderable international events, like the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks had just occurred (Fletcher, 2011, p.104). Unlike other Conservative leaders who are discussed in this thesis, and elsewhere, Duncan Smith failed to quickly assemble a team of close advisors and staff, or court, upon whom he could rely and trust.

In an age when first impressions of leaders are supposedly increasingly important, it seems a failing of the Conservative Party more generally not to ensure a leader has office support immediately; something which would be compounded by Duncan Smith's subsequent own failure to effectively structure his office (Hayton, 2010a, p.11). Of course, much of this wasn't obvious to the public at first, but it would later become important, and was known and viewed negatively by Duncan Smith's colleagues, which further undermined the way he was viewed by those around him, as a competent alternative prime minister in their eyes (see for example Gove, 2003; Seldon and Snowden, 2005a, p.139; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.434).

This sort of mismanagement of his office, would also extend to some aspects of Duncan Smith's competence in dealing with his colleagues and staff. Particularly notable are the examples where he effectively demoted David Davis for disloyalty whilst he was on holiday, leading the economist to say: "Whether or not Mr Duncan Smith had been right to sack Mr Davis, his handling of it could not have been worse. If there was a question mark over anyone's competence, it was over his rather than that of Mr Davis" (Economist, 2003c). Duncan Smith also repeated this act with the party's chief executive in February 2003, who was also sacked whilst on holiday, and he sacked Stephen Gilbert the party's chief agent and the person he had appointed as lead researcher for the party (Bale, 2010, pp. 172-173). However, the reporting of this at the time didn't just focus on the act of sacking someone whilst on holiday, it also became an issue over ideology and the future direction of the party because all three were considered "modernizers", despite the fact people from all sections of the party had lost faith in him (see Economist, 2003). This was further compounded by Duncan Smith seeking to replace MacGregor with a friend, who was also a former Maastricht rebel, Barry Legge, without really having the authority to do so, angering the party's board (Bale, 2010, p.174; Hayton, 2010a, p.15). Again, the sum of all this was that much of the media, and the party's political opponents could claim that Duncan Smith was losing control of his party, was cowardly, and more damagingly, was abandoning any attempt to change the party and reverting to the right (see for example Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.431).

This sort of panicked mismanagement of senior MPs and party staff simply does not look competent, let alone the sort of behaviour one might expect of a potential prime minister and these problems with competence had a deleterious impact across the whole of the party's statecraft. The divisions in the Conservative ranks meant it was impossible to capitalize on the emerging divisions in Labour party over key issues such as Iraq, the creation of foundation hospitals, and tuition fees, which only led to greater dissent with Duncan Smith's leadership, and frustrated him. These difficulties the government experienced over these issues had not been a feature of the previous year for Hague to attack, and increasingly his colleagues came to the conclusion that Duncan Smith was not able to make the kind of capital out of these problems that a leader should (Jones, 2001b).

In the light of these failures in the area of competence, the implications on the other areas of party statecraft are serious. If a party leader is treated with derision by the government and media, his chances of being able to compete for PAH or implement a political strategy are seriously weakened. The detail of a political strategy can take time to be developed and take shape, although a successful leader might quickly find themes which indicate the direction a strategy will take, and this is a harder task without competence. In the same way, PAH is unlikely to be won quickly unless the government or another party encounters troubles, such as an economic crises, but a competent party can try to compete for it. Because these things take (varying) amounts of time, competence and party management are important things to get right, and Duncan Smith clearly failed in these areas. However, the problems in the area of competence were also worsened both by Labour's dominance, and their efforts exploit the Conservative Party's problems to discredit them as an opposition. This section has sought to highlight how it is the interaction of agential failings, and structural factors in the area of competence that had a seriously deleterious impact on other areas of party statecraft. It is in the area of competence the failings were both most serious and largely because they are most obvious and because competence is so important for creating a platform to improve other areas of party statecraft.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the statecraft situation deteriorated between 1997 and 2001. Four years of opposition had produced no electoral progress and had culminated in a widely criticised and ultimately unsuccessful election campaign. The Conservative party still appeared to the electorate to be obsessed with Europe, and was struggling to find any other area of high politics where it was seen as a credible alternative to Labour. Those in the party who had clung to the notion of Labour being certain to encounter difficulties in government because they always had in the past were brutally shocked as the electorate delivered a strong endorsement of the first four years of the Blair government. Labour's statecraft was in a strong position as despite the first murmurings of disenchantment about whether the expectations of 1997 had been met, they were regarded as a well-managed party, that was strategic and competent, and completely dominant of PAH.

It was into this background that Iain Duncan Smith became party leader. In his early statements he demonstrated his understanding of the statecraft problems the party faced, in particular in relation to the need for unity and for the party to campaign on issues of high saliency with the electorate, and pledged to do this. In terms of party management he didn't enjoy strong support from his parliamentary party, and the leadership election further emphasized personal divisions. Duncan Smith was not helped by the ambitious characters around him, who thought they or others could do a better job as leader, and he made many mistakes in the way he managed his colleagues and party officials. The Conservative strategy at this time on paper had some promise, and indeed was the area in which Duncan Smith showed the most promise. The decision to set up a dual track policy review was a good one. However, this was undermined by the failure to find a theme to base this around, and the inevitable delay between initiating the review and receiving results from it leaving a vacuum in the party's direction. Into this vacuum fits the problem of competence, and Duncan Smith could not do what every party leader needs to do, and that is convince their colleagues, and particularly those who had not supported his candidature, of their ability to lead and that they have the potential to win.

In attracting derision not just from his own party, but from his opponents and much of the media as well, Duncan Smith and the Conservatives were in no position to contemplate competing for PAH. Labour's dominance would mean that even if they had tried to compete for PAH, gaining much ground would have been incredibly difficult, and would likely have brought little reward without the government doing something to effectively lose PAH; and this in turn further compounds Conservative statecraft. Labour's statecraft was strong, despite protests over Iraq and tuition fees and the early disenchantment with Tony Blair. The Conservative statecraft suffered badly in terms of party management and competence, and although elements of the party's strategy were sound, it was incomplete and undermined by mixed messages. Duncan Smith's plan to make the conservatives the 'party of ideas' failed completely with regard to PAH. Of course, Duncan Smith was removed as leader by his own party after just two years as leader, the clearest sign of all that his MPs thought he and his statecraft would cost some of them their seats at the next election. However, it also means we cannot be sure how his policy review process would have panned out had he remained leader, or indeed how he would have contested an election.



## **Chapter 4**

### **2003 to 2005 - The Conservative Party under Michael Howard**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter moves on to examine the Conservative Party between 2003 and 2005, after Duncan Smith was removed as leader. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 2003 Michael Howard was anointed leader after being the only 'valid nomination' received<sup>44</sup> for the position of leader. Despite the speculation about how long Duncan Smith could and would remain as leader, which had continued apace for much of his tenure, the prominent figures who had been talked of as replacements delayed their own ambitions to unite around Michael Howard's candidacy.

A man who had performed terribly in the 1997 leadership contest, hadn't even stood in 2001, and who had been tarnished by an infamous appearance on Newsnight and Anne Widdicombe's epithet that there was 'something of the night about him', now emerged as leader by acclamation. A party that seemed on the edge of oblivion just a few days before, seemed to be in an improved position remarkably quickly. However, eighteen months later, the Conservatives would gain 33 seats in the 2005 general election and receive a swing of just over 3%. They have been widely criticised for not doing better, and for pursuing an electoral strategy which has been denigrated as a right-wing core vote strategy, which failed to capitalize on the growing problems facing the Labour government.

However, here it is argued that this argument underestimates the seriousness of the Conservatives' position in 2003, and places too much emphasis upon the rapid improvement in the way appearance of the party after Howard became leader, and upon his autonomy to lead his party. It is unrealistic to expect a party that had been in a such a woebegone state for several years to be able to transform itself into a party capable of winning an election in the space of 18 months, and overstates the difficulties the Labour government was encountering. The statecraft framework used here helps to overcome the deficiencies in these arguments by stressing the constraints acting upon the Conservative Party and its leadership at this time. Conservative statecraft was in no position to win

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<sup>44</sup> This was the phrase Sir Michael Spicer used (Tempest, 2003c).

the election in 2005, and that means the party and its leadership failed in their primary purpose. However, the statecraft position of the party was much improved compared to the condition it was in under Duncan Smith and William Hague. Above all, during this period, the Conservative Party should be seen as fighting to recover its position as a credible political party, and on this more limited measure, the party was more successful.

The first section explores party management, and argues that in this area there was a significant improvement after Duncan Smith left office. The way the new leadership managed the party was an important factor in this, but so also was the experience of standing on the precipice of electoral oblivion, and the realization of the need for improved party management as an election approached. This was the principle area of concern for Howard and the Conservative Party, and it would be seen as the key aspect of statecraft that had to be improved in order for the party's statecraft position to improve. Furthermore, concern to maintain the improved party management situation would also be a principle focus when it came to attempts to shape the other areas of party statecraft.

The second section examines strategy under Michael Howard and argues that there was a deliberate concern to ensure that any strategy the party pursued did not endanger the improved party management situation. This required a cautious approach, despite a degree of recognition that the party and its policies needed to change to win, because this was the least likely to cause party management troubles. Furthermore, that this was not just caused by a concern for (re) opening ideological divisions, but because a more adventurous strategy that failed to bring electoral or PAH reward would inevitably have caused debate about the direction of the party. It is largely for this reason that it is erroneous to label the strategy that the Conservatives pursued during this period as a 'core vote strategy'. Instead of trying to concentrate their appeal on those who already supported the party, it was a strategy designed to emphasize the party's strengths, and it fitted with their cautious approach. If the party leadership had pursued a more adventurous strategy, they may not have received significant electoral support, but they may have caused problems in other areas of the party's statecraft.

The third section of this chapter goes on to examine political argument hegemony (PAH) during this period. It argues that it was in this area that the party made least progress, in part because of the limited strategy that was pursued, but also because Labour's governing and statecraft problems are often overstated. Despite growing disenchantment about issues such as the war in Iraq, and concern over whether the expectations of 1997 had been met, Labour's dominance of PAH in areas of high voter saliency was little diminished, and as combination of these factors the Conservatives would gain little ground in the contest for PAH.

Finally, attention turns to questions of competence and argues that the position of the party and its leadership improved during this period, but once again this was principally concerned with party management and restoring the appearance of a credible political party. Only once it had shown it could get its own affairs in order, which it hadn't shown in previous years, could it claim to be, and hope to compete as, a credible alternative government.

## **4.2 Party Management**

Of all the areas of statecraft considered here, the issue of party management is perhaps most interesting, simply because at the start of this period the Conservative Party seemed to be on the edge of oblivion, forced to eject its leader from office in a desperate attempt to revive the party's fortunes in time for the next election. Conservative MPs had been divided about Duncan Smith's leadership for some time, and these divisions had often been played out in public, seriously undermining the party's wider statecraft. What seems remarkable is the rapidity with which the party seemed to coalesce around Howard (and it is argued the prospect of an election) and came to appear to be significantly more united than it had done for nearly a decade.

This section explores party management at this time and argues that Howard played a significant role in bringing the party together. However, the superficial appearance of unity wasn't wholly accurate as there were divisions, both personal and over the direction of the party behind the scenes, and these occasionally boiled to the surface, but it was still a dramatic improvement on the party's

recent experience in opposition. The important consideration though is that much of the party's new found unity was not directly due to the active management of the party. Instead, a combination of causal factors helped facilitate more quiescent party relations. These included the way Howard was anointed as leader, not just because there was a conscious effort to encourage the party to unite around him as soon as it became obvious Duncan Smith was going, but also because it was obvious Howard was likely to be a temporary leader with a limited mandate.

Those around him with ambitions knew they might still have a chance to assume the leadership if they bided their time. Howard both had a reputation for competence within the party, if not the wider electorate, and was seen as a serious heavyweight politician. After years of inexperienced leaders who had failed to appear strong and competent, which is such an important area of party statecraft, Howard was a welcome relief, even if he was closely associated with the previous Conservative government. Furthermore, the proximity of the election, and also crucially in combination with a growing sense of disenchantment with Labour, meant there was also a degree of hope that the party could improve its electoral position and actually compete with the government.

Considerations of strategy and political argument hegemony were not insignificant, but it is argued that Howard concentrated far more on the competence and party management aspects of statecraft, and indeed there is a close relationship between these elements. Party management and competence were easier for Howard to work on, and therefore improve, and he also knew he had personal limitations constraining his ability to fight for PAH and that strategic concerns both posed a risk for party management, but were also limited by the proximity of the election.

#### **4.2.1 Party leadership**

It is apposite to begin an examination of party management by looking at the events that led to Michael Howard becoming leader in November 2003. Above all else, Duncan Smith was removed as leader for good statecraft reasons. He was not considered a winner, and indeed his own party whips encouraged MPs to think about their majorities when they were pondering whether to write to

Sir Michael Spicer to call for a vote of no confidence in Duncan Smith's leadership (Crick, 2005, pp.423-426). The speculation about Duncan Smith's leadership steadily grew during 2003, and indeed the only reason he remained in office as long as he did seems to be the fear amongst his colleagues about the consequences of another protracted outing for the Hague system of running a leadership election (Osborne, 2003b). The calculation that had to be made was to balance the party's performance and chances under Duncan Smith with the dangers of removing him as leader, and the uncertainty about how damaging the process of replacing him might be; and who might emerge victorious.

Duncan Smith avidly stuck to the line that he wouldn't resign, and there seemed no easy way for him to be removed (Green and Cowley, 2005, p.54). Ever since his 'unite or die' speech, and a poor showing at the 2003 party conference, his own staff and colleagues had widely believed it was only a matter of time before he was finished. Snowden says that by this stage the majority of the shadow cabinet thought they could do a better job of being leader than Duncan Smith, compounding his paranoia or fear about his position (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 106-107). As mentioned above, Duncan Smith appeared increasingly panicked as conflict with his own party board seemed to further and very publicly undermine his leadership and remaining competence, and a poor performance in the Brent East by-election only worsened this (Brogan, 2003; BBC News, 2003h; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005a, p.139; Hayton, 2010a, p.15).

As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, the 'Betsygate' saga was to prove incredibly damaging for Duncan Smith, indeed the accusation that he had paid his wife a staff salary, for which she did very little work, was a major news story, just before the 2003 conference (Wheelan, 2003). This combined with other factors mentioned above thickened the sepulchral atmosphere descending over the party's 2003 conference: even for a party that had become somewhat accustomed to despair, this marked a new low<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> This author has attended many party conferences as a party delegate. For those of us watching on, it was clearly a desperate time for the party, whereas conferences are usually a 'feel good' time for a party as the troops are rallied by the speakers.

Snowdon provides an insight into the intense chaos dominating party staff and the whips, and Duncan Smith's staff were hastily re-writing his conference speech in order to try and sure up support (2010, p.115). The speech itself is best remembered for the line "the quiet man is here to stay, and he's turning up the volume" line which was obviously intended to counter the derision his quiet man label from a year earlier had attracted (Duncan Smith, 2003b). Doubtless to say it didn't work, it was obvious to anyone who watched it, including this author, that the orchestrated applause seemed ridiculous, and was the story that dominated the coverage of the speech (Hoggart, 2003). Speculative stories soon emerged after the conference, claiming that many in the party were in a state verging on frenzy about how to replace their leader, and the system of whips in the party was collapsing, and arguable working to replace him (Crick, 2005, pp.422-424).

More interesting than the story of the collapse of Duncan Smith's leadership is the way the party itself managed the process. MPs and party staff were trying to work out who would be the best person to replace Duncan Smith, the whips were canvassing opinion, and discussing who would seek the leadership when the time came (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 117-118). A number of candidates were either seen as potential successors; believed themselves to be suitable successors; or were potential compromise candidates. There was a clear effort behind the scenes to avoid creating greater problems for the party than it already faced. It amounts to a remarkable piece of party membership, obviously not directed by the leader, but the party whips and senior figures arrived at a consensus about what needed to be done.

The vote of no confidence was triggered on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, when Sir Michael Spicer received more than the requisite number of letters requesting one, and would take place the following day (Tempest, 2003a; Hayton, 2010a, p.15). Whilst the preparations for the vote were in place, Duncan Smith's colleagues were coalescing around Michael Howard as a replacement, and discussions went on to try to deter others from standing and build support for Howard, by consulting the parliamentary party. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October the vote saw Duncan Smith lose the vote of no confidence by 90 votes to 75, which it must be remembered, means he secured the votes of 30 more

MPs than he did in the last round of MPs voting for the leadership in 2001, although there is speculation some deliberately voted for Duncan Smith to avoid humiliating him (Snowdon, 2010, pp.117-120).

Pressure was put on potential contenders for the leadership to forgo their own ambitions and support Howard, and by the time Howard announced his leadership bid on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, it was almost certain he would stand unopposed. It was an extraordinary process, unlike anything that had happened in the Conservative Party for four decades (see Denham and O'Hara, 2008). The Party's MPs had realized that Duncan Smith was incapable of leading the party for the reasons discussed in the previous chapter, and they had come together without deliberate orchestration by any one individual to replace him with Michael Howard (see Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp. 98-99). A party that seemed so divided about the leadership managed to unite quickly once crisis level had been reached, to support a single figure (BBC News, 2003a; Telegraph, 2003; Snowdon and Collings, 2004, p. 412; Hayton and Heppell, 2010, p.436). After a weak leader, who had emphasized the Conservative party's reputation for leadership problems that extended back to shortly after Mrs Thatcher was deposed, a strong figure was sought to stem the damage and steady the ship (Roth, 2004, p.362; Cowley and Stuart, 2004, p.1; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c, p. 728; Denham and O'Hara, 2007b, p. 417). They hadn't picked a figure who was likely to lead them in a radical direction, and they hadn't just picked someone the party could unite around or manage the party well. They had also picked Howard because he was a skilled debater and parliamentary performer of considerable experience who had proven capable of taking on government ministers (BBC News, 2002a; BBC News, 2003g). In statecraft terms, viewed from the perspective of the party, he was seen to score fairly well in competence and party management, and seemed unlikely to follow a divisive strategy. It was only in PAH that there were concerns, and indeed Howard has expressed concerns about how his reputation and personality might impinge on attempts to secure PAH, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Once chosen as leader, he promised to lead the party from *its* centre, engage in a new kind of politics and that "there can be no 'no go' areas for a modern

Conservative Party” striking a surprising tone for someone with his reputation (Howard, 2003; BBC News, 2003d).

#### **4.2.2 Howard as leader**

Howard has usually been regarded as being on the right of the Conservative Party. His reputation in office was as a tough politician, particularly in relation to his time as home secretary. However, he immediately put together a close team of staff who were, and would become regarded as modernizers, and some of whom remain at the centre of Conservative politics to this day, such as Steve Hilton, Stephen Sherbourne, and Rachel Whetstone to a lesser extent (Snowdon, 2010, p.113).<sup>46</sup>

He was chosen because he was seen to offer the possibility of strong leadership and experience, something that had been lacking, and that the Conservative Party needed as its absence was believed to be the cause of many of the problems of the previous years (Hennessey, 2000, pp.437-476; Bale, 2011b, pp.150-155). Indeed, the speed with which Howard established himself, and his team, seems remarkable considering the absence of a leadership contest that might have allowed planning to take place, and was in marked contrast with 2001. Former and experienced staff were recruited: people who knew what they were doing, and it is argued understood the scale of what needed to be done, right from the start and were allowed considerable autonomy (Tempest, 2003b; and see Snowdon, 2010, pp.131-133).

Howard moved the leader’s office, re-organized the chairmanship, organized Central Office into three sections: research, marketing, and communications, and appointed experienced people to lead this areas (Roth, 2004, p.362; Denham and O’Hara, 2007, p.183). Then just five days after becoming leader he announced the party’s lease on their Smith Square office would be sold off to raise funds and subsequently set up Conservative Campaign Headquarters.

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<sup>46</sup> Although Rachel Whetstone is no longer around due to personal reasons.



Howard has always denied that much planning went into this prior to Duncan Smith's removal from office (see Crick, 2005, pp. 429- 432) and others have attested to his desire not to participate in the efforts to remove him. However, whilst there might not have been formal plotting or preparation, the weight of speculation, and the despair at the direction the party was heading led individuals and small groups to spend some time thinking about what needed to be done to improve the party, and Howard had ministerial experience of appointing and managing staff (see Hennessey, 2000, pp. 434-550).

In Bulpitt's language Howard was able to quickly create a 'court' of staff and advisers he could trust, who were loyal and able to do the job asked of them, and for whom he had established personal authority to lead. This did cause a few tensions with MPs who were clearly outsiders from Howard's circle of influence, but they were rare and based on personal as much as a political basis, or stemmed from a feeling by one individual that Howard's staff were more influential than backbenchers (Murphy, 2004; Snowden, 2010, p.133 ). It also meant that Howard's staff were in a strong position, and able to act as enforcers for their leader, which is an important part of managing a party used to divisions (Snowdon, 2010, p. 132-133). Howard also created an unusual shadow cabinet, in that it contained just twelve positions, and individuals would be given large briefs including a combined health and education portfolio which as discussed later would cause some difficulty (George and Brogan, 2003; BBC News, 2003j). It was designed to create a sense of cohesion and arguably make the most of the limited talent he felt able to draw on at this time (Tempest, 2003b). Howard also effectively used his limited powers of patronage to help him encourage large numbers of his MPs to remain loyal, and this is discussed further in the section on tendencies below, but in combination these factors facilitated more quiescent party relations than had existed for years. Only in the latter stages of his leadership, as the election campaign was seen to go badly, would dissent emerge. Howard and those around him had found temporary solutions to management problems the party faced. On a limited mandate (which is discussed more in strategy and PAH), he set limited ambitions for the party which meant there was little in the way of policy that proved divisive. He was seen as competent enough to engender the support of ambitious

colleagues and those who might not have been wholly happy with the direction he took the party in. Indeed, the attitude of some MPs seemed to be that even if they sometimes didn't agree with, or like the firm leadership, they were glad to have it (Ashcroft, 2005, p.25). They were also grateful he'd pacified the party, and they knew because of his age and limited mandate, would not be leader for too long. He was also helped because figures like Portillo and Clarke, who might have been seen as powerful alternative leaders, had both been pursuing other interests, and publically remained largely supportive until after the election in 2005 when the battle for the future direction of the party was rejoined (BBC News, 2005b).

### **4.2.3 Tendencies**

Examining party factions, tendencies and divisions during the period when Michael Howard was leader is relevant because Howard was chosen as a figure for the party to unite around. Superficially, this is exactly what happened, however scratch the surface, and tensions remained evident, but were far less prominent and damaging than they had been. It could be argued that Duncan Smith's plea for the party to 'unite or die' had been heard as the prospect of another calamitous defeat approached. However, rather than this, the period should be seen as one of uncertainty about future direction. As discussed throughout this chapter, at first the situation seemed different under Howard, he was a strong leader, and Labour, or at least Blair, seemed to be in real trouble over Iraq, tuition top-up fees and Labour's internal wrangling. Howard's actions also seemed to reach out across the various strands of the party, and the combination of all these factors meant in particular that those regarded as modernizers, paused to assess the situation and see what happened. Whilst, dissent about the prominence of immigration and asylum policy were expressed later on, by that time the election was approaching, and this quelled the prospect of dissent. Some of the disquiet that did occur has to be considered in the light of a looming defeat- it is easier to express concern about the leadership's direction if it's obviously going to fail. The key tendencies of modernizer versus traditionalists, Europe, and to a lesser extent leadership are discussed here.

## *Europe*

The issue of Europe returned to a position of greater prominence during Howard's leadership, mostly as a result of the debate around the European Constitution that the EU was trying to formulate, and also because of the decision of former Labour MP Robert Kilroy Silk to join UKIP prior to the 2004 Euro-elections (Assinder, 2004a). However, because the Conservative Party was now overwhelmingly of a Eurosceptic disposition, it was not something that was likely to cause damaging internal disputes. To its supporters the European Constitution represented little more than the formalised enshrining of the existing treaties that established and defined the EU. However, and this was the position many Conservatives held, it did mean a greater role for the EU, in particular with relation to justice policy, asylum and immigration (BBC News, 2004a). Furthermore, the more symbolic, though important institutional aspects of the EU Constitution raised the hackles of the centre-right press and many Conservatives (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 145-148). The notion of (another) EU president and foreign minister was greeted with hostility, because even if it didn't entail a significant extra transfer of sovereignty to the EU, symbolically, it's opponents argued that this made the EU seem like a sovereign state (Young, 2004).

Howard's own Eurosceptic credentials were strong, and he saw an opportunity due to the level of opposition to the constitution in the centre-right media, polling seemed to confirm that a large majority of the public either opposed it, or supported a referendum on it. (Ipsos MORI, 2005a). At least at first, the Conservatives' promise to hold a referendum on the constitution seemed a good tactic, that both satisfied many in the party and was popular. However, when Labour later announced their own pledge to hold a referendum the impact of this policy was undermined (Bale, 2010, pp. 210-211). Once again, it became an important issue for the party's statecraft, as the leadership attempted to satisfy both the Eurosceptics who were adamantly opposed to the constitution (some of whom remained opposed to the EU membership in its entirety) and those who were to varying degrees Eurosceptic, but didn't want Europe to dominate the party's agenda. There were still some pro-European figures, but there was no significant faction urging the party to support the EU constitution.

What there was, was an increasingly prominent external concern for the party's statecraft in the form of UKIP. It should be noted, that the actual impact UKIP has had on the Conservatives is disputed. Whilst it is frequently claimed to have cost the Conservatives a number of seats in general elections (particularly 2005 and 2010) it's hard to be sure that the votes UKIP secured would in their absence have gone to the Conservatives (for a discussion see UK Polling, 2011). Yet, dealing with UKIP became, and has remained a problem, because sections of the Conservative parliamentary party and its membership have long believed that if they advocated a more Eurosceptic approach, the 'UKIP threat' would evaporate<sup>47</sup>, whilst others highlight the votes that would be lost from sections of the electorate. Howard had to be careful how he managed the various strands of thought on this within his party, whilst at the same time trying to capitalize on an issue where the Conservatives had support.

Howard was helped because the Euro elections took place only a few months after he assumed the leadership. Those who wanted the party to concentrate on issues other than Europe, which was to a greater extent those who have become labelled as modernizers, rather than pro-Europeans, were unsure of Howard's plan. By this, it is meant that Howard was still making references to the modernizing agenda discussed below, so there seemed room for the party to discuss Europe in relation to the constitution and election, especially as it seemed a potential vote winner until Labour matched the pledge of a referendum. It is also the case that whilst some Conservatives agree with UKIP's desire to see a withdrawal from the EU, particularly at election time, they are still an opponent, and perhaps the worst of all as they regard them as stealing Conservative votes<sup>48</sup>. However, the increased prominence of Europe, in combination with the publicity Robert Kilroy Silk brought UKIP, and a sense of disenchantment amongst the electorate with both of the main parties in the wake of the Hutton Report, contributed to a fall in the Conservative share of the vote in the 2004 Euro elections despite Labour's problems (Crick, 2005, pp. 447-451).

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<sup>47</sup> Being from a marginal constituency, this is frequently debated, and this author has heard this sentiment repeated ad nauseam in party debates and at conference fringe events, despite there being little evidence to support it.

<sup>48</sup> This author has watched Council meetings where there has been a great deal of public agreement between Conservative and Labour councillors whilst both launched attacks of a minority group of Liberal Democrats. Upon enquiring why, the answer came that both sides saw the Liberals as their main threat. In much the same way, at Conservative meetings, UKIP's name is often followed by an accusation of treachery.

Whilst some attribute blame to Howard for raising the prominence of European matters, it is difficult to see what alternative he had as a European election had to be fought (see for example Crick, 2005, p. 447). Party management required him to try to capitalize on the issue, and some Eurosceptic MPs would have become more vocal had the party's leadership sought to minimize talk of Europe to concentrate on other matters. Given that, and the opposition of the traditionally 'Conservative press' to the EU Constitution it would seem inconceivable it shouldn't have been an important issue for the party. If anything, rather than seeing the reoccurrence of party divisions over Europe, the divisions morphed into divisions about the scale of the 'UKIP threat' and how to deal with it.

### ***Modernizers versus traditionalists***

Despite his right wing reputation, even before Howard formally became leader, he drew significantly on the services of what are usually termed modernizers, and there was little open dissent from this grouping, and that which did occur towards the end of his tenure was, came mostly from obscure figures, rather than the senior figures who had undermined Duncan Smith (Crick, 2005, pp. 458-462). At first, and indeed throughout his tenure, Howard was supported by a number of those with a prominent association with wishing to modernize the party. Symbolically, Francis Maude, Portillo's right hand man, was a vocal supporter from the start (Snowdon, 2010, p.134).

Yet, Bale highlights the right wing nature of many of the senior members of his shadow cabinet, and the small numbers of those not from the centre right, some of whom were on the front bench, but outside the shadow cabinet (2010, pp. 196-197). However, Howard also managed to find positions in the parliamentary hierarchy for nearly 100 of his 160 MPs, meaning that whilst the roles may not have been as significant, an astonishing proportion of MPs were to some extent tied to the leadership, this helped with quiescent relations (Crick, 2005, p.437).

Bale also claims that it was Howard's right wing ideology that (pre) determined the course the party followed during this period, but this raises the question of why there wasn't more dissent from those who advocated greater change in the party (Bale, 2010, p. 197). Before highlighting some

inconsistencies in Bale's claim that ideology was the key, it's worth considering the factors that led to the appearance and to an extent reality, of a much more united party.

Firstly, having been at the cliff's edge and peered over, the shock of reflecting on how bad the position the party had been in during 2003 encouraged all to take a step back. Secondly, combined with this, the election was approaching, and although still 18 months away, it was the fear of what would happen at the next election that had prompted the removal of Duncan Smith<sup>49</sup> and the sense that they needed to fight for the next election rather than each other also helped keep dissent from the surface. Thirdly, and most importantly, it was sometime before asylum and immigration came to be seen as the dominant concerns of the party's campaign. Whilst these, and other 'right-wing' issues were still a feature, early on Howard was trying to appeal to the various strands of his party. He discussed the importance of 'happiness', his abhorrence of discrimination, the 'work-life balance', improving childcare and the party held a 'gay summit', a number of these themes would also be repeated after 2005 (see Osborne, 2004; Crick, 2005, pp. 439-440; Telegraph, 2005).

There were elements compared to 'red-meat right-wingery', which were interspersed with some modernizing themes, and it is argued that this uncertainty about the final composition of the party's policy platform represented effective party management. It wasn't a strategy designed to keep the party quiescent, whilst always intending to move to the right, it was a simple attempt to keep his party united, which Duncan Smith before him had failed to do, whilst serving to 'test the water' and the wider reaction to the various themes. In the end, many believe this resulted in Howard pleasing no one, as is often the way for those who try to 'please' many (see Crick, 2005, pp. 465-472). As asylum and immigration assumed a greater role in the party's campaign, a greater number of 'modernizers' did feel uneasy, and mention of the possibility of opting out of the UN Convention on Refugees in early 2005 caused genuine concern (Tempest, 2005b). However, by this stage in the parliamentary cycle, with the election likely to be only months away, it was no time for factionalism

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<sup>49</sup> Despite their denials at the time, some of Duncan Smith's whips, realizing the need to do something about their leader, had urged unhappy MPs to think about their majorities, and act. The act they suggested was writing to Sir Michael Spicer to call for a vote of no confidence (Crick, 2005, pp. 423-424.).

to bubble to the surface, instead it encouraged others to (informally) think about what was needed after the election, which they realized they would lose, even if the scale of that defeat remained unclear (see Snowden, 2010, pp. 176- 180).

### *Future modernizers*

As mentioned at the start of this section, at the time this thesis was being written, David Cameron had become leader of the Conservative Party, and he had surrounded himself with many young modernizers. It has become common to claim that apart from uniting the party, in light of the 2005 election defeat, the only other redeeming feature of Howard's leadership of the party was to path the way for a younger generation (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 176-178). There are often inconsistencies in this argument, for example Bale's claim that Howard's ideology prevented him from 'modernizing' the party doesn't seem to sit easily with Howard's rapid promotion of young modernizers, employing young modernizers, and eventually 'rigging' an election in an attempt to ensure he was succeeded by young modernizers (see Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp. 105-129). He may not have been a member of the modernizing camp, but it lends significant weight to Howard's claims that he was aware of the limitations on his ability to offer a credible policy platform at odds with his own established reputation (see Bale, 2010, p. 197).

The arrival of the 'Notting Hill Set' of young, ambitious, well-educated Conservative MPs and aspirant MPs<sup>50</sup> attracted interest before 2005. Indeed, the personal aspect 'modernizer' versus 'traditionalist' wrangling should not be overlooked. Whilst ideology is important, the rapid promotion, and growing influence of young, inexperienced MPs always causes resentment amongst those outside the inner circle, those who are displaced, or those who fear a generation change will foil their own ambitions.

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<sup>50</sup> It was coined as a pejorative term, by Derek Conway, designed to compare them to Labour's 'Islington Set' (and there had been an earlier Conservative 'Smith Square set' of the early 1990s) for whom a few Tory backbenchers had considerable disdain. A list is probably superfluous, but it includes David Cameron and George Osborne; and outside parliament at this stage, Michael Gove, Ed Vaizey and Nick Boles. It also included staff members of the group, some of whom would go on to enjoy great influence after 2005 like Steve Hilton (Methven, 2004).

The situation towards the latter stages of Howard's leadership somewhat resembles Bulpitt's notion of 'the court', with a small group of close individuals with a degree of unity of purpose around the leader, at least far more so than for Duncan Smith. Indeed, this has often been a feature of British Politics: leaders usually surround themselves with a small group of influential, like-minded figures. Howard's team and staff are discussed elsewhere, but he surrounded himself with very influential staff, and increasingly relied on younger members of his front bench towards the end. In combination with the fact that it was almost universally accepted that he would stand-down after the election (although the timing was uncertain) it meant that the manoeuvrings to succeed him, and to an extent shape the future direction of the party, were underway behind the scenes prior to mid-2005, and escalated after the election (Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp. 104-110). Because the leadership skipped a generation, there was always the possibility of disquiet from those who'd been missed out, and some outside the inner circle Howard had put together, and encouraged to succeed him, continued to feel resentment at this, and being 'excluded' from positions of influence<sup>51</sup>. In light of the years of infighting and leadership troubles the party endured, it seems remarkable that the conservatives managed to move from Howard, to Cameron and a new generation of leaders in a relatively peaceful fashion<sup>52</sup>.

### 4.3 Strategy

In this section attention turns to strategic considerations during the period 2003-2005. Perhaps the most remembered aspect of Howard's leadership is his pursuit of what is usually regarded as a 'core vote strategy' in the 2005 general election. A core vote strategy is one that sets out principally to appeal to a party's existing vote, and it is usually seen as designed to maximize the turn-out of a party's existing supporters (Knight, 2010, pp. 111-114). This section challenges this mutative of the period in a subtle but significant way and asserts that the Conservative leadership's strategic considerations at this time went beyond an appeal to their core vote. The two main arguments are

<sup>51</sup> This author has heard frequent complaints from (a small number of) MPs who feel that those 'outside' the inner circle that formed at this time, and strengthened after 2005. However, If called on to fulfil a role, I'm sure many would rapidly accept; but in the absence of that, MPs naturally form groups of their own, and coalesce around other charismatic or effective figures in a similar 'outsider' position.

<sup>52</sup> This may have been helped by Howard's decision to set up weekly forums for the party's MPs to discuss the future direction in the weeks prior to the leadership elections (see Bale, 2010, p. 259)



that Howard as leader realized the limitations and constraints he faced on a personal level because of his established reputation and image as a politician. He was considered to be on the right of the Conservative Party's political spectrum, and a fairly uncompromising figure, and this had to be ameliorated if he was to be a successful leader. The second argument is that rather than a core vote strategy, the party pursued what it considered a favourable strategy given the limitations of its wider statecraft position (see also Green, 2011). As already discussed the Conservative Party was in a much more quiescent state after Howard became leader, but had he pursued a bolder strategy, based on greater change or modernization of the party's direction, party management would likely have become a problem if it was not also accompanied by an improvement in the polls. Whilst Labour was encountering governing problems during this period, and the natural rate of governability (NRG) worsened a little, the government still enjoyed dominance in political argument hegemony (PAH), which would have made improvements in Conservative statecraft difficult and they were unable to capitalize on any Labour weakness. It's easy to forget the state the Conservative Party was in 2003, but it did serve to mitigate against a 'braver' approach to strategy.

As shown in the previous section, Howard had given a lot of thought to what needed to be done, and what could be done, to help unify the party, as part of party management; and this took precedence over policy matters, at least at first. The most immediate strategic concern of Howard and his team was to try to improve the leader's own image and reputational standing with the wider electorate. Unlike Hague and Duncan Smith, Howard was well known to the British electorate, mainly because of his time as home secretary, and also more recently as Gordon Brown's 'shadow'. As a consequence, people already had well-formed views of the sort of politician he was, and his team worried from the outset that he would struggle to deliver a party message that was greatly divergent from his own reputation (Crick, 2005, pp. 440-442; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c, p.729).

Howard regarded this as a serious constraint on his freedom to craft strategy, and indeed compete for PAH, because the electorate closely associated him with certain policies and considered him to be centre-right (Quinn, 200, pp. 180). Had he tried to present policies greatly divergent from his

reputation, he was unlikely to sound credible, or might seem disingenuous, especially if he claimed to have had a damascene conversion overnight to the 'modernizing cause like Portillo (see Gove, 2001; and see Snowden, 2010, p.120-143). Howard was also aware of the negative associations people attributed to him, but rather than seeking ways to dramatically alter his reputation, the strategy was more concerned to improve it, or in Howard's own words 'mellow' and also play to areas he and his team considered strengths for him and the party (Howard, 2003b). Whilst critics will probably insist upon attributing his eventually campaign strategy to Howard's ideology, Crick provides an interesting discussion of how hard it is to define Howard's ideology, and finds him more pragmatic than might be expected (2005, pp. 468-469).

His leadership acceptance speech would give many clues for the direction his party's strategy would take. It was delivered on a housing estate in Putney, flanked by parliamentary candidates (many of whom were women or from the ethnic minorities) and he attempted self deprecating jokes targeted at both his right-wing reputation, and his appearance (Howard, 2003b; and see Tempest, 2003c). Howard also declared "We are here to win" and "No bystanders, no snipers from the sidelines. Every one of us a fully engaged participant in the great battle..." in a move to emphasise both winning and the need for unity to help achieve that (Howard, 2003b). From the start, he also declared that in his acceptance speech "you will not find a huge amount of policy details. It is about the over-arching ideas, the arguments, the principles that will inform everything that we do" (Howard, 2003b). This would in fact remain a feature of the Conservative strategy for the next 18 months as beliefs and principles were used to try to get across the party's message, and this is discussed below.

The indications of potential policy direction are also interesting, and whilst Howard refused to make policy commitments in this area initially, he did say that it was a "false choice" to offer either tax cuts, or better public services (Howard, 2003b). This theme would remain influential in Conservative policy for several years, and was an attempt to amalgamate a traditional Tory policy preference for tax cuts, with the electoral need to improve public services. It was an indication of the

limited strategy he would pursue, designed to improve his own image, and in language not greatly divergent from that which Duncan Smith used two years previously claim that he was going to fight on those issues of great saliency to the electorate.

There seemed to be some surprise at the initial tone of Howard's words, and Labour and the anti-Conservative parts of the media immediately sought to reinforce the negative aspects of Howard's image by reminding people that he was one of the architects of the Poll Tax, and one of the senior members of the Major government (BBC News, 2003a; Cramb, 2003; Bartle, 2005, p.709). Howard's first prime minister's questions began with him asking questions about the NHS, deliberately to demonstrate an interest in the public services. However, it became more memorable for the exchanges between the two old adversaries over their respective failings with Blair linking Howard to the Poll Tax and the 1990s, whilst Howard produced his dossier 'which he hadn't had to sex up' on Blair (BBC News, 2010b) .

As part of wider party strategy to improve Howard's image they sought to avoid mentioning his Judaism, but emphasized his Welsh upbringing, refugee ancestry, and state, (albeit grammar school) education in contrast to Blair's public school background (Roth, 2004, p.362). This began with a speech in February 2004 in which he referred directly to his childhood, and discrimination he'd faced, in an explicit attempt to alter peoples' image of him (Snowdon, 2010, p.136). Howard's wife became a minor celebrity, with a higher profile than many leaders' wives, and her 'glamorous' past in modelling meant she received media attention, in fact, Howard was willing to be seen with his family, and tried to portray himself as a family man (Oliver, 2003). Ultimately, it seems that this didn't really work. Although Howard enjoyed positive publicity at first, he wasn't able to escape the negative associations of his time in government, or that of his physical image, which Anne Widdicombe's comments had categorically undermined when she claimed "there is something of the night about him"<sup>53</sup> (Ashley, 2003). Despite some impressive performances, Labour's problems, and especially Blair's growing unpopularity, polling from 2004 showed Howard to be stuck in the past,

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<sup>53</sup> This author has spoken to many MPs (including Lembit Opik in 1999) who have all insisted that Howard was a nice chap in private. However, comments were also been made about his short temper.

too right wing, and behind Blair in most of the attributes people sought in a prime minister (Sunday Telegraph Poll, 2004; Norris and Wlezien, 2005, p.662).

#### **4.3.1 Policy**

One of Howard's early decisions was to stick with the policy review process that Duncan Smith had initiated, and Howard had been closely involved with (Dorey, 2004b, p.373). At the very start of his leadership, some of his advisers suggested he should go for a clean break, and start his own, indeed he has been criticised for not doing so (Hindmoor, 2004, pp.326-327). Whilst this might have been the only opportunity Howard had to try to break with the past, and policies of the previous leader, he didn't. Howard thought himself too closely associated with the policy review process, and indeed some of the early policies stemming from that, to be taken seriously were he to try to start afresh (Snowdon, 2010, pp.120-163). , It's difficult to imagine what obvious difference starting again would make, besides delaying the production of policy until the election was dangerously close, and time was an important factor with an election expected within 18 months of Howard taking over. There was little ideological difference between the approaches Duncan Smith and Howard had with regards to strategy, and it's likely similar policies would have resulted as both realized the need for caution and the implications for party management if they produced more radical policies that failed to bring additional support. Those who argue Howard should begin his own policy review process probably confused dissent and division over Duncan Smith's leadership with ideological divisions, and Howard's acceptance of the policies from the policy review confirms this wasn't the case. As Roth argues:

"The urgent need to reattach the middle class also led Howard to continue with certain policies from the IDS regime - notably vouchers for health care and education- which he hoped would attract middle class voters in the same way that council house sales attracted working class voters in the early 1980s." (2004, pp. 362-363).

Furthermore, Howard's principle focus was on matters of party management, and the need to maintain the appearance of unity, something the party had been lacking, and which had been damaging in for a decade and the existing policy review was compatible with that (see Ashcroft, 2005, p.23). It would also have caused disquiet in the party to see policy production further delayed,

because even limited policy detail gives MPs and the voluntary party something to campaign around<sup>54</sup>.

A number of policies that would later feature prominently in the election campaign did eventually emerge from the policy review that Duncan Smith had set up (Dorey, 2004b, p.373-377). However at first, and indeed throughout Howard's leadership, there was a strong emphasis on attacking Labour, and in particular Blair, over policy. As the prime minister's popularity dropped, especially as the situation in Iraq deteriorated, it made sense for the opposition to attack Blair, and he continued to use evidence from their "Total Politics: Labour's Command State" report which highlighted government failings to claim the government had not lived up to expectations (Clark and Mather, 2003). Much of the Conservative Party's attack focussed on the NHS, and the alleged disparity between the amount of money Labour had put into it, compared to the resultant improvement in service quality (see Telegraph, 2004). The strategic thinking that is set out in Total Politics is based on the idea that if the Conservatives can discredit the government, it would create space for their own policies to be presented (Clark and Mather, 2003). In statecraft terms Labour's dominance of PAH had to be addressed before the Conservatives had the chance to present their alternative policies. The dual track approach Duncan Smith put in place would see the party produce new policies and attack Labour at the same time, but as is inevitable as a party in opposition considerable emphasis was placed on attacking the government's record. If this is successful it not only helps with party morale, as attacking Labour is usually something that unites Conservatives, but both of these aspects help with party management.

This is a fairly standard strategic approach for an opposition to adopt; the problem was it didn't work sufficiently in the area of PAH, certainly not as well as the strategy team had hoped, for the Conservatives to benefit from it for a number of reasons. Whilst disenchantment with Labour was growing, it hadn't surpassed the similar and continuing distrust of the Conservative alternative, in fact it was nowhere near (see Evans and Anderson, 2005, p.820; Dorey, 2006, p.154). Furthermore,

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<sup>54</sup> As mentioned elsewhere, and as this author has seen first-hand, the voluntary party prefer to have something to campaign on. It's hard to campaign if your only reply to 'what would the Conservatives do differently' is 'you'll have to await the outcome of our policy review' and this would be increasingly difficult as an election approached.

a two part strategy like this (similar to that pursued by Duncan Smith) is dependent upon the party offering credible and believable policies, but it is widely believed that the policies that were offered merely served to reinforce the view that Labour's policies were better (Ashcroft, 2005, p.23; Kellner, 2005, p.335). Whilst the Conservatives attacks on Labour might have been part of a strong, albeit negative campaign to highlight their failings, as always with negative campaigning, to work well the party doing it needs to offer a credible alternative (Wring, 2005, p.719).

Some of the policy themes from this period remain part of Conservative policy under David Cameron, such as reforming public service targets, or removing them, greater trust being placed with doctors and teachers, and emphasising consumer choice (see Dorey, 2004b, p. 374; The Conservative Party, 2005a; The Conservative Party, 2010b). They planned an expansion of patient choice, although the patient passports outlined under Duncan Smith were dropped, because they realized it gave the impression the Conservatives were unsupportive of the NHS (Dorey, 2004b, p. 375; Hindmoor, 2004, p.326). There was also a move by Howard to accept civil partnerships, and promise a free vote on the issue, which seemed quite a shift in the party, and Howard in particular, as he'd voted against the repeal of Section 28 (Watt, 2004). However, with many of the changes the party made, it gave the impression the leadership were trying to fit the prevailing political landscape with what was easy and acceptable for the Conservative Party in a superficial way, rather than change the Conservative Party itself. In essence, the party's credibility on issues of this nature, what can be called those that fit with the modernizing agenda, was severely limited compared to Labour. The party's message about immigration and asylum (discussed in greater detail below) in particular, but also the continuing debate within the party about tax cuts versus public services, seemed to reinforce (and Labour encouraged his notion in their campaigning) the idea that the party hadn't changed much, and that the commitment to these other policy areas was either superficial, or worse cynical.

#### **4.3.2 Election Campaign**

The preparation for the 2005 election campaign was much more professional and detailed than it had been in both 2001 and 1997 (Bara, 2005, p.268; Green, 2011, p.759). Detailed research was conducted with focus groups and surveys to test slogans and policies, and this contributed to the six statements that featured in the manifesto promising: “more police, cleaner hospitals, lower taxes, school discipline, controlled immigration and accountability” (The Conservative Party, 2005a). The strategy was to make what the party stood for as clear as possible; implicitly as a way of countering the known negative connotations people attributed to the party. Obviously, these statements are not especially controversial or likely to encounter significant resistance from many quarters of the electorate. They are also somewhat similar, although less detailed than the pledges Labour had printed on membership cards prior to the 1997 general election (BBC News, 2005c). It is also somewhat similar to the Conservative approach before the 1951 election, where Butler’s policy review had produced a number of themes for the party to campaign on (see Butler, 1971; Ramsden, 1995).

Furthermore, the Conservatives outlined a document called A ‘Timetable for Action’<sup>55</sup>, which was introduced as a way for the electorate to hold a future government to account according to a timetable of pledged action (BBC News, 2004b; Tempest, 2004). It’s a tactic that has been employed elsewhere and is designed to reinforce the idea that a party believes in accountability at a time when trust in politicians was low. (see Bale, 2011b, pp.116-117). However, in statecraft terms, this tactic also had a further goal. In the attempt to make people think about how they could judge any future Conservative government, they were also trying to seed the notion that the Conservatives *were* an alternative government to Labour which is important for PAH. The idea, similar to that which Crosby has used elsewhere and is now a common feature in election campaigns, was combined with the six simple statements, and they were repeated (somewhat relentlessly) by senior

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<sup>55</sup> Hilton, Bridges and Cameron conducted focus group research, and produced a document called ‘A Timetable for Action’ ahead of the 2004 conference, with a long-term timetable for implementation (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c, p.730-731; Snowdon, 2010 pp.7-14). However, this wasn’t universally popular with the campaign team, or Lord Saatchi (Ashcroft, 2005, p.23), and Howard altered this to speed up how quickly the timetable could be delivered (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 147-148).

Conservatives, in an attempt to establish this message (Ashcroft, 2005, pp.79; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c, p.731).

However, despite these slogans, the overarching message of the campaign has been regarded as a failure. One of the principle features that has been criticised was the 'are you thinking what we're thinking' campaign'. It involved a poster campaign, and was the title of the general election manifesto (The Conservative Party, 2005a), with posters going up in the weeks prior to the general election, for example exclaiming 'Are you thinking what we're thinking, it's not racist to impose limits on immigration'(Kettle, 2005). It is an interesting approach to adopt, and seems to fit with the strategy Howard pursued from the outset with his 'I believe speech' in February 2004 (Watt, 2004; Howard, 2004a), and continued until the election. It was intended to demonstrate what the leader and the party believed in, in very general terms, and in a very simple way, and it was hoped it would resonate with the electorate (see Seldon and Snowdon, 2005c, p.732; Whiteley et al, 2005, p.811). The answer received in terms of seats in the 2005 election was a resounding 'no' because whilst there was agreement with some of the party's statements amongst the electorate, that didn't automatically translate into support for the Conservative Party (Ashcroft, 2005; Evans and Anderson, 2005, p.820; Quinn, 2008, pp.193-196).

What came to be the most remembered theme of the election campaign; immigration, was, much like 2001, a complicated area to understand. Polling data indicates that there was widespread concern about immigration amongst the electorate, and that the Conservative Party had a strong lead in credibility in this policy area (Ashcroft, 2005, p.81; Kellner, 2005, p.325; Whiteley et al., 2005, p.811). Immigration often featured as a more salient issue in polling in 2005 than Europe had done in 2001, sometimes featuring as a top four issue. It had become a more prominent political issue generally because of an increase in immigration from Eastern Europe (Casciani, 2005). However, it was still a mixed picture, and depended polling on immigration and asylum issues very much



depended upon how the question was phrased<sup>56</sup> (see Kellner's comments in Ashcroft, 2005, p.41; Green, 2011, p.760).

Furthermore, and again much like 2001, immigration was an issue that could bring the Conservatives 'airtime' and policy 'recall' which they struggled to get in other policy areas (Ashcroft, 2005, p.54; Green, 2011, p.761 and see Bartle, 2005, for discussion of media coverage of the election).<sup>57</sup> Howard is also believed to have favoured areas like crime and immigration because he felt, and there was some evidence to support this, it was an area he personally had credibility in<sup>58</sup> (Snowdon, 2010, p.150; Green, 2011, p.759-761). The issue of policy credibility is discussed further in the section on PAH, but it is important to understand that because this was an area the Conservatives and Howard could credibly present a case, their message was heard (Snowdon, 2010, p.150; Green, 2011, p.759-761). The negative consequences of this approach however would serve to undermine the party's attempts to establish a credible position in other areas. The focus of attention on immigration and asylum and in particular the discussion of withdrawing from the UN Charter on Refugees also reinforce accusations that the Conservatives were still a right-wing party, despite the fact the 2005 general election has been judged to be slightly more centrist than 2001 and even more so than 1997 (see Ashcroft, 2005).

The preparations for the election were also helped by the increase in donations to the Conservative Party after Howard replaced Duncan Smith, which meant they were marginally less reliant on a small number of prominent donors, than they had been in 2001 (see Fisher, 2004). Howard also made changes to the way the election was fought, creating a 'war room' from which the operation could be managed, directed by David Cameron and George Bridges and also appointed the previously successful (in Australia) Lynton Crosby as campaign director although this came only 6

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<sup>56</sup> Whilst this is always the case with polling, the nature of this issue, as Kellner explains, allows very divergent results to be produced depending upon the phrasing of the question.

<sup>57</sup> Policy recall is how some pollsters define the ability of respondents to remember party's policy pledges.

<sup>58</sup> Attention often focuses on Lynton Crosby's involvement in the campaign and his reputation for making immigration an election issue in his native Australia. However, Howard before Crosby arrived, believed this was an area of credibility for the party, and indeed an issue he had experience in being an MP representing Kent which was the first port of call for many of those coming to Britain (Bruce-Lockhart, 2005).

months before the election which limited the impact he could have (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005, p.46; Ashcroft, 2005, p.2).

One prominent aspect of the Conservative strategy and campaign was the Target Seats operations led by Michael Ashcroft. Lord Ashcroft's involvement with the Conservative Party has often been seen as controversial in the press, and by opponents. The exact workings of the operation are not entirely clear, and for entirely sensible party political reasons, insights into the management of the operation are rare<sup>59</sup> and its working have caused tension with the formal Conservative campaign structure because of the independence it has. Despite the tensions, the Conservative Party and the Target Seats operation had a strategy of targeting marginal and winnable seats<sup>60</sup> to maximize the seat haul at the election.

For the 2005 election, the target seats operation involved advice on the constituency campaigns, and money, although neither of these were to the extent they would reach in 2010. It operated under Ashcroft's leadership, and worked via the selected local associations own campaign committees. Whilst the target seats operation was a concern to the Conservatives' opponents, it doesn't seem to have had a particularly significant effect on the overall result. Ashcroft's own polling data claims that the swing from Labour to the Conservatives was 3.8% in the targeted constituencies, compared to 3.2% nationally (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 296). The reason he gives for this modest difference is that they spread themselves too thinly, much as the party had done in 2001, by targeting 164 winnable seats (Ashcroft, 2005, p. 11).

It is somewhat strange for the party to make the same mistake as in 2001, and does highlight flaws in the party's approach to target seats, especially when the party's own polling data was indicating they may only see a swing sufficient for them to win as few as 34 seats from Labour and the Liberal

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<sup>59</sup> This author served on a campaign team with advisors from the Target Seats organization, and attended seminars as part of this. It was a well-organized set up that conducted polling and paid for leaflets to be produced, distributed and voter targeting to be conducted. It also set targets for the candidate and team to hit relating to things like encouraging supporters to apply for postal votes (because they are then more likely to vote) and identifying 'the pledge' who are the voters who support your party.

<sup>60</sup> They were ranked and received variable funding and support according to how marginal or winnable and received variable funding on this basis.

Democrats (Ashcroft, 2005, p. 11). Part of this originated from the disagreements between the senior participants involved in the party's campaign, and the continued failure to understand how bad their position was, or at least how to respond to it if they did. However, it also would have been damaging for the party to appear to be limiting itself to targeting a small number of seats; it's effectively an admission that you cannot win the election, with the consequent impact on morale and perceptions, they also hoped Labour's difficulties would bring them into contention in more seats.

This section has explored the various strategic consideration of the Conservative leadership during this period. It challenges the established narrative that Howard pursued a core vote strategy, and argues that Howard's approach was principally a continuation of that Duncan Smith established prior to 2003. The main difference was the greater concern with the impact of Howard's personal and political reputation which was seen as a factor that limited the party's strategic options. Whilst attempts were made to change established beliefs about Howard, his concern was to maximize the benefit the party could reap from the areas in which they had credibility. However, the three most significant limitations on party strategy during this period remained the dominance Labour still had over PAH, the time available and factors of party management; and the three are interrelated. A bolder strategy would have struggled to compete with Labour's statecraft position, and been unlikely to bring significant electoral gain. Because of this, it would also have been likely to increase tensions within the party in a way a cautious strategy, even if unsuccessful, would not. In combination with Howard's limited mandate as a result of the way he became leader and the limited time before the general election these factors ensured a cautious approach to strategy.

#### **4.4 Political Argument Hegemony**

This section moves on to examine political argument hegemony (PAH) between 2003 and 2005. The two areas of principle attention are those relating to the position in the PAH battle of Howard and the wider Conservative party, and the Conservative Party's policies. Both are related, and dealt with together, and due to the nature of PAH all are relative to the performance of the governing party, its policies and the prime minister, as well as to some extent the Liberal Democrats. It is argued that at

first, Howard as leader of the Conservative Party surprised some, and seemed to perform well. However, over time this would diminish as the honeymoon period wore off, and the reality of the wider statecraft position limited the scope for change in the party.

There were political events that could have been better handled, and are discussed at greater length in the following section on competence, but whilst Howard was seen as a strong leader, he would perform badly in PAH terms against Tony Blair, despite the problems the latter encountered. The Conservative Party as a whole performed even worse, despite the appearance of unity that had developed after Duncan Smith left, the party changed little during this period, remained tarnished by the legacy of the previous Conservative government and was not seen as an alternative government. Labour's strategy successfully reinforced this image.

In policy terms the position is mixed. On the issues that mattered most to the electorate like the economy and public services, the Labour government enjoyed an easy predominance in PAH. There were areas where Conservative policy resonated to a greater extent with the public, and on issues such as immigration<sup>61</sup> and Europe the Conservatives could compete for PAH. However, these issues remained of secondary importance when voters chose which party to support, and Labour was also successful in countering Conservative policy on immigration especially.

The reasons the party failed to make progress in PAH are largely a result of the limited mandate and strategy Howard had and that the party pursued, which was cautious in policy terms and the extent to which the party would be changed. However, as has been mentioned in the previous section the strength of Labour's PAH, and the continuing favourable NRG, despite disenchantment over Iraq, encouraged a cautious strategy. It is the interaction of the various elements of statecraft that explain the limited progress the Conservatives made in competing for PAH.

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<sup>61</sup> Drawing on the work of Green, who has researched vote optimization (2005; 2011).

As has already been mentioned, in the years immediately prior to 2003 it is likely few would have regarded Michael Howard as the man to turn around the fortunes of the Conservative Party. He was popular amongst the party membership, and indeed the party's MPs, and he was considered a very able debater and former home secretary. However, his image seemed to sum up much of what many people thought was wrong with the party. He was believed to be on the right of the party, and had the twin millstones of his questioning by Jeremy Paxman over the sacking of Derek Lewis, and Anne Widdicombe's 'he has something of the night about him' comment (BBC News, 2002a; Roth, 2004, p.364). The latter comment would stick, and Howard was often portrayed in cartoons as Dracula like, indeed he even made reference to this aspect of his physical feature in his leadership acceptance speech (Howard 2003b).

This seemed a less auspicious reputation for a leader to have, than those which dogged Hague or Duncan Smith throughout their respective spells as leader. Unlike Hague and Duncan Smith, who weren't well known prior to becoming leader, public awareness of Howard was a double-edged sword. Whilst the negative aspects of his reputation, and his close association with the pre-1997<sup>62</sup> government did have a deleterious effect on his leadership, and allowed Labour to claim the Conservatives were unchanged from the Major years; his experience was an advantage, as was his reputation for being a strong performer and tough home secretary (Brown, 2003; Economist, 2003a).

His reputation as an experienced and strong politician as well as a good parliamentary performer helped from the beginning with party management, and as has been argued earlier in this chapter, was one of the main factors that contributed to Howard becoming leader in 2003. Duncan Smith had been seen to be weak, ineffective and incapable of controlling his party. Before that, Hague had been considered a good performer, but lacking the judgement political experience brings, and John Major has been considered weak or too consensual<sup>63</sup> (Hennessey, 2000).

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<sup>62</sup> In particular, references were made to Howard's involvement in the Poll Tax, and he repeatedly had to apologize for this (see BBC News, 2003b).

<sup>63</sup> As Von Karajan (Economist, 2011) had said of orchestras, the Conservative party seemed to be in need of 'the smack of firm leadership'.

As a result of Howard becoming leader, and the surprisingly moderate tone he adopted in doing so, the way the party was treated in the media and to a lesser extent elite opinion, improved (from a very low starting point) almost overnight (Rallings and Thrasher, 2004, p.335; Johnson, 2005). Howard's own performance in polling quickly showed a marked increase in the percentage of respondents who considered him as a potential prime minister compared to the ratings Duncan Smith had received (Ipsos MORI, 2011d). Whilst the same data set does show Howard's ratings dipped a little after the initial few months, they remain stronger than his two immediate predecessors for the duration of his term as leader (Ipsos MORI, 2011d). However despite this, Tony Blair, whose own ratings as a leader had fallen somewhat since their peak in 2001, maintained a healthy lead over Howard despite the Prime Minister's travails over Iraq (Ipsos MORI, 2011d). Whilst the very fact of incumbency helps with the performance in polling, it is still significant that Blair maintained a lead at a fraught time for him, with Hutton Inquiry and the first public signs of a feud between him and his chancellor (Helm, 2003; Pfanner, 2003).

Part of Howard's problem remained his prominent time in office during the 1990s. Throughout his leadership Labour repeatedly emphasized Howard's links to previous Conservative governments, and he was not able to escape this; indeed it has been claimed that it would have been impossible for him to escape this regardless of what he'd done after 2003 (Evans and Anderson, 2005, pp.819-835). Labour's strategy for dealing with Howard was to explicitly link him with their narrative of the 1990s which they referred to as a time of public service failure and economic problems (BBC News, 2003e; Roth 2004; Blair, 2020, pp.488-490). Because Howard was so well known, and views of him were well formulated prior to him assuming the leadership of the party, it would prove impossible for him to substantially alter them, despite his limited efforts to do so. Indeed, as discussed in the section on strategy, he claims to have both realized this limitation, and sought to capitalize the potential strengths of his reputation<sup>64</sup> instead of trying too hard to reshape his public image. There is a complex interaction between the various aspects of statecraft that meant Howard was unable to make more progress in this area of PAH. Blair had an established reputation as a competent and

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<sup>64</sup> By which he meant a reputation for example of being tough on crime (Nicholls and Katz, 2004).

successful prime minister, despite the problems he faced from 2003 onwards. This, combined with Howard's close association with the 1990s, and Labour's strategy of reminding the electorate of his involvement in the Major government meant Howard's job of competing for PAH was always going to be hard. Whilst it is common to argue that Howard should have been more adventurous in his strategy and attempts to compete with Labour, as already discussed, his objective of keeping the appearance of party unity required a cautious strategy because of the electoral peril of anything else, and the likely negative impact on party unity.

Howard's limited attempts and ability to alter his own image also have a direct impact on the policies the Conservatives produced and offered at this time. It would take some time after Howard assumed the leadership for the party to announce fresh policies, although policy positions were retained from before such as the 'patient passport' education voucher policies (Dunne, 2004). Howard claimed to be aware of the need for the Conservatives to become regarded as a potential alternative government and to compete for PAH, when he said: "It's not enough for people to lose faith in their government – they also have to have faith in the alternative..." (Crick, 2005, p. 435).

However, rather than explicit policy detail the main thrust of the early Conservative attempts to compete for PAH was based around a series of 'beliefs' that Howard presented at the start of 2004. Most are fairly anodyne, and unlikely to encounter much opposition. For example, "I believe it is natural for men and women to want health, wealth and happiness for their families and themselves" and "I believe every parent wants their child to have a better education than they had" (Howard, 2004b). However there were also some traditionally Conservative themes as well, such as "I believe that the people should be big. That the state should be small" and "I believe red tape, bureaucracy, regulations, inspectorates, commissions, quangos, 'tsars', 'units' and 'targets' came to help and protect us, but now we need protection from them. Armies of interferers don't contribute to human happiness" (Howard, 2004b). This did draw inevitable, and not wholly complementary comparisons with President J F Kennedy's 'I believe speech' but did not lead to fresh policy, nor have any appreciable impact on PAH (see BBC News, 2004c).

It is a feature of the Conservatives during this period that the amount of policy detail was limited, instead the use of 'themes' or statements of principle would remain the focus right up to and including the election (see for example Howard, 2004a; BBC News, 2004c; Conservatives 2005a). However it is difficult to see any PAH impact from this because the general Conservative polling position, and views on how well it's policies were viewed, remained fairly stable for much of Howard's time as leader, mostly varying by a few points across a range of polls (Ipsos MORI, 2005b). However, there is some evidence that Conservative policies viewed in the abstract were more popular than they were when they were associated with the Conservative Party, providing an indication of the need difficulty of the position the party faced (Green, 2005).

This remained the situation despite Howard's continued attacks on Labour's record in office, using material from the Total Politics document the party had initiated by Duncan Smith to emphasize Labour's supposed failings. It has been argued that Howard's attacks on Labour, which were often seen as effective in terms of parliamentary performance had unintended consequences. The Conservative approach of attacking labour for not living up to expectations, and for being wasteful with the money spent of public serves, may have contributed to an increase disenchantment with Labour, but this didn't transfer into a corresponding increase in support for the Conservative alternative (Wring, 2005, pp. 718-719; Dorey, 2006, pp.150-151). The Conservatives' position on this was to maintain that public service standards could be maintained, whilst money (which was being wastefully spent) could also be saved from waste, and could fund limited tax cuts and even better investment in public services (Howard, 2004a). However, the Conservative PAH position meant that the twin strategy of attacking Labour's record, and highlighting wastefulness, whilst also claiming it would maintain or improve public service standards wasn't credible (see BBC News, 2005c). The image of the Conservative Party and of Howard, in combination with Labour's strategy to remind the electorate of how things had been under the Conservatives in the 1990s meant that the message of continued high standards in public services and saving money didn't resonate, and wasn't convincing.



One further argument in this area is that Howard should have been braver in policy terms than he was. He had a more united party, and appeared a strong and credible leader, and as a result he is criticised for not doing more to change the party (see for example Conservative Home, 2005; Sanders, 2006, pp. 182-183. However, as has already been discussed, this was fraught with danger and hampered by his limited mandate, but it was also very difficult for the Conservatives to formulate alternative policies to Labour in the area of public services. For example, during this period, the Labour government was buying up capacity from the private sector to reduce NHS waiting lists, introducing further competition into the NHS and reforming the old consultant controlled health market, leading the economist to claim “the government may already be taking reform of the NHS about as far as is possible without dismantling the entire funding structure” (Economist, 2004). These policies would probably have been ideologically compatible with most Conservatives, which creates a problem, but more importantly it makes it harder for the Conservatives to produce and present alternative policies. This isn’t just a case of ‘Labour stealing Conservative clothes’ more importantly it makes it much harder for the Conservatives to formulate their own distinctive policy platform without going further than Labour had already done, but Labour would claim that it amounted to the Tories seeking to destroy the NHS (see Economist, 2004). The differing PAH positions of the parties meant that Labour could credibly use private sector resources to improve the NHS, whereas the Conservative ‘patient passport’ policy allowing patients to use private sector services was portrayed as showing a lack of faith in the NHS (Dunne, 2004). This forms a negative feedback loop because competing for PAH (to some extent) requires distinctive policies; but in the absence of PAH distinctive policies can be controversial, fail to resonate, or perhaps actually further undermine PAH because they aren’t seen as credible. In these circumstances the Conservative Party’s cautious approach becomes more understandable.

The Conservatives encountered a similar problem with the James Review, produced by City troubleshooter David James that identified complicated savings that could be made in government expenditure amounting to ‘£35 billion’ created by reducing waste and increasing public spending by less than Labour planned (for a summary of the review see Channel 4 News, 2005). Whatever the

basis for these figures, and they were disputed by Labour and they would be a prominent part of Conservative campaigning. However, there would be confusion and scepticism about what the figures meant. Was it a '£35bn cut' as Labour would claim or was it a reduction in spending each year which would amount to £35 billion by 2011-2012 as the report claimed; and is there a difference (Channel 4 News, 2005). Furthermore, some of the savings the report identified would be re-invested in frontline services some would fund deficit reduction whilst a smaller proportion would lead to tax cuts. It all seemed a little complicated, which isn't auspicious for competing for PAH. Oliver Letwin and other senior Conservative figures would become engaged in debates with opponents and media figures over what the James Report actually meant (Jones, 2005b; Schifferes, 2005). Labour would claim the figures were unrealistic, showed that the Conservative Party couldn't be trusted with and would reduce public service standards, and that the real motivation was to provide tax cuts (Schifferes, 2005). Most infamously, Conservative deputy chairman Howard Flight, would claim at a private meeting that the Conservatives really intended to go much further than the £35 billion figure they'd outlined<sup>65</sup> (Guardian, 2005). There is no evidence this was any more than personal optimism or bravado, and the leadership strenuously denied any intention of going beyond the £35 billion figure, but the damage was serious (Guardian, 2005). This allowed Labour to reinforce their message about the danger posed to public services and the economy by a future Conservative government, undermine trust in the Conservative leadership and this message resonated: this was more credible than Conservative claims to be able to save £35 billion from government spending, and maintain or improve public services and the economy.

The report had been intended to amalgamate Conservative principles with an interest in public services. However, the combination of tax cuts, reducing waste, and government spending as well as a pledge to reinvest some of the savings back into public services to reduce the deficit and fund relatively modest tax cuts wasn't seen as credible, and was effectively undermined by Labour<sup>66</sup>. Labour's record in government and its dominance of PAH in these areas meant that a complicated,

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<sup>65</sup> Oliver Letwin had got into similar trouble himself with a comment he made in 2001.

<sup>66</sup> The Passage of the Hunting Act was another area that the Labour government used as a way of attacking the Conservative Party's interest in issues of supposedly marginal concern for the majority of the electorate.

albeit arguably relatively modest set of proposals from the Conservatives still negatively associated with its performance in office during the 1990s, would ensure little progress was made in the battle for PAH.

One further area of policy merits re-examination: immigration and asylum. As has already been mentioned, this is probably the most memorable feature of the Conservative policy and of the Conservative election campaign in 2005. It was certainly an issue that Howard made a brief reference to in his acceptance speech, and it would feature throughout the two years Howard was leader (Howard, 2003). However, the detail of what the Conservative's would actually do to control immigration was always vague. Their main immigration policy document promised to set a cap on immigration numbers, but despite repeated questioning, this number was not specified, instead it would be set after the election (The Conservative Party, 2005a, p. 19). There was just a single page in the manifesto devoted to immigration, and again, it was of limited detail (The Conservative Party, 2005a, p. 19). The greater part of both of these documents was devoted to attacking the government, and highlighting the excessive immigration that had been allowed by the labour government, mentioning a 'net immigration figure of 150,000 a year' (The Conservative Party, 2005a, p. 19). Border patrols and services were to be increased and reorganized and a 'points based system' similar to Australia's that would give "priority to people with the skills Britain needs" (The Conservative Party 2005a, p. 19).

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Conservative policy in this area was pledge to "withdraw from the 1951 Geneva Convention, and work for modernised international agreements on migration" (The Conservative Party, 2005a, p. 19). This attracted a mixed reaction, with support from Conservative sections of the media, but it was denounced by non-Conservative sections of the media; and in Bulpittian terms, a sizable amount of 'elite opinion' viewed this with opprobrium, especially due to the apparent conflation of asylum and immigration (see Howard, 2005b). Beyond the impact this had on immigration policy, it was also a matter that affected the image of the Conservative Party generally. A pledge to withdraw from something seen by many as a fundamental

pillar of human rights and even as a sign of a civilized nation attracted criticism of the party and its leadership generally, and was used to reinforce the negative associations of the Conservatives (see Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, p. 398).

Besides the lack of detail, and the wider impact of some of the detail on immigration, one of the interesting aspects of what is usually regarded as 'core vote strategy' is that the general election campaign generally, was less 'right-wing' than perceived, similar to the 2001 general election and that immigration was less of a feature of the Conservative campaign than perceptions merited (Fisher et al, 2005, pp.1-3). A number of factors contributed to this, the first of which is the profile of the immigration issue generally at this time was high with increased immigration from new EU member states, and countries in conflict (see for example Casciani, 2005; Winder, 2005, pp. 315-337). As result, it was a natural area for the Conservatives to attack Labour's performance in office; and it was an area in which the Conservatives were seen as having credibility in polling and a degree of PAH (see Green, 2011). It was also an area which brought the Conservatives media attention and support, but as a result it displaced other areas of Conservative policy as a result (Fisher et al, 2005). Senior Conservatives at the time would comment on the unfairness of media attention and public perception, claiming that their announcements on other issues would go unheard, whilst anything said about immigration would received considerable coverage (Fisher et al, 2005).

It is here that the degree of PAH the Conservatives had in this area becomes important. Howard and his team had to make a calculation about immigration and other issues. Immigration was a high profile issue of the time, and an area where sizable sections of the media were critical of the government. As a result, attacking the government becomes attractive: it is an area of potential weakness, where the Conservatives had some credibility, and it was good for party morale to try to exploit this weakness. However, the result of this, and the party's lack of PAH on issues of greater voter saliency, their message on immigration resonates with the media and receives more attention than those other areas. In these circumstances, the Conservatives have to make a choice. They can either continue to try to exploit an apparent weakness in the labour position over immigration, which

is one of the few areas they seem to get a favourable response on a high profile issue; or they can avoid discussing immigration (much like they had tried to do with Europe) so that their other messages weren't obscured by the attention it received.

In reality, this presented a very difficult problem for the leadership to surmount. Attacking Labour was good for party morale; MPs like to see their leader attacking areas of apparent government failure, but it also obscured other policy areas. However, ignoring or reducing discussion of immigration would have drawn criticism from the right-wing press and probably caused disquiet amongst the party. The further factor in all of this was Labour's stance on immigration, which toughened prior to the 2005 election. Indeed, Labour promised their own 'points based system' of immigration controls which effectively served to undermine the any advantage the Conservatives had in this area, whilst maintaining the government's overall PAH supremacy (see Labour, 2005).

The Conservatives may still not have received any extra attention for their other policy areas, but may have looked less credible and performed worse in the PAH competition as a result of not having an issue like immigration where they had some credibility to fight the government on. This represents the interaction between party management, strategy, PAH and competence, and there are a complex series of factors for the Conservative leadership to consider, with imperfect information, and without the benefit of hindsight we now have.

## **4.5 Competence**

Discussions of competence are usually prominent in accounts of this period in Conservative history. Generally Howard was, and has been seen as, a more competent leader than his two immediate predecessors because he came with a reputation as a strong politician, and almost immediately seemed to be leading a more united party. Howard seemed able to compete with Tony Blair at the dispatch box, especially early in their exchanges, and he established a strong staff and set up in the new Conservative Campaign Head Quarters (CCHQ). However, this competence is contrasted with failures in other areas, and indeed in this section it is argued that the criticism Howard has received

for not being more adventurous in changing the party is accentuated because he was seen as a competent leader. This section goes on to contrast the apparent reputation for competence, with the very considerable constraints on Howard's autonomy as leader, and highlights how this limited Howard's ability to drive further change in the party. However, this isn't to excuse Howard from charges of not making more of his position, or indeed, to argue that he was competent in all his actions, there were many errors. Howard could have handled the party's position on the growing problems in Iraq with greater aplomb, could have improved the party's campaign structure, and he only brought in the services of Lynton Crosby (although he was not available earlier) when there was little time for him to make a difference. Whilst it has been argued that one of the failings of this period was the prominence given to Howard personally in the strategy as a result of the 'I believe' tactic and Howard's use of principles rather than detailed policy, this section will argue there were considerable statecraft constraints acting against the production of detailed policy, and the use of principles was an attempt to maximize support at limited cost.

Even before Howard became leader, the emphasis of senior figures within the Conservative Party was on finding a leader who could show competence. Oliver Letwin would say:

"We need to demonstrate above all two things; unity of purpose; and that we have a leader who is unchangeably competent and capable of persuading anybody that he could be the next Prime Minister of this country" (see Hughes, 2003).

The focus on competence would remain until the end of Howard's leadership, and even after defeat he continued to emphasize its importance. Howard would stress the importance of competence in opposition because if you're not in government:

"You cannot change the world. You haven't the power to do so. But you can show, by how you act and by what you say, that you are competent to govern... and competence is built on discipline. Of course we need discussion and debate. But let's not be offensive about each other; let's not run down our party" (Howard, 2005a).

The explicit linkage of competence, discipline and unity and appearing to be a credible alternative government is the key feature of Howard's leadership and helps us to understand why Howard placed such matters and party management ahead of a more adventurous strategy, or attempt to

change the party to compete for PAH. The Conservative Party was regarded (including by many of its own members) as having been poorly lead, and damaged by divisions and disputes, and these had been causally linked with the party's poor electoral performance (see Seldon and Kavanagh, 2005). This should not be mistaken for a belief that competence and discipline was the only requirement the party had to fulfil in order to become a credible alternative government and compete in statecraft terms, as mentioned above, Howard knew more was required to win, but they believed discipline and competence had to come first. The limited time before the election as concentrated the mind of the leadership on the importance of these issues. The dangers for party statecraft from seeking to be more adventurous were numerous, and there would be little time to correct mistakes and maintain or retain competence and discipline if things didn't work out. If anything, what seemed an almost instantaneous transformation of the party that occurred as Howard became leader likely served to mitigate further against doing anything too radical. By this it is meant that the degree of favourable coverage Howard received, combined with the way the party appeared united around him and Labour encountering problems, didn't encourage Howard to be adventurous, but instead to be cautious about anything that undermined the improvement.

Whilst much of the attention so far has been on explaining why competence should not automatically be assumed a justification for the leadership and party being more adventurous, it now shifts to examine situations where competence problems affected party statecraft. These include the way Howard in particular handled the fallout from the worsening situation in Iraq, the Hutton Report and tuition top-up fees, and there were problems with the campaign management in particular (see Snowden, 2010, pp. 135-139 for a discussion of failures). The deteriorating situation in Iraq, and the inquiries into how Britain came to participate in the 2003 invasion would be prominent throughout Howard's time as leader<sup>67</sup>. It was a period that would do much to undermine trust in politicians generally, and whilst the legality of the invasion would continue to be questions, the primary political focus<sup>68</sup> was on whether the case for war had been exaggerated by the government (BBC

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<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the Chilcott Inquiry into the nation's involvement in the Iraq invasion is ongoing at the time of writing.

<sup>68</sup> Although the Hutton Inquiry was really established to investigate the death of Dr David Kelly, in reality the political world was more interested in whether the case for war had been 'sexed-up'.

News, 2004d). Howard and his team clearly expected the Hutton Report published in January 2004 to be more critical than it was, and they had spent much time studying the evidence in advance of the report in order to take advantage of any criticism it levelled at the government (see for example Crick, 2005, p443-444; Snowden, 2010, pp. 139-144). However, when the report was published, it largely exonerated the government and the ammunition the Conservative leadership had prepared went unused. What had been widely expected to be an opportunity for the Conservatives to capitalize on Labour's problems didn't materialize, and Howard's performance in the parliamentary debate on the matter was lacklustre (Assinder, 2004b). Howard's poor attempts to distance the party from the vote that authorised the war against Iraq, particularly after the Butler Report, lacked credibility and looked optimistic as the majority of the party had supported the government, and impacted on party morale and the limited momentum it had (see Wring, 2005, pp.718-720).

The same charge of opportunism was levelled at the party over their continued opposition to tuition fees because it was widely assumed the Conservatives should naturally support them, and they failed to provide a credible alternative to funding higher education (see Curtis, 2004). Both of these matters could have been better handled, although it can be difficult for opposition parties to avoid appearing opportunistic. It was also an issue that was complicated because the Liberal Democrats had always opposed the war, and consequently they were the established and more credible opposition party on these issues. However, it was damaging for the Conservatives and Howard, because both were issues that were causing significant difficulties for the government, and the inability to do better was a setback for Howard and the party which undermined morale and PAH. Whilst polling showed an improvement in the competence scores for the party and the leader compared to pre-2003, both remained behind Labour and Blair's scores (see Quinn, 2008, p. 195).

In terms of the parliamentary party, under Howard's leadership the party would remain significantly more united than it had been for some time, with only small signs of discontent (about the campaign strategy) prior to the election. However, within his election team and staff there were problems and tensions over direction. In an area that mixed policy and party management, Michael Howard



sacked Howard Flight for claiming that a Conservative government would cut public spending to a greater extent than the party's leadership had announced. This came at a terrible time for the Conservative leadership, being just two months before the general election. This was damaging for the party, and it was exploited by Labour to reinforce their message that the Conservatives couldn't be trusted, even linking this with a potential Conservative government introducing charges into the NHS (Sparrow, 2005). After sacking him, Michael Howard responded by preventing Flight standing for re-election and emphasizing his displeasure at what Flight had said, in a prompt attempt at damage limitation. Howard and the party claimed it demonstrated his strong leadership, and determination to show that the Conservatives weren't just about cutting spending (see Bale, 2010, p.249-250). However, even this was problematic, because Howard then seemed likely to face a grassroots rebellion that was determined to retain Flight as a parliamentary candidate (Jones and Sparrow, 2005). In the Conservative-leaning press Michael Howard's actions were not entirely viewed positively, for example: "The swift and brutal way that Mr Howard withdrew the whip from Mr Flight then banned him from taking any further part in the election surprised Tory MPs" (Jones and Sparrow, 2005). For a while it appeared that the leader's decision might either backfire or cause party division as the election approached, but it was the proximity of the election that helped the leadership quell this<sup>69</sup>.

A further problem for the party's economic credibility would also come shortly before the general election. It was interesting that the government allowed papers from Black Wednesday to be made available early shortly before the general election, and despite them revealing that the cost the Treasury was likely to have been £3.3 billion rather than the far higher estimates that had been claimed at the time, it was not an auspicious topic of discussion shortly before an election (Tempest, 2005a). Whatever the impact on the electorate, it wasn't ideal for the Conservatives and Howard, who had been in government when Black Wednesday occurred, to see this issue, which is regarded as having done considerable lasting damage to the party's economic credibility resurface (Clark, 1998, pp. 413-417).

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<sup>69</sup> It is almost certainly entirely coincidental that Howard Flight was later raised to the peerage in 2011, and doubtless played no part in his eventual decision not to fight his leader's action...

The combined impact of Flight's comments and the resurfacing of debate about Black Wednesday were perfect material for Labour to use to attack Howard and the Conservatives' credibility and competence to run the economy. It served to further undermine Conservative claims that "By cutting Mr Blair's waste, we will be able to do three things. Spend as much as Labour on schools and hospitals. Cut Mr Blair's borrowing. And reward hard-working Britons with lower taxes" (Guardian, 2005).

Clearly, the Conservatives didn't win the general election in 2005 and this has led to questioning of Howard's competence, and the wider competence of the Conservative party. A swing of just 3.2% and a gain of 33 seats can either be considered an underperformance, or it can be seen a better result than might have been expected given the state the party was in just over 18 months prior to the election. However, in terms of competence, it is argued that in the face of continuing Labour dominance, Howard's limited mandate, and the limited time he had to lead the party, the improvement in party management and discipline after years of trouble does represent a good performance in the area of competence. Despite this it was outshone by the Labour government's own position in this area, as it maintained a competent record in office on the issues that mattered most, despite the damage done to Blair by Iraq.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

The general election in 2005 saw the Conservatives gain just 33 seats more than they had done in 2001. In numerical terms they remained in a worse position than Labour were in after the 1983 general election, and it was the third worst performance by the party since 1832, beaten only by the previous two elections. Labour had maintained a healthy, albeit reduced majority. This period has been regarded a failure not just on electoral terms, but it is argued the Conservatives should have done better, given their improved party leadership and discipline and the growing disenchantment with the government and Tony Blair (see Rallings and Thrasher, 2004, p. 335; Wring, 2005, p. 718). This failure has previously been attributed to the 'core vote strategy' the party pursued during as the

election in 2005 approached, when what was required was greater change in how the party looked, what it stood for, and the policies it offered (see Denham and O'Hara, 2007a, pp. 183-184).

This chapter has argued that these arguments place too much emphasises on the ability of a leader to with a limited mandate, and a limited time frame, to transform a party that had stood on the verge of oblivion in late 2003, just a year and a half before the election. This is not an attempt to excuse the Conservative leadership from their mistakes, for many were made, but instead here the argument is that when judged against Howard and his party's main goal upon assuming the leadership the performance is rather better. In essence, whilst the party and Howard still hoped and wanted to win, during this period the Conservative Party's statecraft was primarily concerned with something that had to come before the pursuit of office: recovering its position as a viable political party, because without that, the pursuit of office was inconceivable. The Conservative Party in 2003 was ineffectively led and had been divided by personal disputes and disagreements over direction: it seemed more interested in arguing with itself than with its opponents.

Party management and party relations had frustrated the three previous leaders throughout their tenures, and were seen as a major obstacle to the Conservative Party ever recovering office. After Duncan Smith had been removed, internal party relations became significantly more quiescent, not at first because of a great deal of active management, but because of the impact of the seriousness of the party's predicament, and the arrival of a stronger, more competent leader who had established personal authority. However, the leadership ensured that the way they shaped the other areas of party statecraft would maintain this improved party management position. Rather than risking the degree of unity the party acquired, Howard and his team were deliberately cautious in their approach to party strategy and in their attempts to compete for PAH.

In his speeches at the beginning of his term as leader Howard acknowledged the need for the party to offer policies that addressed the public services and also showed he understood the image problem that both the party and he personally had. However, balancing this was the need to

maintain party unity, and for this the leadership needed to be cautious, and understandably after years of disputes and internal wrangling, they were. Trying to lead greater change in the party's direction would have been dangerous for party management, not just on ideological grounds, but more importantly, because Labour's domination of the political landscape would likely mean that change would struggle to bring electoral reward. Change that brings no benefit (or worsens statecraft) is much more likely to be opposed and caused division, than a cautious approach that brings a modest improvement. The Conservative strategy reflected this.

However, whilst it was cautious, it is argued that it went beyond the 'core vote' strategy that it is often labelled as having pursued. The strategy the Conservatives pursued was to campaign on their areas of existing strength, not just to motivate their own core support to 'turn out' of polling day. Moreover, this was pursued not only because they thought this was the best prospectus on which to win, or just because of ideological commitment to such an approach, but because of the dangers and difficulties of being more adventurous given the position the party was in, especially relative to Labour.

Statecraft is about winning office, and clearly in strict terms the Conservative Party failed this test in 2005. However, with the regard to the component areas of statecraft the party performed much better in terms of party management, was more competently lead, and the strategy which Howard pursued performed reasonably as far as its limited aims went. In PAH terms the party performed less well, but this is also a factor of the limited strategic aim combined with the further constraints resulting from Labour's continued dominance, which remained despite growing disenchantment in some areas.

## **Chapter 5**

### **2005 to 2010 - The Conservative Party under David Cameron**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter moves on to examine the Conservative party between 2005, and 2010. At the beginning of the period examined here the Conservative Party had just suffered its third consecutive heavy general election defeat, and the party faced several more years in opposition. There was uncertainty about what direction the party would take next and who would lead them, although there were a small number of likely candidates. It would take several months to answer these questions, but it was remarkably painless, and would see a rapid and perhaps unexpected improvement in the party's statecraft which would, with some fluctuation, remain the case until the election in 2010. The Conservatives were only partly successful in the general election of 2010, some would argue it was even a failure. However, the Conservative Party is now in office, the primary objective of statecraft according to Bulpitt<sup>70</sup>, albeit as the larger constituent party of a coalition, and the country has a Conservative prime minister, who is able to implement many aspects of Conservative statecraft, which represents at least a partial success.

The first section examines party management, which remained largely quiescent during this period. Whilst there were fears that divisions might be prompted by a protracted leadership contest, this didn't materialize, and instead the leadership contest would prove beneficial to the party statecraft as it allowed the emergent leader to establish a democratic, strategic and political argument hegemony based mandate for his narrative of the direction in which the party needed to travel. This mandate became quickly entrenched and associated with the prospect of winning office, which is the best tool for party management.

The second section deals with strategic considerations during this period, which were important, but it argues have been misunderstood. It argues that whilst attempts to 'decontaminate the

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<sup>70</sup> Bulpitt says the primary objective of statecraft is to gain office, if possible alone but if necessary as part of a coalition (Bulpitt, 1986, p.21)

Conservative brand’ and ‘changing the party’ were important strategic matters, the principle strategic concern was to return to electability, and not a consistent or coherent plan to achieve the former. It is also necessary to treat strategy as something that will constantly adapt as the wider party political landscape changes and opponents formulate their own strategies and statecraft. It also considers the importance of preparation for office, with the thought the Conservative Party was giving to ‘implementation’ well in advance of the election. It is argued that this demonstrated an acknowledgement of the importance of implementing the party’s statecraft and governing competently as the crucial last part of the strategy to rid the party of lingering scepticism that remained from the party’s time in office during the 1990s and experience in opposition, and unfavourable comparisons with Labour’s statecraft which had been largely successful for a number of years.

The third section examines PAH under David Cameron. In this area the results are mixed, and changed over time. Whilst Cameron rapidly established his own credibility as someone who *could be* a future prime minister, doubts remained about the wider Conservative Party, and would remain until the election. However, in terms of media support, and to an extent elite opinion, the Conservative PAH position improved substantially over the previous periods of Conservative history discussed in this thesis. Whilst this is partly a result of Conservative strategy, as will be outlined in this chapter it was both helped and hindered by the wider party political environment as the natural rate of governability deteriorated sharply with the economic downturn, recession and internal party problems for the Labour Party. Whilst the Conservatives are criticised for not having convinced more people of the credibility of their party and policy platform prior to the election, it is argued that this was always likely to be difficult to achieve, and that only statecraft success in office could finally dispel the continuing negative associations with previous Conservative governments.

The final section turns to examine competence during this period. As already mentioned, from the leadership campaign onwards Cameron established himself as a competent performer, particularly with a rehearsed speech, if not always in a heated debate. The very fact that he gave the impression of being a potential prime minister is an essential trait for establishing a successful statecraft. As

with PAH, doubts about Conservative competence would remain, perhaps inevitably as an opposition party can only do so much to give the appearance of credibility, and could only be dispelled by actually governing competently. In terms of competence, the Conservatives were assisted by the deterioration in the government's reputation for competence, although they would claim their experience meant they were best placed to address the country's problems. Finally, the handling of the aftermath of the election in 2010 and the coalition negotiations would further boost the Conservatives' appearance of competence at a time of significant uncertainty.

It is the interaction of these statecraft components with each other and with the wider party political environment that is key to understanding why the Conservatives were able to secure office, but only with the help of the Liberal Democrats. Whilst detractors will claim that this represents a statecraft failure by Cameron and his party, Bulpitt said governing in coalition was subordinate only to governing alone, and is better than being in opposition. It is also argued that governing problems of the scale Labour encountered do not necessarily present an opportunity for opposition parties, because at such times the electorate may opt for 'the devil it knows' over the uncertainty of where change might lead.

## **5.2 Party Management**

Under Michael Howard, the Conservative Party had experienced a more quiescent period of party relations, but the fear was that this was largely cosmetic or likely to be temporary. In particular, there was uncertainty about how the party would cope after the general election defeat and with the prospect of a potentially divisive leadership election looming. As discussed in the previous chapter, there was the notion that the Conservatives should have done better in 2005 in light of Labour's problems and the improved internal party relations. If the Conservatives couldn't do better with a stronger leader, and the governing party encountering problems and complications with the natural rate of governability, what would it have to do to stand a chance of winning next time. After the defeat, a number of senior Conservative figures had begun to express their view that the party needed to embrace change if it was to see an improvement in performance at the next election. This

section explores party management and leadership after the election in 2005. Despite the fears, the party didn't see a return to the internal conflict that had existed prior to late 2003, even with a protracted leadership contest which was won by David Cameron who promised to change the party.

As a result of the delay before Michael Howard resigned, and the lengthy leadership contest the Conservative Party was able to enter a period of reflection, or even conduct a post-mortem, on its current position. Rather than reopen divisions about the reasons for the party's failure, and future direction, this resulted in a leader emerging with a considerable democratic mandate from his party, and a boost for him personally in the battle for political argument hegemony (PAH) with the wide support Cameron secured for his message. Whilst Bulpitt emphasized the importance of opposition as a period to reformulate or reshape a party's statecraft, this period of virtual interregnum provided the perfect opportunity to change and adapt the Conservatives' statecraft position with a degree of removal from the party political environment that an immediate replacement would have had to deal with. The momentum Cameron gained during the contest helped with party management, but it was also aided by his emphasis on 'changing to win'. Cameron was able to associate the changes he outlined (more in principle than in detail) with the prospect of winning, and this is important for securing the cooperation, if not support, from those in the party who might not be so enthusiastic about the message presented. The widespread and favourable coverage his campaign would receive in the latter half of the contest, was to be an endorsement of the credibility of his claim that changing could lead to winning, and the prospect of this is the best tool for party management.

Once he became leader, the Conservative Party remained relatively quiescent throughout his term as leader. There were times when his statecraft position seemed vulnerable, but despite this, it is argued that his position of leader was soon more secure than any of his modern predecessors whilst the party was in opposition, in part because there were few big figures for opposition to coalesce around, and those who remained, would experience problems of their own. Cameron also managed to balance his message of changing the party with traditional Conservatism in a way that minimized internal opposition, and many of his flagship policies that were designed to show the party was



changing were not issues of high politics, which would have been more controversial. The heavy reliance on rhetoric and symbolic policy areas and gestures also assisted with party management, because it is by its very nature easier for a party to use this to address multiple constituencies in an attempt to draw and retain broad support. Standing over all of this is the position of Labour's statecraft, and indeed the wider political and economic environment, which meant that the position of leader of the opposition presented more opportunities to Cameron than it had done to his predecessors, and the again, the prospect that Labour could be vulnerable, and that Cameron might be able to win, is the best tonic for party management.

Michael Howard's tenure as leader had seen greater unity within the party than the Conservatives had been used to for many years. He had reorganized Central Office, and sought to professionalize its operation, but most of his changes were of limited scale rather than broader constitutional changes to the way in which the party operated. Howard had set himself the task of grasping party management strongly, and quashing the prospect of dissent and disunity quickly, directly to remedy the intra party disputes that had done so much damage to the party since the early 1990s. In the immediate aftermath of the general election, there seemed the possibility that the divisions could resurface, especially due to the delay before the leadership contest got underway. In the end, the leadership contest itself proved to be of considerable benefit to the party, and it emerged with a new leader, with a strong mandate to lead and change the party. This section will examine leadership, and the leadership contest, (and pre-contest) because it became a transformative event for the party, and laid the foundations for much of what would happen over the following five years. However, the greatest impact of the contest was not due to the vote, or scale of Cameron's win, instead the length of the largely good-natured campaign, the message it conveyed, and the favourable coverage it brought, boosted all areas of Conservative statecraft.

### **5.2.1 Leadership**

The 2005 Conservative leadership election received considerable attention at the time. For the fourth time in eight years, the party would have to find a new leader, and there was much foreboding

in the light of the problems this had caused in the past; especially considering the relatively strong leadership and unity Michael Howard had fostered during his short tenure as leader. There are a number of interesting features of the subsequent campaign that relate to the party's statecraft: the vague and drawn-out timetable and the seemingly deliberate attempt to favour particular candidates are principle amongst these. It is argued that both amounted to Howard and his team trying to facilitate a change in the party statecraft. It was Howard's advisors who encouraged him to allow a long campaign, and whilst this has traditionally been seen as an attempt to thwart the chances of the front runner, David Davis, it is argued here that circumstances of the leadership campaign offered the party a degree of freedom to deal with statecraft questions, that would not have otherwise been available.

Michael Howard announced he would stand down the day after the 2005 election result, however unlike his predecessors there was to be a delay before a successor was chosen. Howard wanted to stand down immediately, but there was a campaign by those around him, and amongst a number of senior figures in the party, for him to stay on, primarily to facilitate a post-mortem of the election and to learn lessons from the past. Whilst this campaign was largely unsuccessful, it did lead to him remaining leader for a further six months (see Snowden, 2010, p.166). Despite this, the long delay between the election and Howard finally standing down had significant implications. The decision by Major and Hague to step down soon after their respective election defeats had become widely regarded as an error, or even selfish, because it didn't allow the party chance to reflect upon the defeat before it was plunged into a leadership campaign (see Assinder, 2005a). In the absence of a period of reflection, there was little chance for candidates to plan their approach to a campaign before it began, away from the spotlight of direct media and party political attention, which might have allowed time to think about the future direction of party statecraft. In 2005, there was a strong contingent seeking to ensure that this wasn't repeated, but it went beyond that in three ways. The first is that there was a desire not to imperil the recently fostered stability in the party, the second is related to this, and was a desire to alter the Hague leadership election rules, although this didn't happen, because of opposition claiming this was a deliberate attempt to discriminate against certain

candidates. The third and most important was the freedom it allowed the party to reflect upon the defeat, but more important than this, to allow potential successors time to prepare for the very difficult job of leading the opposition (see Assinder, 2005a; and see Fletcher, 2011, pp.113-132).

Howard has always denied trying to alter the leadership election process in order to favour one candidate over another as some commentators have suggested, merely stating that it was to prevent the previous problems of a divisive used to elect Duncan Smith (Snowdon, 2010, pp. 186-195). In fact, almost immediately, and quite predictably, the announcement that he would stand down meant his authority dwindled, as attention turned to questions of who would succeed; it certainly wasn't an auspicious position from which to go through the complicated process of changing the leadership election process (see Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp.111- 112 for an insight into how complicated that would be).<sup>71</sup> Whilst announcing his resignation weakened Howard's authority and ability to try and change the leadership process (Denham and O'Hara, 2007b, p.417), it is likely this would have happened anyway. It was widely acknowledged that Howard would not remain leader for very long if the party was heavily defeated in 2005, and speculation would have grown had he not announced his intentions. Montgomerie (2005) claims that some of Davis's supporters (who were most active, and irksome to Howard) would have sought a motion of no confidence had Howard not announced his decision shortly after the election.

The attempt to change the rules was genuine, despite not being well thought through prior to 2005, rather than just an attempt to ensure there was a protracted campaign allowing the less well-known candidates a chance to prove themselves. It also brought a considerable degree of criticism, with the Economist going so far as to label it "Howard's rotten exit strategy" (Economist, 2005b; and see Bale, 2010, p.254 for similar comments).

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<sup>71</sup> As Theodore Roosevelt famously discovered when he ruled himself out of contention for the 1908 election, immediately after winning the 1904 election, his authority plummeted. This seems to be a lesson neither Howard, nor Blair in 2007 were aware of (Bale, 2010, p.257).

The extent to which Howard's manoeuvrings actually affected the leadership election result is still debated. Most commentators seem to think it contributed to Cameron's ultimate victory, but others have suggested it only added an additional six weeks onto the length of the campaign, which suggests that Cameron might have been able to achieve a similar outcome had the contest been fought on pre-Hague rules (Denham, 2009a, p.385). However, it is argued that this overlooks the more subtle aspects of Howard's actions because Cameron didn't just benefit from the length of the campaign, he also benefited from the attention he received as a by-product of the party's and the media's attention that focussed on the reasons behind the proposed changes, meaning it also focussed the debate about the future of the party. By this, it is meant that a little known candidate was referred to as the leader's protégée and preferred heir, and it brought him attention, and into direct contrast with Davis, as Davis was the candidate Howard was believed to be acting against.

One consequence of Howard's pledge to alter the election system was that the potential candidates had to face a degree of uncertainty about the timeline and type of contest they would have to fight: would they have to court MPs, constituency chairmen, members of a mixture of all three? (Denham and O'Hara, 2007b, p.417; Denham and O'Hara, 2008, 20 pp.110-111). Whilst this was criticised at the time, it ultimately helped the party. As discussed in more detail below, the uncertainty about the likely rules, in combination with the five-month period between the general election and the formal part of the leadership election, encouraged broad leadership campaigns with wide appeal.

The formal leadership election itself did not begin until October 7<sup>th</sup> 2005, five months after the general election. This 'cold' part of the campaign is interesting in its own right because of the machinations that were taking place. The role Michael Howard played in promoting George Osborne and David Cameron is also significant. Whilst it's not fair to say they were 'unknown' prior to the 2005 leadership election, they were not prominent, and had only been MPs for four years (Green, 2010a, p.671). As a result, it came as a surprise to some that Howard appointed Osborne shadow chancellor and Cameron to the education brief in the post election reshuffle (see Bale, 2010, pp.251-253). There is a risk of reading history backwards when examining this, and this period,

because some have claimed Howard deliberately promoted his protégés, although Cameron secured the ‘lesser’ brief (Bale, 2010, p.258). There was certainly speculation before the election that Cameron was Howard’s protégée (they had worked together years previously before Cameron became an MP) and preferred heir, whilst there was a complicated and mixed group of MPs who didn’t want David Davis to succeed Howard (Walters, 2005). Both Cameron and Osborne played important roles in the production of the manifesto in 2005, which has bought criticism, given how quickly they advocated change after the defeat in 2005. However, it is also likely that this meant they were aware of the limitations of what could be done at that time<sup>72</sup>.

Most accounts list personal, rather than political or even ideological reasons for the opposition to Davis prior to the contest, whether that stems from his time as a whip or his own personality, ambition, or the excessive vicarious ambition of his supporters (Denham and O’Hara, 2008, p.125). He was undoubtedly a Conservative ‘heavyweight’ who could perform well at the dispatch box and in the media, and as with all leadership elections, some of the front runners’ supporters allegiance is based on the expectation that that candidate will win, and helps explain why Davis’s support fell away precipitately after the 2005 conference (Denham and Dorey, 2006, p.41).

As Davis looked less like a winner, Cameron looked more like a winner, and the maths changed accordingly. Whilst Cameron probably had the least baggage, and fewest ‘enemies’ of the candidates; he was already seen as being part of a clique which became known as the ‘Notting Hill set’ and this would at times cause some resentment from MPs who felt they were outside Cameron’s circle, especially older or longer serving MPs (Bale, 2010. p.225). This would prove to be a source of future tension in the party<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> A few months after Cameron became leader, I was at an association meeting where one of the members commented on the ‘excellent improvement’ Mr Cameron had made... and that the party seemed to be heading in a much more sensible than it had done in the general election campaign and manifesto of a few months before. When the prospective parliamentary candidate was asked about this, she rather sheepishly mentioned that Cameron and Osborne had been involved in the said manifesto and campaign...

<sup>73</sup> I have heard MPs claim they feel excluded from a front bench role, or Cameron’s inner circle, in particular because of their age. Of course, it is equally possible this is the way they justify their ‘outsider’ status or lack of promotion, which is in fact based on perfectly rational grounds.

It is easy to forget that Cameron only looked likely to win during the last two months of the campaign; prior to the conference in October 2005, and for a while afterwards, the expectation was that Cameron would end up supporting one of the 'big beasts' and most likely, Ken Clarke (Montgomerie, 2005). This in itself is interesting as context for the rapidity of change. David Davis had support as a front-runner, yet Cameron looked like a winner.

Whilst the speeches attract considerable attention, even to the extent that the contest has even been dubbed 'a tale of two speeches' (Dorey and Dehnham, 2006, p.35; Denham and O'Hara, 2008, p.132) there is more to Cameron's success than just speeches. Even prior to the launch of his campaign Cameron had made a number of speeches urging change and modernization of the party (see for example Cameron, 2005a; Cameron, 2005b; Cameron 2005c), and with a particular emphasis on education policy, which whilst not necessarily having had the impact of his later speeches, helped set the direction and tone of what would follow<sup>74</sup>.

The first big impact speech, delivered at the launch of his campaign, was designed to address a number of points (see Cameron, 2005d). Essentially, Cameron sought to counter accusations he was too young and inexperienced, but more importantly, a considerable effort was put into showing that Cameron was different as a deliberate attempt to counter the party's fear of the young and inexperienced after Hague. Cameron's team chose to launch the campaign on the same day as Davis launched his, the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2005, they did so in a smart room, with expensive lighting they are rumoured to have borrowed £20,000 to pay for, and they handed out smoothies whilst pop music played in the background (Snowdon, 2010, p.197). Davis's team used a wood-panelled room, and whilst both spoke of the need to change the party, Davis's speech was heavily scripted and not well delivered, whilst Cameron spoke without notes, in a 'relaxed' style in which the intended message was clear: he was a different kind of Conservative, backing up the rhetoric (Montgomerie, 2005;

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<sup>74</sup> I was at one of Cameron's early (formal) campaign launch events held in Birmingham at Millennium Point on 23 October 2005. In the group of young Conservatives I went with most were very impressed, whilst a minority were rather sceptical about how much substance there was behind what he was saying. However, by the time of the Birmingham hustings event between Cameron and David Davis on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2005, it was almost like a procession for Cameron- and even David Davis seemed to realize he was on a losing wicket, but the hustings was remarkably polite, almost as though attention was already shifting to what would come after the campaigning.

Finlayson, 2007, p.4; Green, 2010a, p.671). Both candidates said the party needed to change, in fact there was a significant degree of similarity between what Davis and Cameron said, and what Howard, Duncan Smith and Hague had said years previously, but Cameron sought to highlight the contrast between the front runner, and him (Denham and Dorey, 2006, p.41).

The combination of the message, and the presentation was part of a strategy to lay claim to title of 'the contender who could change and modernize the party', and it seems most likely to have been aimed directly at securing media attention and support. After the defeat in 2005, papers of all colours had columnists arguing that the party needed to change, and not just its policies, but also how representative it was, as well as their attitudes and appearance. After three successive defeats, they needed a leader who could claim to do this credibly, not just say them (see Economist, 2005d for summary). The slick presentation and message seemed, partly at least, designed to appeal directly to these columnists and capture media support, and Cameron's team and supporters like Michael Gove and Danny Finklestein pushed this message firmly (Denham and O'Hara, 2007b). It has been claimed that Cameron won without the media, mainly because the only paper to openly support his candidature was the Telegraph, and it did so when it already seemed certain Cameron would win (Montgomerie, 2010d). However, this overlooks the favourable converge Cameron received from individual columnists within papers, and the equally contrasting coverage Davis received. In fact, after his dismal conference speech, his campaign seemed to stall; showing that the effect of momentum can work both ways (see for example Jones 2005a; White 2005).

Cameron's campaign also sought to emphasize the connection between changing and winning. His campaign slogan was 'Change to Win' and it was emblazoned on everything from tins of mints to T-shirts; to a party enervated by eight years of opposition, Cameron made it clear that his leadership, and his changes, would see them return to power (see Cameron, 2005d). Whilst all of the candidates promised to change the party, and all said they could lead the party to victory at the next general election, as the campaign approached its conclusion Cameron gained increasing momentum as the candidate who was least encumbered and most able to achieve this (Montgomerie, 2010d, p.7).

Whilst political argument hegemony amounts to more than momentum, it was an enticing indication that Cameron had statecraft potential.

The polling data on the candidates had seemed straightforward for much of period between the May and October. Despite the problems of surveying for such an election, pollsters acknowledged that Davis was the favourite amongst the membership, whilst Clarke scored higher amongst non-Conservative voters (see UK polling, 2005, for report survey of polling during the campaign). This remained the position immediately after the conference, but Cameron's star was rising and rising fast. The eve of conference (infamous) Newsnight focus group, or 'hall test' by Frank Luntz gave considerable support to Cameron's candidacy, and in some accounts it's one of the decisive events of the campaign (Cohen, 2006).

### **5.2.2 Wider Party Management**

Whilst the leadership contest had a strong positive effect on the position of David Cameron, as will be mentioned below, the transformation must not be overstated, and it is easy to exaggerate the effect a popular leader has, on a party about which views had not changed to any considerable extent (Green, 2010a, p.673). However, this is not unusual, and almost every new leader is viewed with scepticism when they assume the role and pledge to change the party; especially when it's a message that has been heard before.<sup>75</sup> The difference now was that Cameron had rapidly propelled himself into a much stronger position than any of the previous four leaders, and possibly the seven previous leaders, upon taking over the leadership (see Bale, 2010, pp.2-20).

Despite the efforts of some to damage Davis's prospects, Cameron was not a compromise candidate; he had vanquished his opponents, and they seemed to accept this, publically, and privately, even though doubts would remain until he had proven himself in office. Davis eventually faded, and then left the front bench to fight a one-issue by-election, a move that has almost certainly ended his front bench career and chances of being a future contender for the party leadership (Brogan and Martin,

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<sup>75</sup> The same could be said of Heath, Thatcher and Blair. (see Sked and Cook, 1993, pp.253-291; and see also Powell, 2010, pp.13-30)



2008). For the next six years, the only credible challenger to Cameron would be Liam Fox – which never developed beyond media speculation and the hopes of a few backbenchers - and that too would disappear altogether at this thesis was being competed. The long period in opposition removes 'big beasts' from the scene, and this was further reinforced by the change of generation that Cameron, and his team would largely represent. With Hague, Duncan Smith even Howard and Major, there were visible potential alternative leaders, and this can complicate party management if the party encounters statecraft problems. In Cameron's case, this was no longer so. Although Davis remained, he was soon to see any remaining hopes he may have had to lead the party disappear, and Ken Clarke was supportive of Cameron's approach. There were few figures for dissenting voices to coalesce around, and for the media to speculate about, both of which aid party management.

Furthermore, Cameron was able to draw on several key Conservative MPs and backers, as well as attracting new ones, appointing some to head up the party's policy reviews, whilst others, like Hague, now a rehabilitated figure were enticed back to frontline politics (Elliott and Hanning, 2007, p.297). MPs as diverse as John Redwood, Iain Duncan Smith, Ken Clark, Tim Yeo and Stephen Dorrell were recruited to lead policy reviews, and although this is discussed more below, to have experienced politicians on-board countered some of the claims of Cameron's inexperience, and was crucial in showing that he had support from the 'big figures' within the party (see Dorey, 2007, pp.148-149). While this is standard procedure for new leaders to cement their own position, and neutralize potential opponents by recruiting experienced and influential MPs, Cameron was able to do so in a way the previous three leaders had not because the prospect of office seemed to be in sight once again (see Bale, 2011a, p.41).

The formal changes that Cameron made to the party frequently attracted attention, in particular the 'A list' of candidates he announced in 2006, which was designed to broaden the number of the party's MPs from minority groups and women (Woodward and Branigan, 2006). The move attracted criticism from some parts of the parliamentary party (Dorey, 2007, p.155), wider membership, and the media, albeit for different reasons with some claiming it didn't go far enough,

and others saying it was an affront to local democracy and meritocracy, whilst others bemoaned the number of 'celebrity' candidates (Woodward and Branigan, 2006). The A list would go on to have mixed results, the original notion of compelling safe seats to select from the A list was watered down, but many candidates were nevertheless selected for safe and marginal seats. Whilst many on the list were excellent candidates, local associations have been known to prefer more prominent and established candidates because of the attention and influence that might be associated with them. Untimely the party's candidates would become significantly more representative, despite many 'A-listers' not winning seats (Dorey, 2007, p.154; Driver, 2010). The 'A-list' changes also had the benefit to Cameron of giving the impression of modernization beyond the level of actual changes made, because of the media attention it received and the message it portrayed of party change.

With a few exceptions the Conservative Party remained largely united and loyal to the leader until after the election in 2010, and those problems that did surface within the parliamentary party were limited, and were prompted largely by what has become known as the 'Brown Bounce' when it looked as if Labour might secure a fourth election win (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, p.401). This will be dealt with in more detail below, but it demonstrates the importance of context for party management, which only became problematic at times when the Conservative performance seemed to dip (see Beech, 2009, p.7). Whilst critics claimed this prompted Cameron to move to the right, the interesting aspect of this period is the degree to which Cameron held his nerve in the face of the first sign of public dissent, unlike the previous three leaders, and events would soon see party management issues quelled and party management and statecraft strengthened (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, p.399).

There were problems over the leadership's policy platform, although once again the number of MPs involved - at least publicly - was small. One prominent example was over the issue of grammar schools, a perennial area of debate within the party, but only one MP resigned from the front bench

over the leadership's refusal to support an expansion of the number of these schools<sup>76</sup> (Evans, 2008, p.301). It was an issue about which a significant number of Tory MPs and members were concerned about, but Cameron's position was similar to that of Thatcher and Major, so it wasn't so much a reaction against a change Cameron made, rather a desire for the *status quo ante*, and not enough to call Cameron's direction into question.

As discussed below, such disagreements were often attributed far more significance than they deserved, and didn't represent serious party management issues for Cameron, because he was successful, and his message resonated far more than those who disagreed with him. Once again, the context made Cameron's job easier, and a few disagreements even helped his position. Perhaps the most obvious example of this are the frequent criticisms that came from Lord Tebbit. In fact, whilst his comments are a ubiquitous feature in any discussion on Cameron, they probably did as much to help Cameron as hinder him. In mistaking the popularity of Tebbit with the party faithful either as a sign he is representative of them, or has influence. These events gain a level of prominence they don't deserve, and in terms of influence, much like the criticisms aimed at Blair and New Labour prior to 1997 by figures like Jeremy Corbyn and Dennis Skinner; they also provided Cameron with a regular opportunity to show how he sought to distance himself from the policies of the 1980s, and reinforce the notion of party change and completion for PAH in new areas (see Dorey, 2007, pp.142-143; Denham and O'Hara 2007, p.186; Bale, 2008b, p.272).

The disagreements within the Labour Party also assisted Cameron in managing his own party. The growing splits and tension between the 'Blairites' and 'Brownites' grew as Blair continued as prime minister until June 2007, which meant for the first time in well over a decade, the speculation about a leader's position was directed at the Labour Party, and not the Conservatives (see, for example: BBC News, 2006).

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<sup>76</sup> As members we were also frequently told that the idea of more grammar schools was unacceptable, and the subtext was that it would reinforce a negative(old fashioned) image of what the Conservative Party considered a priorities. References would also be made to how many grammar schools Mrs Thatcher allowed to close, and how no new ones were opened during the 1980s.

Labour's internal and PAH problems also impacted on Conservative party management as they provided a boost for Conservative party morale. It also acted an incentive for the party to behave and focus its attacks on Labour. Most importantly, the problems the governing party was encountering encourages the opposition to think that they might be vulnerable, and gives hope of an improvement in the next election. The Conservatives claimed that this was really about 'old Labour' trying to displace 'New Labour' and revert away from 'Blairism': again, it was a similar attack to that which the Conservatives had faced for years, but could now use on Labour as a way of distancing the contemporary Labour Party from the positive image of competence and PAH that New Labour had. Labour also had troubles in the form of the 'Cash for Honour's inquiry, which although it ultimately cleared the party of any wrongdoing, left a taint, as concerns were increasingly raised about donations to the Labour Party, and likely hastened Blair's resignation (see Independent, 2007). Several Labour cabinet ministers also admitted affairs, which although having less impact than some similar events of the 1990s, weakened Labour's ability to attack the Conservatives record and to credibly attack the Conservatives' past (Woodward, 2007). A pair of 'Conservative bloggers' even wrote a book entitled "The Little Red Book of New Labour Sleaze" which in combination, whilst not dispelling lingering associations of sleaze and the Conservative Party, helped neutralize party political advantage from the issue (Dale and Fawkes, 2006). The increasing and inevitable problems of governing also made things more difficult for Labour. For example, early on there were the problems at the Home Office, with John Reid ultimately declaring it 'not fit for purpose' (Dorey, 2007, p. 141) and a later example could be Labour's decision to change the way the financial services sector was regulated and Alistair Darling's claim that the recession that hit in 2008 was the worst for 60 years, which Brown opposed (Watt, 2008). With this, the attention increasingly turned to scrutinizing the government's record, and whilst the Conservatives didn't escape scrutiny over the substance of Cameron's leadership, party unity and Cameron's competence allowed the focus to remain on Labour's failings (see Bochel, 2010, p. 4). These problems provided things for the Conservative front bench to attack, which is always good for party morale, and therefore management, as well as being good for attempts to discredit government competence, and contrast with the Conservative position.

Once Gordon Brown had succeeded Blair as Prime Minister there were moments when it looked as though Labour could secure a fourth term (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2010, pp.1-18). Brown had a formidable record as the longest serving chancellor of the modern era, who'd overseen a decade of the longest sustained (if not sustainable) boom of modern times, and early on enjoyed largely favourable media coverage (Grice, 2007; Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, p.407).

Brown enjoyed a honeymoon period in the months after he became leader, and two 'Brown Bounces' that saw both his poll ratings, and Labour's ratings rise. The favourable media coverage that he garnered also raised questions about both Cameron's leadership and the direction of the party (Bale, 2010, p.116). In the summer of 2007 Labour's lead in some polls topped 11 points after what was seen as Brown's competent handling of the terrorist attack on London, the foot and mouth outbreak, and the crisis at Northern Rock (BBC News, 2007a). Also that summer, Brown was pictured touring areas affected by flooding and thanking the emergency services, which was contrasted with Cameron's decision to proceed with a visit to Rwanda, which was widely criticised in the media, although he had visited some flooded areas before departing (Pflanz, 2007). Eventually a better general understanding of this prompted the blame to lie with Labour, and although at a short-term cost to Cameron, overall reinforced his changed image.

The changes to policy and direction are discussed below, but this period is believed to have led to "at least two" MPs writing to Sir Michael Spicer as chairman of the 1922 Committee to ask for a vote of confidence, although the fact that two MPs are dissatisfied with their leader is hardly unusual (see Kite, 2007). Ultimately, criticism of the government's planning and response to the floods would remove the focus from Cameron, but the Conservative position remained relatively perilous until the conference season (BBC News, 2007b). The rapidity with which the troubles mounted up for Gordon Brown, and the increasing questioning of his suitability for the 'top job' was remarkable. His speech to the Labour Conference was well received, but his visit to Afghanistan during the Conservative Conference which was seen as cynical electioneering, and contravened a convention of not trying to overshadow opponents conferences backfired badly (Sparrow, 2008). The

Conservatives had a good conference as well, and in particular Osborne's inheritance tax plans attracted favourable reaction, and in the face of slipping polls, Brown decided against an autumn election, and his claims that the polls hadn't been a factor in his decision were mocked (BBC News, 2007a).

The accusation of dithering was damaging to a prime minister who as chancellor was known as strong and 'iron like', but it also reinforced the idea that Labour was frightened of losing, even though it seemed likely that Labour could retain a majority<sup>77</sup>, albeit a reduced one. The idea that Labour thought they might lose could be used by Conservatives to claim that they had a genuine prospect of winning, which is good for party management, as well as being able to criticise Brown's competence. The media were replete with stories comparing Brown to former Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan, and questions about his leadership would grow. This would be the last period during which Labour led the Conservatives in the polls (UK Polling Report, 2010a). Brown enjoyed one further bounce during the global financial crisis of 2008, and once again Labour recovered in some polls as Brown was given credit for his and his government's handling of the financial crisis during the autumn of 2008 (Guardian, 2009). Labour's strategy became akin to that of Major's government in 1992: namely that they were the best party to get Britain through the economic troubles it faced, but by early 2009 the Conservatives had a large poll lead, and a Guardian/ICM poll showed the Conservative team leading Labour on the economy, although it was not a ringing endorsement and was not as large as Labour's lead in 1992 (King, 2001; Glover, 2009). Labour's problems with party management would worsen almost continuously, and several key Labour figures publicly expressed their concerns about Brown's leadership, further undermining the party's statecraft. Some even resigned in the hopes of prompting a leadership challenge (Hoskin, 2009).

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<sup>77</sup> The Ashcroft campaign group and strategy I attended was very apprehensive about the outcome of an October election, were one to be called. There was no sense that the Conservatives would win, just that the Labour majority would be reduced.

### 5.2.3 Tendencies

One of the significant features of Cameron's leadership of the party in opposition is how little factionalism there was. In part, this is because once Cameron had been chosen as leader, the 'modernizers' were now in charge, and the real test was to be how successful they would be, and how long it would last. But, the first years of Cameron's leadership of the party would see the more quiescent internal party management situation that had existed under Howard continue, despite the change in message and appearance that the party went through.

#### *Modernizers versus traditionalists*

Cameron drew considerable support from those of a 'modernizing' persuasion, but he also secured the backing of a significant number of those at the right-wing end of the party's spectrum. Indeed, it was a common refrain for those MPs to say "we are looking for someone to get us back into government and Cameron ticks all the boxes" (Kite, 2005). If anything, there was a degree of doubt about what Cameron really stood for. Whilst he was associated with those who wanted to change or modernize the party; there was also a sense that he was a 'good centre-right Conservative'. The Telegraph quoted a member of the right of centre Cornerstone group as saying "Cameron has made a big impression on key figures on the Right. He is much more socially Conservative than people think" (Kite, 2005).

Indeed the degree of obscurity about exactly what direction Cameron would take and the considerable honeymoon period he enjoyed would mitigate against any significant early factionalism affecting the party (Dorey, 2007). The Conservative Party's position in the polls improved, the party looked different (in particular its leadership looked younger) which was one of the key themes of the modernizers as they argued the party needed to look different in order to be taken seriously as a changed party (Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp. 132- 148). It has also been argued that the failure of the 2005 election campaign showed that offering tax cuts, especially limited tax cuts, had brought the party no discernible benefit, which weakened the case of those with a ubiquitous desire to see taxes lowered (Daley, 2005). However, Dorey also implies that that this view amongst

backbenchers was merely abeyant rather than extinguished. Whilst this may be true, a combination of strategy and political events have effectively kept tax cuts off the agenda until the time of writing, which has limited party divisions over this (see Dorey, 2007). Equally, any talk of compassionate conservatism, which did crop up at various points, didn't sound quite so threatening to the right of the party in the light of its usage in US Republican politics (O'Hara, 2007b, p. 254).

Of course, people like to quote criticism from the occasional right-winger, and there were still those who thought changing the party was unnecessary, famously and pithily encapsulated by Eric Forth<sup>78</sup>, shortly after Cameron took over as "I believe in lower taxes, grammar schools and big business, Mr Cameron. Am I still a Conservative?"<sup>79</sup> (Telegraph, 2006).

As in the previous periods considered in the earlier chapters, social issues continued to be a factor of party management after 2005, although, the position is reversed here with the leadership being seen as more socially liberal than the party. Cameron's strong support for civil partnerships, seen as reluctantly supported by the party in 2004 (and with a large number voting against) was most visibly outlined in his speech at the Conservative conference in 2006 received a mix reaction. In the Hall, the applause for Cameron's comment that "... we were right to support civil partnerships, and I'm proud of that" was somewhat stifled compared to that for the rest of the speech<sup>80</sup>.

Undoubtedly, many in the party doubted this policy, some on religious or conscience grounds, and others because they didn't see it as a vote winner, but there was little serious factionalism on this issue, and even if there were substantial numbers opposed to the measure, it had already been passed. It was also one of those symbolic issues, which was used to show the party had, and was

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<sup>78</sup> Forth was always an eccentric character, and his criticism may not have harmed Cameron's attempts to show that the party was changing. The Same is true of Tebbit, especially as he is seen as a protector of the Thatcherite torch.

<sup>79</sup> Sadly, Eric Forth died only a few months after this. Depriving us of an interesting commentary on the development of the Conservatives under Cameron.

<sup>80</sup> This author was there, along with some youngish friends I was grabbed by some party officials, and 'plonked' on the stage behind Cameron and we were arranged to present the image they were looking for. The room, in contrast to subsequent years, was not quite full, although it was vast. The age of attendees seemed to be changing as well, and unscientific observation appeared to show a greater proportion of younger members were present than had been in the years before. However, as Cameron repeated his support for civil partnerships, looking around the room, it was clear many were applauding because they felt obliged to, rather than because of any sense of agreement or conviction.



changing, and Cameron's stance on this, and his support for gay politicians has won support from atypical quarters for a Conservative leader (O'Hara, 2007b, pp. 218-21; Writer, 2009). Indeed, those who maybe crudely labelled as socially conservative have been subjected to a pincer movement, with an active LGB group<sup>81</sup> amongst the party membership on one side, and the leadership on the other side, limiting serious opposition to the leaderships policies on this. However, once in government rebellions and opposition from the backbenches inevitably receive more attention, and there are signs this will be the case on social issues for a Cameron government.

### *Europe*

Party divisions over Europe have been mixed during this period. As mentioned elsewhere, Cameron's pledge to withdraw the party's MEPs from the European Peoples' Party (EPP) grouping in the European Parliament was an important factor in helping him secure the leadership (Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp.149-158). It was something that was so obscure it seemed unlikely to bring the party additional supporters, but was designed to show Cameron's opposition to European Federalism, something the EPP generally supported, even though it is a centre-right grouping. The opposition to increasing EU federalism was widely held by the party's MPs and members, and this one proposal brought Cameron support from the more vocal and potentially awkward Eurosceptic MPs, although those more favourably disposed to the EU feared a loss of UK influence, they were in no position to argue for greater federalism (see Kirkup, 2010).

It took three and a half years for Cameron to honour the pledge to withdraw, and many in the party had resigned themselves to the possibility it wouldn't happen. At a 2008 conference Bruges Group fringe event, Nigel Farage, a guest speaker, offered anyone in the room a £10 bet that it would never happen, and only one person, in an admittedly Eurosceptic but well attended room, agreed to accept the bet<sup>82</sup>. Cameron has always claimed that the delay was largely due to negotiations with other parties in an attempt to form a new centre-right anti-federalist grouping, and timing (BBC News,

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<sup>81</sup> In recent years, they have hosted one of the largest set of fringe events at the party conference.

<sup>82</sup> This author was present when this happened, and there really was very little faith the pledge would be honoured, with 3 years having passed since Cameron promised to withdraw the party from the EPP. I'm not sure if Farage paid out. For a transcript certain to annoy Europhiles (Bruges Group, 2008).

2009). However, it is also possible he either didn't really want to honour the pledge once he'd reflected on it, because of a fear some MEPs might defect, or he may have kept it back as something to quieten the Eurosceptics if they did cause trouble at a later date (see Watt, 2010). Either way, it was an effective piece of party management because it was such a low-cost offering to potentially demanding Eurosceptics.

The aspect of Britain's relation with Europe that caused the Conservative Party greater problems was in relation the successor of the failed EU Constitution: the Treaty of Lisbon, designed to salvage some aspects of the proposed constitution, which had been rejected by the French and Dutch in favour of an 'amending treaty' (Watt and Wintour, 2009). It would return to haunt him, but in September 2007 Cameron had promised:

“Today, I will give this cast-iron guarantee: If I become PM a Conservative government will hold a referendum on any EU treaty that emerges from these negotiations. No treaty should be ratified without consulting the British people in a referendum”<sup>83</sup> (Cameron, 2007).

When it became obvious that the treaty would be ratified more easily, and quickly than the Conservative leadership, and many commentators had expected, they were faced with a problem as Labour announced that no referendum was required and Conservative attempts to force one failed<sup>84</sup> (BBC News, 2008b). Once it was realized that Lisbon would be ratified and subsequently was ratified, the Conservative position became confusing and vague as the prospect of coming to power and immediately becoming embroiled in a fight with Europe arose (Brogan, 2009). The referendum pledge was dropped, on the grounds that once the Lisbon Treaty had been ratified, unravelling it would be difficult, if not impossible although Cameron said he would not let "matters rest there" (Hawkins, 2009). There was disquiet and disappointment amongst Eurosceptics as it became clear there would be no referendum on the Treaty, but with an election coming the following spring, Cameron's promise to repatriate powers in the areas of legal rights, criminal justice, and social and

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<sup>83</sup> It's worth noting a further part of this statement: "The final reason we must have a vote is trust. Gordon Brown talks about "new" politics. But there's nothing "new" about breaking your promises to the British public. It's classic Labour. And it is the cancer that is eating away at trust in politics. Small wonder that so many people don't believe a word politicians ever say if they break their promises so casually. If you really want to signal you're a break from the past, Prime Minister, do the right thing – give the people the referendum you promised". (Cameron, 2007).

<sup>84</sup> Only three Conservative MPs voted with the government, claiming a referendum was unnecessary (BBC News, 2008b).

employment legislation which would go on to feature in the manifesto was enough to keep things surprisingly calm (Hannan, 2009; and see The Conservative Party, 2010b, p. 113).

Whilst it is usually argued that maintaining party unity on Europe after the election would be more difficult, and indeed it has been, this was always likely to be the case when a party actually has to govern, but unlike the 1990s, there are very few pro-Europeans. The real difficulty will be between the party leadership who even if they're Eurosceptic will fear the difficulties that altering Britain's relationship with Europe will present for party statecraft, and MPs who demand action on Europe regardless. At the time of writing, Conservative MPs are increasingly questioning the future of Britain's relationship with the EU, and several groupings have formed within the party around this theme (see for example: Fresh Start Project, 2011). Whilst there are few remaining pro-Europeans, there are plenty of MPs pragmatic enough to realize that whatever they think of the EU, renegotiation, and especially the possibility of withdrawal, would present enormous statecraft problems, and these would be compounded, or compound, the economic situation which seems likely to remain difficult for some time. In this, the government is assisted by being in coalition, which provides a reason (or an excuse) for inaction; and the seriousness of the economic situation, because it is an issue that dominates British politics, and allows the Conservative part of the coalition government to warn its MPs about becoming too fixated with Europe.

As the election grew closer, Conservative Party management remained relatively straightforward for several reasons. The first, and most important, was that the prospect of office seemed within reach. Whilst the leader of the opposition has relatively limited powers of patronage, the enticement of potential patronage is attractive to ambitious MPs, and party members; Cameron's strategy may not have been the main reason for this, but it was a necessary component. The second is related and stems from the Conservatives once again enjoying favourable coverage in the media and elite debate. It may not have been wholly convincing or successful, but as discussed below, the very fact they had shed some of the negative connotations of previous years raised morale. The third reason is that Cameron was fortunate in his opponents, especially becoming leader at the same time as

Labour's problems were mounting, particularly in terms of policy and party management. They had also recently replaced one leader who'd become an electoral burden with one who would become a positive millstone for Labour, just as the worst economic crisis for three generations hit Britain.

## **5.2 Strategy**

Under Hague, Duncan Smith, and Howard, the Conservative Party has been regarded as having failed in its strategy. Some have even argued that at times, the Conservative Party didn't even have a strategy (Bale, 2010). However, consideration of strategy is seen as important during David Cameron's time as leader of the Conservative Party, and in particular his 'decontamination strategy' for ridding the Conservative brand of its negative associations, appearance, and even some of its figures, has featured prominently in commentary. However, here it is argued that there is need for caution in attributing too much significance to a simple strategic plan, and especially in the inevitable academic interest in strategic consistency. Almost all political leaders pledge to change their party upon assuming the leadership, and in some ways the strategy pursued would remain similar to that pursued under by his predecessors. It is argued that rather than attributing too much causal significance to a decontamination strategy, the real interest is in the way Cameron mixed elements of traditional Conservative strategy, with the themes of modernization and change. It is also argued that concentrating on decontamination or modernization can be misleading, because the real overarching strategy was to return the party to an electable position- to improve the party's statecraft- decontamination (including modernization) was the means, not the ends of Cameron's statecraft. There is a subtle difference to be made, the over-arching importance of the desire to return the party to a position of electability helps us to understand why the decontamination strategy or modernization strategy was seen to, and sometimes criticised for, changing between 2005 and 2010.

The essential feature of a political strategy is that it is flexible, and capable of adaptation. Much like a military strategy, a political strategy rarely survives the first engagement intact (see Clausewitz, 2003, pp. 45- 53), and in a dynamic political environment, where there are unpredictable events, imperfect knowledge and opponents to compete with, this can have even greater saliency. As a

result, this chapter also emphasizes the importance of rhetoric for a party leader and strategy. To a party in opposition, rhetoric has numerous advantages, and some disadvantages, but in the absence of being able to legislate, it is important. It also serves as a tool of party management, and as a way of seeking to compete for political argument hegemony (PAH), as Bulpitt argued that a winning rhetoric was important in achieving PAH. In this way, for Cameron the rhetoric could be, and often was, as important for its symbolism, as it was as a sign of concrete intent to legislate. A mix of rhetoric designed to appeal to multiple constituencies is an established way of trying to appeal to the widest pool of support possible; but for Cameron, the strategy was also to use rhetoric to appeal to non Conservative and elite opinion formers, and the latter is just as Bulpitt had described a party should seek PAH.

In opposition, it is received wisdom not to announce too much detail of policy intention until an election is near, for fear of having it prematurely discredited or stolen, and also because of the need not to commit to a policy that might be outdated as a result of events or the passage of time before an election (see Fletcher, 2010). It is argued here that the same also applies to strategy- it should be seen as flexible and changing as time and events change, and this is what happened to strategy during this period. This section also argues that the importance to the party placed on preparing to govern was also a significant area of strategy, because it was always likely that the crucial test of Conservative Statecraft would be how it governed once in office. Only governing competently could cure the party of the lingering negative associations of the party's time in government during the 1990s.

As suggested above, to understand Cameron's strategy it is necessary to look beyond the autumn of 2005 and the Conservative leadership contest, that has been outlined in detail in party management, but it is also necessary to be wary of reading history backwards. One of the first actions of almost every leader of a party who takes over in less than ideal circumstances, is to seek to distance themselves from what has gone before, and from previous incumbents (see Evans, 2008, p.297). Of course, they have to be cautious about this, lest they alienate sections of their party, or look

disingenuous, as happened when Gordon Brown and to an extent John Major did when trying to distance themselves from their immediate predecessors.

From the beginning, there would be comparisons between Cameron and Blair (see amongst others Kerr, 2007, p.47; Finlayson, 2007, p.4; Evans, 2008, p.296; Heffernan 2008, p.294; McAnulla, 2010a, p.291). The comparisons weren't something that made the Cameron campaign excessively uncomfortable, but as will be discussed in the following analysis of strategy, and also later in the context of PAH, this comparison worked in two ways. Firstly, whilst Cameron's critics argued that the party shouldn't just 'ape' Blair, intending it as a veiled criticism, which for some it was; there was also the obvious implication that Cameron was being compared to someone who'd played a significant part in transforming a party languishing in opposition, and won three elections, with large majorities; something many Tories grudgingly admired (Gove, 2008; Forsyth, 2009). Secondly, it was also a useful way of demonstrating that the party was moving away from the Conservatism of the past, and showing acceptance of some of what had happened since 1997. But arguably the most important part of Cameron's campaign strategy was to look competent, and like a winner (O'Sullivan, 2006).

As the Conservatives were in the process of losing the 2005 election, those offering lessons for the party were abundant. Most highlighted the core vote or right wing nature of the campaign, those which took greater account of the context also highlighted it was the party itself, not necessarily their policies, that had a seriously deleterious effect on the party's performance, something known by the party (Ashcroft, 2005, p.110-112). Regardless of the lessons, the advice of supporters and critics alike was that the party needed to change, although exactly how was of course disputed (see Kellner, 2005, pp.329-332; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005, p.740; Sanders, 2006, pp.192-193; Ashcroft, 2005, p.111).

Despite most accounts suggesting Cameron was the first leader to understand this, it has been argued in the previous chapters that the two former leaders of the party understood this problem, but they

were unable remedy it due to varying combinations of the wider political situation, and their own strategic shortcomings, along with a failure to understand *how* to remedy the problem (see Green, 2010a, pp.668-699). The real difference was that Cameron was the first leader to have a strategy and context that enabled him to address some, if not all, of the problems the party needed to remedy in order to present themselves as having a credible statecraft alternative to Labour, and compete for office once again.

The long leadership contest allowed Cameron and his team time to think about strategic matters, and as an underdog, there was also a degree of freedom to be more radical than the front-runners, and whilst all candidates for the leadership promised to change the party, Cameron was clearly viewed as the one who wanted to change it the most (see for example Denham and Dorey, 2006, pp.38-39; Elliott and Hanning, 2007, pp.292-293; Green, 2010a, p.671). This space was important, because it allowed Cameron and his team a chance to think about statecraft matters that might not have been possible if they had been subject to greater media scrutiny and speculation from the start. This was further assisted by Cameron's previous profile, which had been low relative to his competitors, which meant he was less encumbered than those whose reputations were well established, and for whom a message of change is likely to seem less credible. The media, many of the party old guard, as well as academic and elite commentators, had been questioning the party's very purpose, facilitating the way for a more radical message to be heard, the contingency of those who failed to see the need for change, or who just wanted to carry on and wait for Labour to come unstuck had grown faint (Green, 2010a, p.669). Preparing the ground during this time was an important precursor to Cameron's leadership, as many party grandees were able to see an opportunity with Cameron to advance the party.

Cameron had to maintain links with the Conservative tradition and support base, whilst offering a different message, broadening the party's appeal, and amidst all this, appearing genuine in his intentions, although there were concerns over how genuine he was as he allowed the right to convince themselves he intended to be a "proper Tory". Having to appeal to all parts of the party

was a daunting prospect which has often been overlooked, and which had overwhelmed previous leaders (for contrasting views on this see Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009, pp.13-14; and also see Bevir, 2000, p.281). For example, in his 2005 conference speech Cameron was clearly linking 'old style' Conservative policy areas with what he would claim was a change of direction for the party, indeed parts of the message would sound similar to that exposed by Howard:

"Yes, we want to leave more money in your pocket, but we know the value of good public transport, too, so we'll share - that's right, we'll share - the fruits of economic growth between tax reduction and public services" (Cameron, 2006d).

It is also necessary to explore one further aspect of Cameron's leadership: namely the rapidity with which he sought to establish the narrative of change, even though some of the messages would be similar to previous Conservative positions. As already mentioned, the long leadership campaign allowed the candidates time to think in some detail about broad strategy, and Cameron made a considerable number of speeches to emphasise his plans to change what the party stood for, particularly on education (see Cameron, 2005a; Cameron, 2005b, Cameron, 2005c). However, whilst the message has received attention, it is also necessary to understand that the luxury of the way the contest panned out, allowing Cameron to focus more on the wider electorate, rather than just the party membership, and he sought to emphasise the 'change to win' message in an attempt to lock the party on such a course (see Cameron, 2005d). Cameron might not have used the line 'there is no alternative' but that was the message, and the personal, popular, and electoral mandate he received, although contingent upon success, was what was required in order to allow him the autonomy to benefit from a changing political landscape, and avoid abandoning the change agenda as previous leaders had been rapidly forced to. Rather than just receiving a democratic mandate from his party, which recent Conservative history had proven is no guarantee of continuing support, Cameron received what amounts to a mandate for his approach to competing for PAH, for his strategy and competence. His narrative of what the party needed to do to return to electability won support beyond the party membership, and maintaining that, and the improved prospect of achieving office would be crucial for sustaining party strategy.



Four specific aspects of Cameron's strategy in particular deserve attention here; the explicit effort to link the change agenda with winning, and the symbiotic relationship that was necessarily required between the two.<sup>85</sup> Firstly, that the party would 'modernize', a phrase which hadn't featured anywhere near as much amongst Cameron's predecessors, although Hague had talked about it but the message had become lost. Although what 'modernization' meant, or specifically means, remains debated and uncertain, the message was if the party modernized, it would win (see Denham and O'Hara, 2007a, pp. 167-190, for a discussion on modernization). The second is the much vaunted 'decontamination strategy' which was designed, apparently largely by the media's favourite Svengali figure, Steve Hilton, to improve the image and reputation of the party: a necessary step in order for people to re-examine what the Conservatives had to offer. The third is one that is often overlooked, and is the way Cameron and his team sought to both distance themselves from the negative aspects of recent Conservative history, but also emphasize the continuity- the latter is equally as important as the former. The fourth is directly related to both of the above, is that the Conservatives would not only seek to compete with Labour on areas in which it enjoyed PAH, but to do so on non-Conservative issues, and even well into and beyond what could be regarded as Labour policy areas (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, pp. 399-400).

Cameron's comments show he sought to distance himself from recent Conservative history and are well documented, especially his statement "that there is such a thing as society, it's just not the same as the state" which was seen as a riposte to the infamous, and often quoted (out of context) "there is no such thing as society" quote of Mrs Thatcher (Dorey, 2007, p.143; McAnulla, 2010a, p.290). As in the midst of Britain's recession, Cameron not only explicitly ruled out Thatcherite measures as being the answer to the problems the country faced, in reply to being asked "whether her [Thatcher's] controversial approach had been an effective medicine for the nation's fiscal ills [in the 1980s]". He replied: "I don't think it was, actually" (Watt, 2009). He even went further and said "we never in the 1980s actually managed to cut public spending" which for any other leader, or at any other recent time in the party's history would have been heretical; but it was used to suggest the

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<sup>85</sup> The relationship is noted as being symbiotic not a necessary evil.

party had moved on, had learnt from the past and understood the political context and would not, as Labour claimed, seek to return to 1980s style policies (see Laing, 2009 and see for example Dorey, 2007, pp.140-141; Denham and O'Hara, 2007, p. 186; McAnulla, 2010a, p.290 for discussions on Cameron's move away from Thatcherism). But rather than just a criticism of the Thatcher legacy, this statement could be seen to hint that Cameron thought cutting public spending was desirable, there is just enough ambiguity in Cameron's rhetoric to support these differing interpretations.

Of course, Hague and Howard had both tried to, or at least said they wished to distance themselves from the party's Thatcherite legacy, but this either backfired in or didn't appear genuine (Brown, 2005). Cameron was the first leader with the image, degree of plausibility, and the space caused by Mrs Thatcher's waning influence and weakening of Labour's attacks and own PAH position, to be able to do so (see Dorey 2007, p.143). A key part of this was the way Cameron balanced the message, mixing both references to more positive aspects associated with Thatcher, whilst distancing the party from some of the more negative aspects of Thatcherism (Dorey, 2007, pp.140-149; Evans, 2010a, p.326).

Whilst using rhetoric to detach the party from the cuts to public services and unemployment of the 1980s, he repeatedly praised Thatcher as a prime minister saying he would try to "emulate her courage, conviction and wisdom" (Prince, 2009).<sup>86</sup> In this way Cameron has sought, at different points in his leadership, to refer to 'compassionate Conservatism,' 'progressive Conservatism' and Mrs Thatcher (see for a discussion of this: Dorey, 2007, pp.142-143). Since becoming Prime Minister, he has continued with this approach, and doubtless his decision to rename the 'White Room' in Downing Street the 'Thatcher Room' is an example of its continued use (see Rawnsley, 2010a).

These measures are part of a strategy to change what the electorate believe the party stand for, whilst balancing the need to retain or reaffirm support from the more positive aspects of the party's recent

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<sup>86</sup> And see Evans (2010, p. 327) for an analysis of the influences of approach rhetoric and style of Mrs Thatcher on Cameron.

history, which is a standard approach for parties trying to change what they stands for (see Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009, pp.11-17 for discussion in relation to New Labour). This was also part of Cameron's repeated attempts to refute any suggestion that he was an ideologically driven politician, and a direct attempt to counter accusations of 'Thatcherism owning him', saying "As a Conservative, I'm naturally sceptical of embracing anyone's theory or ideology" (Hutton and Cameron, 2009; Frith, 2009). As has already been suggested, Cameron was able to do this more successfully than his predecessors because of the more favourable environment in which he operated, something that this chapter will return to.

### **5.3.1 Brand Decontamination**

Cameron's strategy has generally become known as 'brand decontamination' although different authors associate this notion with different policy areas. Distancing himself and his party from previous incarnations of 'conservatism' is a standard process for any new party leader; even Gordon Brown tried such a tactic when he succeeded Tony Blair (Brown, 2007). This should be borne in mind, and serve as a cautionary note against trying to divine, in this case, what is often regarded as a repudiation of Thatcherism, an acceptance of a one-nation ideology or a desire to copy Labour as the rhetoric may not be supported by the action or policy that follows.

The general consensus is that there has been a conscious effort by Cameron and his team to improve perceptions of the party. Several arguments are worthy of attention here. The first is that Cameron's rhetoric on change is not necessarily a concrete indication of a desire to change the party accordingly. For example, Bale (2008, p.178) accuses Cameron of U-turns based on the way he moved away from the sentiments expressed in his earlier statements. However, this author would argue that you cannot always assume a politician's rhetoric can or should be taken as a firm pledge or statement of intention.

For Cameron, the purpose of brand decontamination is to persuade people to look again at the party, to make them think the party has changed, or to overcome any kind of phobia of the Conservative

Party (Quinn, 2008, p.193), then the rhetoric is likely to be just as, if not more important, than policy, especially for a party in opposition who can implement nothing (Letwin, 2009, p.9). By getting people to look again at the party, Cameron hoped to attract a wide body of support, as an effort to compete for PAH and bolstering support for his claims and actions to change the Conservative Party.

Little if any consideration is given to the fact that Cameron, in the space of a few months, rose from being a low ranking member of Michael Howard's team, to the Leader of the Opposition (Denham and Dorey, 2006, p.36). Whilst it is still argued that Cameron had developed, and was elected, largely on the basis of his formulation of how the Conservatives could win the next general election, despite the long leadership campaign, he, as with all leaders will be 'learning on the job' as they establish themselves as leader and adapt to the position and to events and the statecraft of other parties with which they have to compete. Once again, to claim or imply that the changes to the party's rhetoric, message and policy are largely due to the ideology of the right of the party merely distracts from a more thorough investigation of causation.

The demands of the right may contribute to the selection and balance of the actual form of any changes Cameron makes, but this does not mean that they cause them. Changes can be attributed to the changing political circumstances the party is trying to address, a constant assessment of how the party's message is being received by the electorate and media, and to whether or not something more suitable is required to compete for PAH and facilitate party management. The search for strict consistency over five years of political development in opposition, especially as the period has witnessed events of preponderant proportions is likely to be an unrewarding one, unless it is viewed through of the lens of tracing its development in light of the imperatives of the whole range of statecraft demands (see discussion of Party's reaction to Cameron's change in Bale, Hampshire and Partos 2011, p.401 and for discussion of new Labour see Powell, 2010, pp.165-171).

The other component of brand decontamination is usually held to be Cameron's adoption of 'green issues' (Carter, 2009). However, it also has wider implications than decontamination alone because it was so markedly different from anything people expected from the Conservatives that it served, along with other pronouncements, to show how much the party had changed, help to lock the party onto a different path and compete for PAH by using a non-traditional Conservative policy area. It also allowed Cameron to colonize an area of British politics that had not previously featured prominently, secure a poll lead over Labour, and served to reinforce his message to some of his sceptics, that there was electoral potential in non-traditional policy areas (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, pp. 399-400). The strategic element of the green agenda is also demonstrated in the way his references to it were reduced, though by no means stopped, due to the onset of the recession (see Cameron, 2009c). As the wider party political environment shifted, competing for PAH in other areas became more important, particularly on economic matters, and strategy had to try to reflect this, despite the uncertainty it brought.

Cameron's immediate and firm adoption and championing of unexpected policy areas was also undertaken to capitalize on the relatively benevolent circumstances he enjoyed as the NRG for the government became less benign. It was crucial for him to do this at the start of his leadership and to be clear on direction he wanted policy to take in general terms. The combination of a Prime Minister whose popularity was waning, and increasing signs that Labour hadn't been able to deliver all it had promised created an opportunity for the Conservatives (Bale, 2009, p.226).. there was also a growing recognition within his party that change was required (although not a consensus about what they meant) and his strong personal mandate, charisma and attributes, allowed him to rapidly set the party on a different path far more comprehensively than his immediate predecessors (Bale, 2008a, pp.227-8). It also helped that Cameron was regarded as being a Eurosceptic <sup>87</sup> and just sufficiently of the centre-right to be given a chance by the vocal element of the Conservative right; whilst at the same time being able to maintain the trust of those more centrist party members. Of course, what follows from this is the inevitable debate about the extent of genuine commitment

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<sup>87</sup> Although the extent of this has been questioned (see for example Forsyth, 2011). Certainly within the party membership events I have attended, Cameron seems to have been to maintain his Euro-sceptic credentials.

Cameron and his party had to this agenda, especially in light of the frequent criticism of the lack of concrete policy to reinforce the rhetoric, but that's perhaps better than being regarded as obsessed with 'core vote' issues the party previously had been.

Once again, this misses the strategic aspect of Cameron's statecraft. The re-branding of the party *had to come before new policies were devised*, partly because such an exercise is hardly going to happen quickly, but also because they couldn't have been certain exactly where it would lead and they had no intention of devising policy that would peg them to a period before it had time to take effect (see Bale, 2011a, p.117). A further, and obvious problem is that any early policies would be vulnerable to being stolen or discredited by their opponents, for little benefit, see below for more details (Dorey, 2007, p.142; Bale, 2010, p.119). It is also likely that concrete policy announcements would be more likely to complicate party management, because they provide something rather more substantive for internal opposition to coalesce around, than rhetoric alone, which can more easily be dropped or amended according to the reaction it receives.

Furthermore, much as his opponents have attacked the argument, Cameron could claim with some justification as the economic crisis that later hit would prove, that it would have been foolish to frame specific policies years ahead of a general election when little could be known about future circumstances (see O'Hara, 2007b, p. 230). Instead, he concentrated on broad statements of principle, mainly relating to attempts to associate the party with those policy issues that were important to the electorate, but upon which they had limited credibility. The most obvious example of this is the way he's sought to label the Conservatives as the party of the NHS, education and public services more generally (see for example Cameron, 2008a). In this regard, his family's personal and frequent use of the NHS has enhanced his credibility on the issue, and this in turn has countered Labour's previously successful electoral strategy of labelling the Conservatives as the party of cuts and neglect of public services (see Cowley & Green, 2005, pp.59- 61).

The frequent claim that the party had no policy, or didn't know what it stood for was a double edged sword: whilst it had the potential to be damaging to Cameron and his team, it was harder for Labour to formulate a way of attacking them and it also served to show they had changed, even if it made it harder to ascertain exactly how. The six policy groups that Cameron established were never intended to simply formulate a set of policies that could be published quickly and form the basis of the party's campaign (Letwin, 2009, p.9). It could be argued that these groups represent the most systematic policy process the party has undertaken, it is certainly comparable with the efforts that went into Putting Britain Right Ahead in the 1960s and the Conservative Charters of the late 1940s (see Ramsden, 1995, pp.93-97; Ramsden, 1998, pp.390- 391). Regardless of what would result from these policy reviews, their relatively high profile nature (much higher than, for example Duncan Smith's policy review) and the prominent Conservative figures who led them, meant that this received attention and reinforced the impression of a party seeking to change, thereby bolstering the party's ability to compete for PAH credibility.

Direct historical comparisons are always difficult, and can only be mentioned all too briefly here, yet it is interesting to note how the review in the 1960s led to a significant public restatement of principle and policy prior to the 1966 general election, which the Conservatives lost, and then seemed to constrain the party by tying it to a set of electorally discredited proposals, which it found difficult to adapt over the following years (Ramsden, 1998, p.391).

One of the many interesting features of Butler's policy review of the 1940s is the way it was controlled. In a phrase associated with Butler (see Butler, 1971), a notion of politics being the 'art of the possible' permeated the process. The primary concern was formulating policy that addressed the electoral problems that the party faced, and that they could credibly present and claim to implement (Ramsden, 1995, p.159). It is also worth noting the way Butler resisted premature calls for policies to be announced, from their opponents and supporters. This consequently attracted criticism from people who claimed they didn't 'know what the party stood for' and from those who asserted the lack of policy amounted to an admission that they intended merely to revert to the kind

of policies they had previously pursued, somewhat like Cameron has faced in recent, and different times<sup>88</sup> (see Ramsden, 1995).

Indeed Cameron has stated that he has been in and around the Conservative Party, and been able to witness the damage it has inflicted on itself over Europe and similar issues (see Cameron and Jones, 2008, p.255). The desire to learn from this, and to seek to avoid allowing the repetition of such damage is an essential component of his leadership; indeed perhaps it could be argued that party leaders often strive to learn from, and avoid making the mistakes of their predecessors as crucial element in crafting their statecraft.

### **5.3.2 Implementation**

One further aspect of Cameron's strategy that is also often overlooked is the planning for implementation that went on under the direction of Francis Maude, Oliver Letwin and other shadow cabinet members (Elliott and Hanning, 2007, pp.292-293). Whilst it was largely kept from view, for the obvious reasons that it would at best look distinctly complacent to be planning for office well before a general election, it was an important part of the party's statecraft. Again, this was in part a lesson of the past, because it was believed Cameron was keen to avoid the difficulties of transition from opposition to office which were supposed to have been difficult for the post 1997 Labour government (Kinnock, 2011, pp.113-132). However, it wasn't just designed to avoid a problem that had supposedly affected the Labour Party, it also serves an important statecraft function, by (if it works) quickly establishing a governing competence, and if this is achieved it can help address the lingering negative associations from the previous Conservative government, and doubts about how Cameron's Conservatives would actually govern.

Implementation is also a feature of the statecraft approach- being a central aspect of competence as well as PAH, because, as mentioned above, the 'U-turn' has negative connotations, and outright failure to implement a policy agenda is often very damaging (Bale, 2008a, p.178). It can also

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<sup>88</sup> The Conservative Advisory Committee on Policy discussed this problem during the 1940s, and the Party's Agents' Journal also referred to it. See for example, Conservative Agents' Journal (January 1945 p. 3).



provide a linkage between Howard's strategy of the previous period of explicit accountability, in theory allowing a Conservative government to rapidly begin implementing programmes it could be judged on, which if successful should boost the party, and in the event of a hung parliament and minority government, which was a plausible outcome and provide a base which could allow the party to fight a quick follow up election but also reinforce the party's image (see Sanders, 2006, p.193; Moon, 2010, p.25).

The outcome of the 2010 election has shown the advantages and the dangers of such planning. Whilst it is often argued that the level of thought the Conservatives had given to policy and implementation was advantageous in the coalition negotiations, it has also brought difficulties, most notably because of Health Secretary Andrew Lansley's largely undisclosed, but quickly unveiled plans to reform the NHS, which rapidly ran into considerable trouble and caused wider problems for the government (see Campbell, 2011). In this area at least it seems likely that plans formulated in opposition, for rapid implementation in office, have had an unexpected and deleterious impact on statecraft, and in particular PAH and competence, as the government's policies have run into considerable opposition. Whilst it looks as though Lansley will have to amend his proposals, were one being generous, it might still be possible to argue that the best time to attempt such plans is at the start of a government, with the freedom and mandate it offers, as it can become more difficult later on<sup>89</sup> (Denham and O'Hara, 2007b, p.409).

The decision to participate in a series of Leaders' debates in 2010 is often criticised because the argument is that it allowed Nick Clegg a platform that a third party could usually only dream of (see for example Pattie and Johnston, 2011, p.152). Despite warnings from several quarters, it certainly seems as though Cameron and his team thought it would be a format that suited him, and presumably based on his own skills and competence at presentation which would contrast with

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<sup>89</sup> Of course, it is also possible in statecraft terms to argue the reverse, and that such proposals have the potential to complicate the early stages of a government, damaging its statecraft and ability to do other things. It seems likely that much of the controversy around the health reforms caught both Lansley, and Cameron by surprise, thereby further emphasizing the potential dangers of making assumptions about legislative proposals.

Brown's often awkward public performances.<sup>90</sup> At first, it seemed as though this might backfire spectacularly as it boosted Clegg's personal and party ratings as his 'anti-politics politics' message was well received, and it detracted from Cameron's, as he encountered the perils of being the favourite to do well in such a format (Ashcroft, 2011, p.83; Dutton and Shipley, 2011, p.3).

However, in subsequent debates, Cameron performed somewhat better, and the freshness factor of Nick Clegg was less significant now he was coming under more detailed scrutiny, especially from the Conservative supporting press (Wintour and Curtis, 2010; Pattie & Johnston, 2011, p.152). The final analysis of the impact of the debates is still contested. Most Conservative opinion, and most opinion in general, seems to believe that it weakened Cameron, and there was a falling away of Conservative support, even if the Liberal Democrats didn't appear to benefit on polling day (see various including Ashcroft, 2010, p.118; Dutton and Shipley, 2010, p.3; Montgomerie, 2010, p.6; Roberts, 2010). The counter argument is that the attention Nick Clegg received also served to distract commentators and the electorate from the economic debate and Labour's attacks and lingering doubts about the Conservatives' plans, although it is difficult to disentangle that from the wider significance (Ashcroft, 2010, p.120; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2010, pp.157-191). Whilst the impact of the leadership debates has been regarded as contributing to the polling position of the Conservatives dropping from 39% to 36% during the course of the campaign, whilst Labour's improved slightly (see Green, 2010a, p.684), it's also important to consider that it's not unusual for a government to see a recovery in such circumstances as the 'better the devil you know' factor comes into consideration (see Denver, 2010, p.591-593).

The specifics of the Conservatives' election strategy have also received much criticism, both during the campaign, and especially upon the result. The argument is usually that the strategy was unclear, and underdeveloped, which is perhaps strange considering the arguments already presented about the strategic nature of the Cameron project. Indeed it is difficult to outline a specific election strategy, and there was not one overarching strategy upon which the Conservatives campaign was

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<sup>90</sup> For a summary of the dangers such a format poses to the front-runner see Roberts (2010).

based leading to many people to concentrate on the Big Society message, although it is argued this isn't a strategy in its own right (see Green, 2010a pp. 684-685). The Big Society will be discussed in more detail below.

Four themes of the Conservatives strategy are identifiable, two of which featured throughout Cameron's leadership of the party. The first, which is an almost ubiquitous feature of opposition parties in elections where there is a prospect of changing the government, was that of change, and in particular, 'it's time for change' (Cameron, 2005d). The manifesto had various sections on changing society, and changing the economy and politics. The 'battle of the posters' was also a feature of the campaign, which went interactive, perhaps became most associated with the 'fire up the Quattro, it's time for change' image (see Ashcroft, 2010, p.1). The second was to pin the blame for Britain's economic position onto Labour, and Gordon Brown in particular, whilst Brown and Labour tried to counter this by shifting the blame onto 'the feckless bankers' (see Dorey, 2010, p. 407). The third aspect of the party's strategy related to the way it targeted seats, and in particular the decision to concentrate the targeting on Liberal Democrat marginals (Ashcroft, 2010, p.100). A fourth element of the strategy was also to concentrate on Cameron, with the thinking being that he was the party's greatest electoral asset (after Brown) (Denham and Dorey, 2006, p.41).

It is the interaction of these various themes and their impact, or failure that is of importance here. The concentration on change, as already mentioned, is a feature of many election campaigns; after all, it's rather difficult to dispute when a country faces a difficult situation. However, to an extent, it is also dependent upon the Conservatives' ability to attribute the blame for the country's problem on Labour, something which they were only partially successful in achieving, and a position that the coalition has tried to re-infer, again with only partial success (Fox, 2010, p.609).

However, the change message can also have the reverse impact to that which the Conservatives intended, because it also raises the question of what they would be voting to change to. It has been argued that whilst the message of 'change' was successful after 2005, it also befogged the remaining

doubts about the Conservative Party as a whole, as it also raised questions (which weren't all answered) over what exactly the Conservatives had changed to, and this inevitably become more of a concern as the election approached (Ashcroft, 2010, p.109). That argument suggests a wider failure of the party's decontamination strategy, but also perhaps a failure to seek to reassure people about the Conservative plans during the election. It is also likely that doubts about exactly how the Conservatives would govern, whether they could govern as competently as New Labour had been regarded as having done, and how differently they would govern to their previous periods in office, would remain until dispelled or confirmed by being in office. Much as in the past, doubts are likely to remain about exactly a party would govern if elected, and ultimate this can only be answered by a party being in office (see for example Jeffreys, 2005).

The extent to which the Conservatives attacked Labour and Brown during the campaign has also been debated, but again, there are two opposing positions, with some claiming they did so excessively, with the consequence that is contributed to the doubts just mentioned about how much they would seek to change, if elected (Ashcroft, 2010, p.109). To others, the Conservatives didn't attack Labour enough, and consequently let Labour 'off the hook' and could have capitalized more had they been more aggressive (Montgomerie, 2010, p. 6). It is a difficult position to attempt to resolve, but the evidence that there remained concerns about what the Conservatives stood for indicates that attacking Labour more may have been counterproductive, especially as Labour, and Brown in particular, seemed able to undermine their own position frequently (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2010, p.173-176). It is also likely that increased attacks on Labour would have led to more questions about what the Conservatives would do instead, it was Brown's trademark response at Prime Ministers Questions<sup>91</sup>, and all parties were cautious about answering this question in detail, because of the obvious dangers of explaining the consequences of deficit reduction on some sectors of the electorate. In this areas, the complexity of the interaction of strategy and the competition for PAH become very complicated. Attacking rival parties, and in this case the government, is good for party morale, and helps a party to compete for PAH and competence by trying to discredit the

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<sup>91</sup> Since 2010 it has become Cameron's trademark response at Prime Ministers Question Time (see for example Hansard, 2008).

government or its policies. However, equally, going too far can raise doubts about the extent of change that may result from a change of government, and in the case here, this could negatively affect the Conservatives' claims to be trusted on issues like the NHS and economy.

Also related to this was the decision to make David Cameron the focus of the Conservative campaign, because he was the embodiment of the changed party, and it is far from unusual for the leaders of opposition parties to be the focus of attention, especially when that party has been out of power for a long time, and has few other prominent figures (Fletcher, 2011, pp.5-38). It is also a safe strategy, designed to limit the scope for campaigning errors, and highlighted the contrast between Cameron and Brown, which it was believed would help the Conservatives more generally. Whilst the importance of the leadership can be overstated, it is a central aspect of British general election campaigns, and unavoidably so when there are also leadership debates (see Roberts, 2010).

Finally, the decision to concentrate a significant amount of the party's campaign operation on Liberal Democrat marginals is a mirror image of the strategy they ran against the Conservatives in 2005 (see Carlin and Sapstead, 2005). There seem to have been three principle reasons behind this, namely: they considered it most likely they could naturally attract Liberal Democrat inclined floating voters; prior to the election it was widely anticipated that the Liberal Democrat's performance in 2005 had been inflated by their positions relating to tuition top-up fees and Iraq, both of which were less salient; and thirdly, there was a degree of complacency about Labour marginals, and they steadily extended targets to include ever safer seats (Ashcroft, 2010, pp.78-79). Of course, the Conservative strategists could not have foreseen in advance the effect of the leadership debates on the campaign, or 'anti-politician mood', and given the number and location of many of the Liberal-Conservative marginals, the strategy is understandable. The swing from the to the Conservatives in targeted seats was 2.9% from the Liberal Democrats, compared to 6.2% from Labour, which indicates it was effective, but significantly less so in Liberal Democrat marginals (see Ashcroft, 2010, pp.78-79 and 97-98).

In summary, the overarching strategy was to win office. Themes of change and preparations for implementation were important, as was Cameron himself as he played a key part in updating the party's image. Whilst the strategy clearly didn't succeed in seeing the party secure a majority in 2010, it did lead to them gaining office as part of a coalition. A party's strategy cannot be viewed in isolation, and as argued in this section, the fact that the NRG had deteriorated, and that the government was encountering problems, does not automatically mean another party should win. It has also been argued that the negative associations the Conservatives were still encumbered with from the 1990s, and the remaining doubts about how competently a Conservative government could govern could only finally be dispelled or reconfirmed by being in government- no strategy alone could do this. For some it will be seen as an excuse, for others a justification of Cameron's strategy, but a gain of 97 seats is uncommon in British general elections, the electoral arithmetic was not favourable to the Conservatives and it would represent the largest Conservative gain of seats since 1931 (Ashcroft, 2010, p.72; Green, 2010a, p.667),

## **5.4 Political Argument Hegemony**

This section moves on to examine the Conservative political argument hegemony (PAH) position between 2005 and 2010. The very fact that the Conservatives failed to win a majority in the election in 2010 is a sign that they weren't wholly able to establish an easy predominance of PAH. Despite this, it is argued that the Conservative PAH position had improved significantly since 2005, but also that it had fluctuated over the five year period considered here. As discussed, a key part of the Conservative strategy at this time was developed to bring support from non-traditional, and elite quarters and to make the Conservatives a credible alternative government, and this in essence, is the strategy the party used to compete for PAH. The lessons of the recent Conservative history in opposition, and failure at successive general elections was believed to be that better leadership and greater party unity was not enough to win. What was required was to make the Conservative Party message credible again, and most importantly, to be able to credibly make the case that the Tory Party of 2005 onwards had changed from that of the 1990s (or even pre-1997).

Cameron also sought PAH for the purposes of party management, because a leader claiming to change a party is greatly assisted if he can claim that the arguments he is presenting are credible and widely supported by the electorate and media. This reassures MPs and party members that what he is doing might be a winning formula which is the most important part of party management. The fact that the Conservative PAH position improved rapidly after Cameron became leader would be a crucial factor in his future party management, maintaining his strategy and appearing competent.

This section also examines some of the major events that would impact on party statecraft and PAH. This includes the arrival of Gordon Brown as Labour leader and the problems the government encountered largely as a result of the economic downturn, the effects of which would come to dominate British party politics until the election. The internal problems facing Labour would ultimately assist Conservative statecraft, although there were times when this seemed unlikely to be the case. However, the recession would also create statecraft and PAH problems for the Conservatives, because it would change the tone and emphasis of political debate. The approach to competing for PAH prior to the economic downturn, needed to adapt for a party political environment dominated by the search for solutions to the country's economic problems.

In this respect the Conservative statecraft did not secure a dominant PAH position, and indeed PAH was complicated by a number of factors. It is argued that it was harder for the Conservatives to compete for PAH on economic matters. In part, this is because until 2007 Labour's economic record seemed strong, and memories of the 1990s suggested that the Conservative Party's management of the economy were not particularly positive. But it is also an area of disparity between the governing party and opposition party, because there is a great uncertainty about how an opposition party's economic policy would change things if implemented. Furthermore, because opposition parties are usually reluctant to announce very much policy detail or even direction too early, the government also has an advantage, even if things are not going well, because it can show what it's doing to improve things, which an opposition party can find more difficult, or be more reluctant to do. This was certainly a factor in Gordon Brown's frequent response to Cameron's

attacks on the government at PMQs, he would list what the government were doing to improve things, and then highlight the lack of, or danger of, Conservative policies (see, for example Brown, 2010). This changing political environment was also a factor in hampering what has been considered David Cameron's attempt at a 'Big Idea' the Big Society. Whilst it has been poorly outlined by the party, with little detail despite multiple 're-launches' opponents have been partially successful in portraying it as a way of 'dressing-up' or justifying cuts, and it is a sign of PAH failure that this message has proven more credible than the Conservative message that this represents a genuine attempt to deal with the country's social problems.

In the past governing parties have been able to retain office despite a worsening of the economy during their tenure either because they have previously built up a reputation for credibility, or because their strategy has convinced the electorate that they are best placed to improve things- a 'better the devil you know' strategy. This would be a factor in the Conservatives failure to establish PAH dominance under Cameron, although as discussed in the last section, this was likely to be difficult to achieve for the Conservatives, given the remaining associations of Cameron's Conservatives with previous Conservative governments, and this would only be finally removed (or reinforced) by governing competently.

The position of the Conservative Party in the media changed quickly after 2005, although this certainly isn't to suggest that it was widely and consistently supportive, the coverage the party received was considerably more favourable than it had been for many years (Bale 2009, p.224; Kerr, 2007, p.46). Although it didn't secure the formal support of The Sun until 29<sup>th</sup> September 2009, with the headline "Labour's lost it", it had been leaning that way for sometime before, as was The Times, which ultimately supported the Conservatives in the election. The Telegraph and The Daily Mail were often critical of some aspects of Cameron's agenda, but despite the not infrequently critical editorial line, remained broadly supportive (Bale, 2009, p.224). Whilst the notion of PAH as a concept goes beyond media support, the extent to which much of the media, and a number of prominent columnists shifted to provide favourable coverage of the Conservatives, and Cameron in



particular was a strong indicator that for the first time, they were competing for PAH. At the same time, the support for Labour was diminishing, and in particular, after a short honeymoon, there would be a precipitous deterioration in the relationship Gordon Brown had with the media (Price, 2010). This would aid party management because it was seen as an endorsement of Cameron's leadership, and the very fact that the media took this stance, boosts the party's credibility and claims to be a competent alternative government.

Indeed, as this thesis is being completed the extent to which parties make efforts to court newspapers, and in particular, the News International titles is the subject of much scrutiny. Cameron's use of counter (Conservative) intuitive policy issues such as 'green agenda' and support for civil partnerships also drew favourable coverage from non-Conservative quarters, although doubts about its authenticity did remain and negative comments also ensued (Kerr, 2007, pp.46-47). The extent to which the changes in the Conservative Party earned this support, or whether the papers were merely following the public mood and disenchantment with Labour will always be debated, suffice to say there was a shift, and it helped morale and Cameron's autonomy, and re-enforced the notion that the party had changed, if nothing else (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, p.407).

Consideration must also be given to how the changed, and changing political context affected the way Cameron, and his party was viewed when it made mistakes. For example, Hague was ridiculed, and despite rehabilitation, still hasn't completely escaped the mockery that he received after wearing his baseball cap (Bale, 2009, p.225); yet Cameron was pictured cycling to Westminster, with a chauffeur driven car carrying his shoes and work following him- and it's far less damaging (see Bale, 2009, p.228). Whilst this is partly because the Conservatives were viewed more favourably, it's also possible that Cameron's critics found it difficult to attack this sort of occurrence, because it's a 'gaffe' made whilst pursuing a counter intuitive idea to what was traditionally regarded as

Conservative, which appealed to his critics<sup>92</sup>. It certainly meant that Cameron had a greater margin for error than his predecessors had.

However, it's not just with relation to the media that the Conservative position improved. Cameron's strategy, rhetoric and the policy review process led by Letwin, was designed to attract wider elite interest in what the party had to offer. According to Bale, the party's emphasis was on "re-establishing contact with people that the Tory Party hadn't been in serious contact with for years [including] academics, think tanks, pressure groups and practitioners" and one could add those who wear 'hoodies' (Bale, 2010, p.119). This achieved more success in some areas than others. In particular the party's support for foreign aid attracted some support from Bob Geldof, and working with, supporting or contributing to some specific Conservative policy areas was no longer seen as an act of career suicide (see Priol, 2006; d'Ancona, 2006; Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, pp.399-400 for wider discussion). D'Ancona (2006) describes Geldoff's involvement as being important because "it suggests that the Tories are not a bunch of losers anymore". Indeed, foreign aid would be a cornerstone of the strategy to change people's perception of the party. It is a relatively low risk and low-cost<sup>93</sup> way of championing an issue that has increased in prominence, that no one party has 'colonized' exclusively, especially since Clare Short's time as international development secretary, and Cameron made it a high profile issue right from the early stages in the leadership contest:

"And when we talk about foreign affairs, we don't just stand up for Gibraltar and Zimbabwe, but for the people of Darfur and sub-Saharan Africa who are living on less than a dollar a day and getting poorer while we are getting richer" (Cameron, 2005d).

It might not have brought automatic support, especially from some sections of the Conservative Party, but it was certainly a conspicuously atypical Conservative policy, that could be used to show how the party had changed.

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<sup>92</sup> Although Hague's ride on a log flume might not be universally regarded as a traditional Tory activity... The context is crucial.

<sup>93</sup> Whilst the 0.7% of GDP aspiration for foreign aid might be a significant sum of money, it's far smaller than many of the other departmental budgets.

### 5.4.1 The Big Society

One area of PAH that has not yet established itself, despite several [re] launches during Cameron's leadership, is The Big Society. Cameron mentioned the idea at the 2009 conference by talking about Big Government (Cameron, 2009a), and later that year in the Hugo Young Lecture (2009b), but little more was made of it until 2010 when he said:

"Throughout the past four and a half years, I have consistently argued for, and developed policies to bring about, a shift from state to society in tackling our most stubborn social problems. Big society - that's not just two words It is a guiding philosophy - a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control...

...It includes a whole set of unifying approaches - breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods, making government more accountable....

...And it's the thread that runs consistently through our whole policy programme - our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics" (Cameron, 2010a).

Cameron did not specify very much detail in his speeches referred to above, indeed, it is usually argued that one of the problems with the Big Society message is that the specifics haven't been gone into sufficiently for the idea to be properly understood (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011; IPSOS Mori, 2010a). However, it was clearly an attempt to provide a theme which covered a number of areas, mixing traditional Conservative concerns about social responsibility and liberal ideas relating to a smaller state (Montgomerie, 2010 p.7). The Big Society has been also criticised by the left who claim it is a pseudonym for cutting public services, its proponents have found it difficult to sell on the doorstep, and it hasn't fared well in poll testing (see Montgomerie, 2010, p.8; Smith, 2010, p.829). It could perhaps be argued that the idea of the Big Society can be linked back to an older High Tory<sup>94</sup> view of politics, something supported by the Cabinet Office website, which ties the Big Society in with the party's localism agenda, and the process of devolving more decision making powers to local bodies (see Cabinet Office, 2010; Smith 2010, p.829). Cameron and his team have also been keen on 'social action projects' since shortly after assuming the leadership, and

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<sup>94</sup> Certainly in my experience of discussing the big Society idea with rural Tories, to them it just seems like a simple restatement of how things should be...

candidates were encouraged to set up and particulate in such activates, and these remain a part of the Big Society agenda according to the Cabinet Office (2010).

It is also possible that the Big Society is an idea given more prominence by both sides than it properly deserves. Many of the themes it encompasses, as outlined by Cameron above, fall within an established Conservative tradition, but in an attempt to find a theme, perhaps similar to Labour's third way, Cameron sought to slogan-ize it (see McAnulla, 2010a, p.286). However, regardless of what it stands for, and this author is inclined to agree with those who say it's not an inherently negative concept, it is just not an election or campaign slogan that resonates, and in the absence of an attempt to provide the substance behind the slogan, it has failed to secure PAH.

#### **5.4.2 Party political factors**

One aspect of PAH that attracts an overly inflated level of scrutiny is the impact of Cameron's background, and the background of several of his leadership team, but it is argued here it had relatively little impact so far. However, it may have a greater impact in light of the country's economic problems, if his background makes him seem out of touch with ordinary voters and this notion cannot be countered it could prove damaging. Despite this, rarely is an article written without a reference to his affluent background and Etonian education, but Labour's tactics of using class based attacks on Cameron, and other Conservatives were a failure, especially in the Crewe and Nantwich by-election (Porter, 2009). Whilst the issue wasn't neutralized when Cameron tried to address it, Labour and a number of the remaining class war warriors have tried to make it an issue on several occasions to claim that Cameron and his team are out of touch with the electorate, in an attempt to undermine his credibility and ability to compete for PAH (see Dorey, 2007, p.139; Evans, 2008, p.303-304). Whilst some Guardian/ICM polls showed that a third of those surveyed thought the Conservatives represented the upper classes, both Cameron's personal and party ratings were rising<sup>95</sup> (see for example UK Polling Report, 2010b; Glover, 2010). It is perhaps an exaggeration to

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<sup>95</sup> Interestingly the same polling/article claims that a similar proportion of respondents believed Labour represented the interests of the working class, and concludes that few people now boast about belonging to either the working class or upper class (Glover, 2010).

attribute the seductive fascination some have with Cameron's background as Gimson claims: "The idea of Eton irritates commentators, many of whom went to less grand fee-paying schools, more than it annoys the man or woman on the Clapham omnibus" (Gimson, 2009; and see Young, 2011). However, the real difficulty for Labour has been that whilst they are not afflicted to the same extent, a significant number of their own senior MPs are similarly unrepresentative of the background of the average Briton- it just doesn't receive a comparable level of scrutiny.<sup>96</sup> The issue is potentially further complicated because whilst the Conservatives may be considered less representative, trust, and the belief that politicians represent the interests of the average voter affect politicians of all parties (Economist, 2011).

The economic crises that developed during 2007 and 2008 are also widely believed to have caused a number of problems for the Conservatives, and left them without an economic strategy. Bale goes so far as to claim it left the Conservatives "flying a plane when they now needed a car" (Bale, 2008a, p.2). Indeed at various times during and following the recession the Conservatives seemed to be on the back foot, and struggling to find a coherent answer to what they would do differently, if anything, to the government. However, whilst Labour and Brown did receive a bounce in the polls for their handling of the situation, particularly during late 2008 when Brown was seen to have reacted quickly to 'save the world' (Dorey, 2010, p. 413), the party of government couldn't escape a share of the blame for some of what happened, and the obvious internal disputes between Brown and his chancellor, Alistair Darling, further undermined their position (Guardian, 2009 and see Darling, 2011). Smith argues that the impact of the financial crisis and recession also caused difficulties for Labour because their strategy had been based on growth, and the recession promoted a shift in the state-society balance, however, it also meant Conservative statecraft had to adapt to this (2010, p. 822).

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<sup>96</sup> For example, Labour sent Harriet Harman onto The Politics Show to attack Edward Timpson and the Conservatives for being 'Toffs' despite the fact she attended the same school as George Osborne, and is the niece of an Earl. Of course, Cameron could refer to Blair's education at Fettes and Ed Ball's at Nottingham High School (Pollard, 2008).

Polling also showed that the economy rose during 2008 to become the most salient issue in those surveyed, and IPSOS polling shows that from the summer of 2008 onwards, the Conservatives had a lead when people were asked which party would best manage the economy, although at times it was tiny, especially when questioned about whether Brown and Darling or Cameron and Osborne were seen as more competent (see Ipsos MORI, 2011a; Dorey, 2010, p. 414).

As mentioned above, Labour's strategy was much like that of Major's in 1992, and just about every other government seeking re-election during or shortly after a recession by saying: we are best placed to fix things (Dorey, 2009, p.260). There were doubts about Conservative plans, which remained until the election, and it seems likely that Labour's position improved as the election approached because the electorate considered them best placed to deal with the economic problems, and be concerned by change. Ultimately the PAH position came more clearly to suggest Labour were unable to escape the responsibility for the debt levels, and spending prior to 2007 (see Smith, 2010, p.822). As briefly mentioned at the end of this chapter, following the election, this position has remained, and if anything, the coalition's economic arguments have enhanced their PAH position (Ipsos MORI, 2010b). The interesting test will be to see how long this remains, should things continue to worsen.

In geographical terms, the extent to which Cameron broadened support for the party is limited. The party's position in Scotland (and the North generally) remained dire, despite hopes that it would improve, although the picture was better in Wales, the Conservatives are still widely referred to as the party of England, and much of that support is in the South (see Green 2010, p. 684). Of course, Cameron didn't create this problem, but it hasn't been much improved by five years of his leadership (UK Polling Report, 2010c). It seems as though the Conservatives did improve their support across the range of demographic social classes, and the young<sup>97</sup>, and in most cases, by a

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<sup>97</sup> It's not scientific, but the average age of attendees at Conservative events and conferences has lowered significantly over the years under David Cameron. There is no longer any need for the party officials to go on the hunt for younger members for photo shoots.

similar proportion to the national swing to the Party, which was also less than the party had hoped, particularly from the middle classes (Curtice, Fisher and Ford, 2010, p.14; Ipsos MORI, 2010c).

It has been claimed the 2005 election seemed to have taught the party important lessons about what they had been getting wrong (see Ashcroft, 2010, p.112). Yet this isn't just the oft-repeated need to adopt a campaign on centrist issues, the party leadership had been aware of the desirability of that for many years. The most prominent and crucial issue facing the party was the fact that the majority of people had little or no intention of listening to anything the Conservatives said about public services, the economy and social issues, because of the party's image and reputation. What was needed was a combination of party change, but also the need to get people to take that change seriously and listen again to what the Conservative Party had to say- they had to improve their PAH position (see Green and Cowley, 2005, p.66; O'Hara, 2007b, p.297).

There is more to being a credible opposition and alternative government than having the right or even popular policies; they need to be credible in order to resonate with the electorate, and they need to resonate more than ones opponents. Indeed, during the Howard leadership, there was evidence that some Conservative policies were more popular in the abstract than they were when associated with the Conservative Party (Green, 2005). Therefore, the challenge for any Conservative leadership was how to formulate statecraft with electoral appeal. It required a strategy that contained the 'right' arguments, presented in a way that appealed to the electorate, and the Conservatives were lucky that Labour was encountering governing and internal difficulties at whilst they were doing this. Cameron was able to convince his party that he both understood this, and more importantly, that he might be able to achieve it, not least by the professionalism of his leadership bid itself (see Elliot and Hanning, 2007, p. 270). The long leadership campaign of 2005 was about more than two speeches (see Denham and Dorey, 2006). It allowed Cameron to show that he had the potential to reach out to non-Conservative voters and show early signs that he could convince people of his personal skills as a leader, substantially strengthening his position. The scale of his win also gave him a considerable mandate to lead. Despite the seemingly emphatic victory, Cameron only secured 7% more support

amongst the party membership than Duncan Smith had four years previously, although he did have 36 more MPs backing him (Denham and O'Hara, 2008, pp.167-168).

As a result it is argued that because Cameron got what amounts to the statecraft of the leadership election right, he had authority, which whilst still conditional on performance, went far beyond the electoral mandate (for an assessment of the importance of the electoral mandate see Denham and O'Hara, 2008 p. 1-10). He seemed like he actually could be a winner. Whilst Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard had all enjoyed brief spells when they looked like they had revived the party, none had enjoyed the coverage Cameron was receiving by the latter stages of the leadership contest, and it was this which gave Cameron his real mandate to lead, and his authority over the party.

Cameron's mandate for change has been questioned by some (see Denham and O'Hara, 2007b, p.410). Indeed there was a belief that he would be dragged back to the right it should not be seen as predetermined just because the previous three party leaders had moved away from their attempts at change, Cameron would almost inevitably face the same fate (for the worst example of this, see Bale, 2008b, 284). Given the standard interpretations of the recent behaviour of the Conservative Party, it is perhaps understandable that commentators would be lulled into thinking the Conservatives were condemned to constantly repeat their past. However, the circumstances in 2005 were quite different to 1997, 2001 or 2003. The reaction to the cumulative effect of these three defeats is often portrayed as the party realizing that the 'one more heave' and need for 'clear blue water' approaches to electoral strategy had now been thoroughly discredited by three successive and heavy defeats. Yet, as indicated above, this is only part of the picture. Michael Howard had achieved something quite significant as leader: he had fostered party unity and morale in a way that hadn't existed for at least 15 years, the atmosphere in the party was much improved immediately prior to the general election, and the party's campaign had been modernized and it was sophisticated (Green and Cowley, 2005, p.48). The fact that the Conservatives still lost the election heavily highlighted to them in a way that had not previously been possible, that unity and strong leadership



made very little difference to their electoral performance, and that something more fundamental needed to change, or appear to change.

In his actions and rhetoric after announcing his resignation Howard showed an understanding that the message the party wished to convey, and credibility with which it conveyed it, would be important for the party's future statecraft (see Howard, 2005a). Indeed, he went to great and underappreciated, lengths to encourage the party to skip a generation, having to convince some of the 'elders' such as Maude and team, and elect a leader who might be able to craft a viable statecraft from these lessons (Green and Cowley, 2005, pp.48-49). Somewhat like the debate that still exists over exactly where the origins of New Labour lie, more credit should be given to those who came before Cameron, for understanding some of the party's problems, even if they were not ultimately able to resolve them (compare to Lent, 1997, pp.9-11).

Cameron's background in public relations (PR) has allowed his opponents to claim that he, and his election as leader, represented nothing more than a triumph of PR. All this shows is a lack of understanding, or willingness to accept, the importance of PR type considerations for what this chapter refers to as PAH, and how these could help him address the problems that confronted the Conservative Party. Although some would question how much use being a director of corporate communications would be for becoming leader of the opposition (see Kerr, 2007, p.41 for opposite view), it may be possible to argue that his first class degree in PPE<sup>98</sup> from Oxford and years of working for MPs and within the Conservative Research Department would have been rather good preparation. Cameron's opponents concentrate on his PR background as a way of criticizing him for being superficial, when in fact he does have other more relevant experience. The theme of change was the means, not the ends, by which Cameron could get people to look again at the Conservatives. The result of this has remained evident: Cameron has been the first Conservative leader for a generation to enjoy (largely) positive media attention whilst in opposition (see Bale, 2008b, p.276; Campbell, 2008, p.342); and is reported to have been at times the "most popular opposition leader of

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<sup>98</sup> Even if Boris considers this to be a second rate subject, as was evident from his appearance on Newsnight on 15 October 2011.

recent times” (Curtice, 2009, p.179). Ultimately, as with other areas of Conservative statecraft, it will be how the party governs that provides the ultimate test for Conservative attempts to establish PAH, and remove the remaining doubts about the credibility and suitability of the Conservative Party and policies.

## **5.5 Competence**

A common theme when examining competence in opposition, is that establishing a reputation for competence is important. It’s not enough on its own, and indeed it might not win an election, but in the absence of appearing competent, establishing a winning statecraft is likely to prove very much more difficult. For the Conservatives during this period there were a number of competence factors that assisted them, that were more significant than they had been for Cameron’s three predecessors. The most important of these is the damage done to the government’s record for competence by a combination of the recession and economic downturn and Labour’s internal disputes and party management problems. However, despite the truth in the old adage about governments losing elections rather than oppositions winning them, the Conservatives still had to get this aspect of their statecraft right, not just to compete for office, but also because of the significance of competence in competing for PAH and maintaining quiescent party relations.

This section examines Cameron’s personal appearance of competence, and that of the party. In particular, focus will be given to the way he appeared to be a potential prime minister from the middle of the 2005 leadership campaign onwards, a reputation he would retain until the election. This undoubtedly helped his party management, but it was also an important factor for attempting to convince the electorate that the Conservative Party more widely could be trusted to govern; and the doubts about the wider party were arguably always more serious than those relating to the leader. It is not unusual for leaders to appear more competent than their wider party, but in these circumstance the reputation the leader has becomes more significant<sup>99</sup>. As with the consideration given to all of

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<sup>99</sup> Jeffreys (2005) argues this was also the case for Harold Wilson and the Labour Party in 1964 and to a lesser extent Labour in 1997.

the statecraft areas in this thesis, it is the interaction of Conservative statecraft, with the wider political environment and their opponents' statecraft that would be key. Cameron established a reputation as a competent speechmaker and media performer whilst Blair's star was waning, and the contrast was more pronounced once Gordon Brown became prime minister. Whilst the issue of authenticity would remain for Cameron, and the party more widely, this was mitigated by discussions about Gordon Brown's suitability to be prime minister, despite his remaining economic credibility. It was not enough to win the election, but it was enough to win office, and ultimately the way the Conservatives, and especially Cameron handled the situation on the morning of May 7<sup>th</sup> and the coalition negotiations would further boost their reputation for competence.

From the beginning, with the lengthy leadership campaign, and Labour's own governing and internal problems, Cameron had a degree of autonomy and time to establish himself, and even room to manoeuvre that had not been available to previous leaders of the opposition. The Conservative Party more generally also benefited from Brown's performance as prime minister, as the focus on his problems and failings detracted from the wider positive achievements of the Labour party. It is also important to consider the lack of alternatives to Cameron's leadership of the party, which rapidly became unassailable, unlike Howard, Duncan Smith and Hague, there were very few candidates in any position to challenge or replace him; subject to success, his grip on the party stronger than many in a similar position, in recent times. Finally, the way Cameron handled the coalition negotiations is regarded to have been very competent, benefitting his and the position of his party greatly at a time of considerable uncertainty and just as when there was a danger it could be seriously questioned.

Cameron's ability to deliver a speech was clear from a very early stage of his leadership, as the impact of some of his speeches were significant<sup>100</sup> and showed his level of competence to be above that of his leadership opponents (see New Statesman, 2005; BBC News, 2008a). His ability to debate may not be rated quite so highly, but it was sufficient for him to often get the better of Blair, and frequently Brown, at Prime Minister's Questions, in part also because he had 'better material' to

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<sup>100</sup> Although perhaps not in the league of Reagan, Clinton, Blair or even Hague.

work on with the governing problems Labour faced (for example see Nelson, 2009). In changed circumstances, it mattered more for Cameron to perform well than it had for Hague because Cameron needed to maintain his level of reputation and highlight Labour's failing at a time when there was a greater level of receptiveness for them and the PAH balance had shifted due to events. The return of several key figures like the rehabilitated Hague, and later Ken Clarke, who posed no threat but improved effectiveness of the front bench that surrounded Cameron, and whilst many shadow cabinet members remained obscure, the presence of other big names helped the party's reputation (see Grimson, 2009). It has even been suggested that Cameron's handling of the rather 'tricky' media firestorms surrounding questions about whether he had used drugs in the past, and newspaper reports linking George Osborne to undesirable characters also boosted Cameron's reputation. Whilst the attacks on the character of Cameron and Osborne were claimed to be fuelled by opponents in the media (and party) Rawnsley argues that his ability to stand-up to a media firestorm served to show he had 'the metal' to deal with the kind of situations a leader of the opposition regularly faces (Rawnsley, 2005).

Directly related to this is the problem of authenticity that continued to affect Cameron, although it is difficult to assess how damaging it actually was, it has been argued he was unfavourably compared to Blair's appearance and performance for Labour in 1997 (Freedland, 2010). In part, this is perhaps understandable, given the accusations that would subsequently be levelled at Blair, as critics claimed he had promised much, but not delivered and the impact that would have on anyone who appeared similar (Montegomerie, 2010, p.8). This was probably inadvertently reinforced by the Conservatives' own attacks on Labour, which sought to emphasize a disparity between what was promised and what was delivered, and further ingrained as trust in politicians generally suffered amidst expenses scandals. If one party attacks its opponents (over several years) for being more spin than substance, it might create problems if that party also becomes vulnerable to accusations of being too concerned with PR. Despite this problem, Cameron's wider competence, combined with Labour's troubles, seem to have compensated for this, and the long leadership campaign of 2005 and

the coverage he received thereafter meant he was able to establish support from almost all elements of the party, and widen its support, although not to the extent that was hoped (O'Sullivan, 2006).

Despite the more favourable circumstances, Cameron also managed the process of changing the party, both in image and policy terms, and although Cameron's policy reviews didn't produce a raft of radical and high profile ideas that were then translated into the party's policy programme, they did produce some policies that were adopted (Bale, 2010, p.119). However, policies reviews are about more than just policy. Indeed, the production of policy might not even be the principle purpose of a policy review, and establishing one (or several in this case) will have a symbolic aspect because it is a clear sign the party is trying to wither change or develop policies to address the country's problems. A set of high profile policy reviews, headed by relatively well known Conservative figures helped with all of the areas of party statecraft for this reason.

A crucial factor in the relatively smooth (in terms of party management) way the Conservatives have conducted their policy review is the party's position in the polls. They have retained a near constant lead over labour in the opinion polls since Cameron became leader (UK Polling Report, 2010a). The splits, disputes and hostility to the Cameron strategy predicted by so many have failed to materialize because he offered the party its first realistic chance of winning an election for years; and indeed it strengthened his authority over the party.

The supposed 'lurch to the right' in which Cameron dropped some of his modernizing agenda and once again referred to core Conservative policies like immigration and Europe (Bale, 2008, p.244) resulted from little more than Gordon Brown's early tactic to re-associate Cameron and his party with the issues that Cameron had tried to distance himself from: evidence of a real shift is rather more elusive (Assinder, 2007). Indeed, Gordon Brown was seen as having deliberately tried to gain favourable coverage from Conservative papers like the Daily Mail at this time in order to increase the pressure on Cameron at this time, and Cameron's response is to this, as much as to his party (see Assinder, 2007; Price, 2010. Far from 'lurching to the right' it was the very fact that Cameron had

remained true to his decontamination strategy that strengthened his position, as he was able to show, for the first time, that the Conservatives didn't need to shift to the right in order to regain their poll lead (cf. Bale, 2008b, pp.287-288).

Whilst many people remained to be convinced that Cameron had changed the Conservative Party prior to their 2007 conference in Blackpool, following a combination of Brown's 'dithering' and presentational mistakes, Cameron holding his nerve, for example on the IHT pledge, and, most importantly, that age old factor of 'events', the Conservatives maintained a healthy poll lead (Glover, 2008). Indeed, the reaction to the 'Brown Bounce' and the 'credit crunch' lend some support as to the benefit of being very cautious on policy pronouncements as in such circumstances, the one advantage an opposition party has over an incumbent government is that it is easier to flexibly respond to changes in the political landscape.

One of the few exceptions to this was the Conservative Party's pledge to match Labour's spending plans (as Howard had done previously) and only consider tax cuts as a result of 'sharing the proceeds of growth' (Bale, 2008b, pp. 277-281; Dorey, 2009, p. 260). These policies had obviously been adopted to tackle Labour's claims that the Conservatives would cut public services, and associate itself with the importance of economic stability, much as Labour had done with its pre-1997 plan to adhere to Conservative spending plans, and not so different to Howard's plans as part of the James Review. Much is made of the way these proposals were dropped in the Autumn of 2007 and how it indicated they represented a move from the centre (for example, see Bale, 2008b, pp. 272-280). Cameron and his team took a gamble, they were uncertain as to the consequences of the credit crunch, and were criticized for not quickly proposing policies to address it, but they didn't need to; the government had no such luxury, they had no choice but to deal with it.

Instead, because of the improvement in the party's competence and credibility as an alternative government, Cameron could claim that the oncoming recession made Labour's spending unaffordable, so he wouldn't match it, in an attempt to force Brown to make the same admission,

making political capital out of uncertainty. In fact, the Conservative economic policy has, if anything shifted more to the left. Rather than concentrating on sharing the proceeds of growth, taken by most people to mean tax cuts; the emphasis is now, rhetorically at least, placed on reducing the impact of the consequences of recession on public services, tax cuts are no longer mentioned and George Osborne has accepted the (party political, if not economic) need to retain Labour's 50% tax band, which was probably only introduced to cause the Conservatives difficulties and boost Labour support (Kirkup, 2008). Interestingly, the detail of any 'cuts' that would be necessary barely featured in the election campaign, as all parties feared discussing the issue, and Cameron had to walk a tightrope between releasing too much detail, and losing support, and reassuring people that they weren't seeking to undo the positive aspects of Labour's tenure

The battle between the parties for economic credibility remained vital to the outcome of the election and considering the low base from which they started in 2005, the fact that Cameron and Osborne were able to establish their own credibility on economic affairs is significant. Considerable doubts remained, and Labour sought to portray the Conservatives as wishing to take the country back to the 1980s, but they ultimately matters less than Labour's own problems (Dorey, 2009, p.268). The only way the Conservatives will be able to dispel or reaffirm this remaining doubt is in the way they govern now they are in office.

Labour tried to spread the blame for the crisis around, whilst seeking to take credit for tackling it, and leading the country out of recession (see BBC News, 2009). Much is made of how the Conservatives following 1992 irretrievably lost their previous reputation for economic competency (Green and Cowley, 2005, p. 67). The situation is now reversed with Ed Miliband and Labour struggling to repair their reputation as the coalition continue to blame them for the deficit (Siddique, 2011). Despite the banks being widely held responsible for causing the financial crises in 2007 and 2008, Brown and Labour were unable to spread the blame for the recession sufficiently to avoid electoral damage as a result of the recession and deficit. Their critics and the Conservatives sought to attribute the country's debt and deficit to their actions, and for changing the financial regulatory structure as a way of linking them to the banking crises (Swaine, 2008; Dorey, 2009, p.268).

The comparisons with 1992 were abundant, and Labour tried to claim they were the best party to steer the country in such difficult times, and the party's polling position did improve as the election approached. However, Brown's own appearance as someone many considered unsuited to the job of prime minister meant he was unable to emulate Major (see Bale, 2011a, p.133-154; Geddes and Tonge, 2010, p.583). In this regard, the situation was closer, though not perfectly analogous to 1997 because whilst the economy was recovering by 1997, the reputational damage to the Conservatives was fatal in the face of a strong opposition. In 2010, it was Brown whose competence was irreparably damaged, but in combination with the loss of economic credibility, and the Conservatives' improved image<sup>101</sup>, it was enough to prevent a similar recovery for Labour. Finally, Cameron's handling of the uncertain situation after the general election was seen as competent, as were the coalition negotiations, especially given that Britain hadn't had a hung parliament for four decades, but the real test for Cameron and the Conservatives will come over the next few years.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter covers the period 2005 to 2010 during which time the Conservative Party went from succumbing to its third worst defeat in modern history, to being in office, albeit as the major part of a coalition government. The statecraft position of the Conservative Party improved during this time, and it improved in particular relative to Labour and its statecraft position, but it did so under more favourable conditions than Cameron's predecessors faced. However, the improvement cannot just be attributed to the governing problems as the natural rate of governability deteriorated, and internal party problems faced by Labour mounted; for whilst governing parties may lose elections, opposition parties still have to win them.

In terms of party management, it is argued that the Conservative Party remained remarkably quiescent considering the language of change that Cameron adopted, and the non-traditional Conservative policy areas he engaged with. Whilst this was helped by the period of reflection after the defeat in 2005, it was also due to Cameron's strategy of establishing a narrative or theme even

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<sup>101</sup> Albeit nothing like Labour in 1997 (see Kellner, 1997).



before he became leader. This served to establish a course early on, which brought him and the party favourable coverage and made it both more difficult for any doubters to dissent from the direction, but also allowed Cameron to claim that his version of change offered the party the prospect of winning and a return to a position of electability, and this is the greatest tool for party management.

The most important strategic objective for Cameron and his team was winning office, and it is argued that attempts to 'decontaminate the Conservative Brand' or 'change the party' are best seen from this perspective, rather than specific strategic aims themselves. The point of changing the party, or decontaminating the brand was to make the party electable, and that required a flexible approach to strategy which could respond to events and the actions of the Conservative party's opponents. It is also argued that the search for strategic consistency is also likely to be fruitless, because of this requirement for flexibility. It is to be expected that with multiple constituencies to appeal to, changing events, imperfect knowledge, and the actions of one opponent's a strategy will need to adapt, and during this period with the financial crisis and relations, the focus of political debate changed considerably.

In terms of political argument hegemony, the Conservative strategy was partially successful, and certainly at first it attracted favourable elite opinion in the way it hadn't done for many years, even from non-traditionally Conservative quarters. Whilst Cameron and the Conservatives have been criticised for not achieving greater success or being more convincing in PAH terms, it is argued that given the negative association from its last period in office, with which it was still encumbered, its chance to establish PAH dominance would only come with governing to competently to dispel them. There was still distrust of the Conservatives' ability to manage the economy and to an extent on the public services, despite Cameron's personal attempt to improve the latter, however, in light of the substantial governing problems the country faced, it is to be expected that the electorate both desire change, but are also apprehensive about what change will mean. In this regard, the economic problems the country faced were both an opportunity for the Conservatives to exploit, but it also presented dangers, as it meant the party statecraft Cameron had been developing since his leadership

bid in 2005 had to adapt to take account of the changing governing problems that would have to be factored into it in order to continue to compete for PAH.

All of these aspects of statecraft required competence, and whilst the exact nature of what amounts to competence can be debated, the very fact that Cameron was widely seen as a potential prime minister, in a way his immediate predecessors hadn't managed to establish themselves says much for the competence of his delivery, presentation and message. It wasn't perfect, mistakes were made, and things could have been done better, but the fact that Cameron competently associated his narrative of change, with his personal potential as a possible prime minister both facilitated improvements in the other statecraft areas and compensated for the remaining doubts the electorate had about the wider Conservative party.

It is the interaction of these statecraft components with each other and with the (changing) wider party political environment and the statecraft of other parties that is crucial for understanding this period. It is interesting that in both 2005 and 2010 the Conservatives are often regarded as having failed to perform as well as might have been expected. Undoubtedly Cameron and his party wanted a majority Conservative government, but whilst they failed to achieve this, they did enter government in coalition, which Bulpitt described as the next best thing to governing alone. The Conservatives occupy all of the four (elected) great offices of state, and the coalition agreement recognizes that they are the significantly larger party in the governing arrangement. The epilogue that follows also argues that the coalition also presents opportunities for the Conservative leadership, and not just a constraint on its autonomy. Being in coalition has to be seen as a partial success in statecraft terms, but it would still only be a partial (though more significant) success if they had won a majority, because for truly successful statecraft the Conservatives and Cameron will have to continue to govern competently, enhance their PAH and reputation for competence and maintain quiescent party management in office. Ultimately they have to do this so that they have a chance of retaining office and improving their position relative to their opponents at the next election.

# Epilogue

## The Coalition

### The Formation of the Coalition

An analysis of the coalition formed between the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats would require more space, and probably a greater passage of time than is available for this thesis, but the formation of it, and some statecraft observations on its early workings are worthy of mention. As the climax of the election neared, and the prospect of a hung parliament seemed increasingly possible, the Conservatives in particular sought to emphasize the ‘dangers’ of no party winning a clear majority, including via the use of humorous ‘webCameron’ broadcasts (see Webcameron, 2010; Anstead, 2010, p.9). The very fact that the party were clearly worried about this being a real prospect indicates that they had given it some thought prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, which perhaps helps explain<sup>102</sup> why Cameron was able to act swiftly in making his “big, open and comprehensive offer to the Liberal Democrats” just hours after the result became clear (Cameron, 2010b). He went further still, warning of the dangers and instability associated with a minority government, and said

"Across our two manifestos, there are many areas of common ground, and there are areas where I believe we in the Conservative Party can give ground, both in the national interest and in the interests of forging an open and trusting partnership" (Cameron, 2010b).

Such a pronouncement was unexpected, surprised most people, and has been seen as a masterful stroke by supporters and opponents alike, including some of the Labour negotiators (Mandelson, 2010, p.550; Robinson, 2010). Indeed, given Britain’s lack of experience at coalition formation, the competent handling of the negotiations and formation of a coalition has been a surprise to many (Ashcroft, 2010, p81-83 and p.126; Crabtree, 2010).

It is argued here that the reason for this offer, and the planning that seems likely to have been done for this very scenario, was that the likely consequences a minority Conservative government, or

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<sup>102</sup> William Hague, and the Conservative leadership still deny this was the case, and that any detailed preparation for a hung parliament had occurred. It has been argued that Cameron had planned to seek to form a minority government as long as the party secured more than 300 seats, but changed his mind as the result became clear (Ashcroft, 2010 p124). However, this seems implausible, but it would also have been, and remain very damaging to the party to admit they planned for such an event.

remaining in opposition, would have on Cameron's position (Ashcroft, 2010, p.127). For a leadership built on, and sold to his party on the basis of winning, losing an election, even whilst securing more seats in a single election than the party had for 80 years, would have been very damaging, especially given Labour's and Brown's lack of popularity.

In the absence of winning a mandate, Cameron's position as leader of the Conservative Party, in a minority government would have been much more difficult, which provided the incentive for coalition, couched in the terms of the national interest and the need for strong and stable government, which Conservatives have always preferred (Cameron, 2010b). Cameron would also have been aware that in the face of the 'maths' of the electoral system, repeating the 1974 scenario of two elections was also a big gamble, especially given the scale of problems facing the country. In this regard, the words of the governor of the Bank of England, a large number of analysts, and the media, warned about how the markets would react to a minority government (Robinson, 2010). It also seems certain that Cameron, aware that there were still image and reputational problems associated with the Conservative Party, believed governing, if done competently, would give the best opportunity to show that the party merited the ability to govern (Ashcroft, 2010, p126).

There has also been speculation about the role of the Civil Service, and in particular Sir Gus O'Donnell who despite protesting impartiality, Labour did suggest had a preference of strong and stable government, and a quick resolution to the uncertainty, and therefore favoured the Conservative- Liberal coalition that ultimately resulted (Robinson, 2010; Bartle and Allen, 2010, p.245). It has also been argued that much of the media also pushed for a speedy resolution, and whilst the Conservative press weren't necessarily enthusiastic about coalition with the Liberal Democrats, they were united in their desire to see the end of Brown (Anstead, 2010, p.10). Whilst it's difficult to know if and how the Conservative leadership saw advantages with regards to governing in a properly constructed coalition, in terms of Cameron's own position, they were clear. Nick Clegg had also very publically stated that whilst the Liberals weren't planning for a hung parliament, in the event of one the conservatives had gained the "first right" to try and form a

government (BBC News, 2010a). Indeed, it was in the interests of every party to claim there was uncertainty about the negotiations, and likely outcomes, in order to avoid seeming too keen and eager to enter a coalition and losing or offending any of their own support.

The personal chemistry between Cameron and Clegg, and indeed several members of the negotiating team from the two parties has, and probably quite rightly, been given considerable credit (see for example Bartle and Allen, 2010, p.255), but the fact Labour was led by Gordon Brown certainly improved Cameron's position; for practical political reasons and personal reasons, it was difficult for Clegg to negotiate with Brown, especially as Clegg had stated he would have to stand down (Mandelson, 2010, p.564).

Whilst some might have said the Liberal Democrats faced a catch-22 position: prop up a Labour government, which was unpopular, and had suffered heavily in an election, and still be short of a majority (see BBC News, 2010b; Bartle and Allen, 2010, p.243); or join with the Conservative Party, who had offered them more, and would have a much larger mandate to govern, but were also seen to be a less natural ally (BBC News, 2011a). Regardless of the effectiveness of the strategy Cameron had pursued up to the election, the changes he'd made to the party allowed him to immediately outline shared policy positions between the two parties on green issues, education and taxation which helped in the negotiations, and it is difficult to imagine the two party's having formed a coalition prior to Cameron's leadership (see Cameron, 2010b).

The accounts of the actual negotiations, in particular the interviews the BBC's Nick Robinson conducted with the core participants suggests that Labour was the least well prepared for them (Robinson, 2011). It also seems likely that a coalition was a risky proposition for Labour, especially one without a strong commons mandate, because of the difficulties likely to follow from a party that had 'lost' an election then trying to govern in difficult times: and Labour would therefore want to avoid a coalition after having their PAH damaged by losing, and the likelihood of facing a more hostile NRG (see BBC News, 2010b). The Labour negotiators claimed that from the start the

Liberals preferred to go into coalition with the Conservatives, and there may be a little truth in this, but they also handled the situation badly, and whilst some claimed that alliance would be ideologically preferable, politically it was at least as fraught as joining with the Conservatives. But, Cameron's bold approach to them, personal chemistry, the fact they were the largest party, that the negotiations went well, and in combination would have a considerable majority sealed the deal (Walters, 2010). Cameron's strategy for dealing with a hung parliament, his competence in executing the coalition deals in combination with the desire for change expressed in the election, even if it was unclear what change was required, made the process of coalition formation considerably more straightforward than it might otherwise have been, saving his own and his party's reputation from suffering.

## **The Coalition in Action**

Once the coalition was formed there remained a great deal of uncertainty about how it would operate, how stable it would be, and crucially how long it would last. As it was being formed, the references back to 1974 were abundant (see for example Osborne, 2010), and there was a debate between those who believed an alliance of two such different parties would soon encounter difficulties and breakdown; and those who thought the danger of breaking the agreement would be enough to ensure its survival through to 2015<sup>103</sup> (see Hasan, 2010; and see Crick, 2011). In reality, and with the benefit of some hindsight, the coalition offers several benefits, in statecraft terms, to the Conservative Party, and to Cameron, which will be briefly outlined, but in part at least because it presents an interesting opportunity to extend the statecraft approach into a further new area: coalition.

The most prominent argument presented for Cameron and the Conservative leadership's commitment to the coalition is based on the belief it helps party management, and prevents the 'Tory right' forcing Cameron to move to the right (see, for example: Quinn, Bara and Bartle, 2011). There

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<sup>103</sup> Part of the coalition agreement was of course to legislate for fixed term parliaments, and this was specifically designed to protect the junior party from being dropped at an opportune moment (see Cabinet Office, 2010).

is an interesting paradox in this argument because given that a number of people have argued that Cameron's decontamination policy always involved a return to the right, and more 'red meat' Conservative policies once it had done its work, there now seems a near universal acceptance that Cameron has no desire at all to move the party to the 'right' (Lamb, 2011; Montgomerie, 2011b; and see also Bale, 2008, p.244 for a summary of the first argument; see also Boles, Pack and Snowdon, 2011, p.194 for comments that Cameron will not move to the right and that the Conservatives' successful home is in the centre).

However, there is some truth in this position, there clearly are a number of Conservative MPs who would prefer the government to adopt more tax cutting and Eurosceptic policies, however, the number with a suicidal commitment to pursue such policies regardless of the consequences is currently small, and the extra seats the Liberal Democrats bring helps to counter them, more than control the ideology (see for example Lamb, 2011). The problems of managing a party with a small majority are well documented, and often perilous; but it can be argued that minority government also helps a leader manage rebellious MPs because any rebellion imperils the government (see Kirkup, 2011).

Another key reason given for the Conservatives commitment to the coalition is based on the way it 'spreads the blame' for the deficit reduction policies the Conservatives have long supported, even if they weren't clearly set out prior to the election (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2010, p.405). This undoubtedly seems plausible, and early indications are that it has worked, and possibly better than the Conservatives could even have hoped, as the Liberal Democrats have suffered severely in polling (Kellner, 2011), and the Conservatives remain steady despite economic trouble (see Rennard, 2011; see also Payne, 2011). However, it is often the case that the junior partner suffers more from being in coalition, because by fact of numbers, they are more likely to be supporting the policies of the major party, than vice versa (Curtice, 2011, p.1; Rennard, 2011).

However, whilst the Liberal Democrats have so far struggled to claim credit for their input into the coalition, such as the increase in the income tax allowance, they have suffered greatly because they've broken election promises they made when they had no idea they might have to govern. For the Conservative Party, this is also a sign that internalizing a degree of opposition also helps to shelter them from Labour attacks. In combination with the way Ed Miliband has struggled to establish himself as a credible leader of the opposition, the fact that Labour are still suffering as a result of being blamed for contributing to the country's economic problems, means the Conservatives have faced less of a challenge from opponents. Moreover, if you have a party like the Liberal Democrats as part of a coalition, clearly unhappy about some of the coalition's policies, yet remaining broadly supportive, it detracts media attention from Labour's criticisms and enhances Cameron's position, *ceteris paribus* (see for example: BBC News, 2011b). It also exacerbates the problem for Ed Miliband, because the more there is a focus on any Liberal Democrat concerns about the coalition policies, again, as long as they remain broadly supportive, it makes his job of attacking the government harder.

In this way, eighteen months into the coalition, in statecraft terms the coalition seems to have increased Cameron's autonomy, certainly compared to a minority government position, and reduced the danger of having a few bellicose and rebellious MPs destabilizing the government.<sup>104</sup> It also spreads the blame for unpopular decisions, and in theory at least broadens his PAH because a for party that might not normally have supported the deficit reduction plans, the coalition has been and continues to support them, reluctantly or otherwise, thus bringing the coalition onto the centre ground. Whilst the coalition programme for reducing the deficit is far from dominant in PAH terms, as perhaps few programmes involving cuts ever could be, the alternative, or calls for a 'Plan B' have not significantly challenged it (see Montgomerie, 2011a for discussion of polling). In terms of competence, so far, Cameron has maintained his positive reputation for competence, despite a large number of 'U-turns', especially relating to health and prison reforms, and is substantially ahead of

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<sup>104</sup> Although, conversely, it is possible that part of the reason so many Conservatives rebelled in a vote on call for a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, was because of the cushion the coalition had. Had the vote mattered it's unlikely 81 would have actually rebelled (see Kirkup, 2011).



Ed Miliband in polling when surveys ask who is most prime ministerial (see Ipsos MORI, 2011c ). The strategy position is less clear, but is broadly dependent upon governing competently, and demonstrating that they can do so, however, the main pillar of eliminating the structural deficit by 2015, which seems as close to a what Bulpitt might have called a governing code as the coalition gets; and something which it is already clear they will not achieve (see Knowles, 2011). Cameron and his team also have to strike a careful balance between links with the changes to party Cameron promised, and deficit reduction. Cameron is trying to demonstrate that the changes implemented prior to government were largely sincere, and knows that the Tories will lose credibility if they allow themselves to be re-associated directly with damaging public services and favouring the rich. Whether their claims that ‘we’re all in this together’, or that they are governing in the ‘national interest’ ever become or remain widely accepted is likely to be dependent upon how the economy performs and how the cuts impact on people. It is also likely that the plan for the next election would be for the two parties to diverge as the contest approached, and the Liberal Democrats in particular seeking to distance themselves from the electorally negative elements of the agreement, and claiming credit for the positive; whilst the Conservatives will try continue to blame Labour, and attack their economic record for causing the deficit, whilst also benefiting from having governed credibly for five years.

However, at the times of finalizing this thesis, it seems as though there is a real chance the UK economy could once again worsen, and the reaction to that, and the coalition’s performance, will be the real test of the coalition: it should certainly be interesting to monitor the statecraft of the Conservatives over the coming years.

## Conclusion

The principal aim of this thesis has been to investigate how the Conservative Party sought to gain office within the British structure of politics under three different leaders between 2001 and 2010. In order to do this, Jim Bulpitt's statecraft approach has been refined, improved and adapted and in the three empirical chapters the Conservative Party has been examined according to a statecraft framework.

Chapter 1 outlines the research questions and examines the existing literature on the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010. In challenging the existing literature between 2001 and 2005, it was found that that little attention has been devoted to the party under Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard in its own right. Instead, it is often examined and contrasted with the more successful and interesting period after 2005. Of the attention it has received, most does not proceed from a theoretically or conceptually informed position, and consequently lacks empirical purchase and the ability to adequately address the complexity of the Conservative Party's position at this time. This complexity is further obscured by the pre-eminence of two narratives that serve to close off lines of investigation into the party under Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard.

In the case of the former, Duncan Smith's limitations as a leader dominate the analysis of the period, and whilst this is an important factor, it serves to downplay the serious constraints that confronted him, especially Labour's dominance of the party political environment, and the task of leading a party that would likely have struggled to adapt to these constraints regardless of who was leader. In the case of the Conservative Party under Howard, the dominant theme of the period is what is regarded as the 'core-vote strategy' the literature claims the party pursued it in an attempt to ensure the highest possible voter turn-out from its own supporters. This has been regarded as a strategic failure by a party that should have sought to broaden its support, and judged more critically because under Michael Howard the party appeared to be more united and better led than it had been for some time, and the implication is that Howard and the party had the potential to achieve more in the 2005

election than they did. Again, it is argued that this type of approach downplays or ignores the considerable constraints acting on the leader of the Conservative Party at this time, and in particular fails to acknowledge that Howard took over the leadership of a party in a mess, with a limited mandate, and just over 18 months before an election. In Chapters 2 and 3 a detailed analysis of the period is undertaken to provide a more nuanced account of the relationship between agential autonomy to pursue party statecraft and the considerable structural constraints provided by the wider party political environment.

After 2005 the emphasis of the literature changes, as the Conservative Party became 'academically interesting' again, although it remains problematic. Whilst much of the literature remains devoid of an explicit theoretical framework, it also tends to focus on specific aspect of the Conservative Party at this time. In particular many words have been devoted to discussing the ideology of the Conservative Party under Cameron, or Cameron's personal traits as leader. Many of these accounts are good, and indeed provide a stimulating insight into the period, although it is argued that the search for ideological consistency and classification is problematic because it reinforces a disconnect between the study of politics, and the practice of politics by political leaders who are primarily concerned with leading their party into a position to compete for office, and become 'more electable' *not* the pursuit of ideological consistency. Furthermore, in examining specific aspects of the party at this times, a more detailed understanding of the interaction between these factors has been overlooked, and what is required is a theoretically informed, macro-perspective that seeks to address this deficiency by examining a range of phenomena that have contributed to how the Conservative Party has sought office.

This period also suffers from the lack of a sophisticated conception of structure and agency at this time, as accounts often stress either Cameron's transformational leadership of the party, or Labour's deteriorating position as causal factors in the Conservative Party's improved performance between 2005 and 2010. This thesis is instead interested in pursuing an account of the interaction of structural

and agential factors to provide an analysis that considers the dynamic interaction of agential and structural factors from the perspective of how the party has sought electability.

Chapter 1 also examines the research process, including the metatheoretical underpinnings of the statecraft approach that is explored in Chapter 2. It argues that in this thesis the way the statecraft approach is conceived as being based on a critical realist position, with a sophisticated and dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, and drawing on a range of research methods to conduct the analysis in the subsequent empirical chapters.

Chapter 2 moves on to explore and critically examine the improved theoretical statecraft framework applied in the empirical chapters. It is based on the statecraft approach developed by Jim Bulpitt, which it is argued is perfectly suited to remedying the deficiencies in the existing Conservative Party literature. The statecraft approach proceeds from an assumption that parties principally seek office, and provides a theoretically informed macro-perspective which has been missing from the existing literature. Whilst Bulpitt's empirical work has proven influential, the limited detail he provided about the methodological and theoretical assumption that informed his approach has usually been regarded as rendering the approach too problematic for wider usage. Although a limited number of others have used *a* statecraft approach loosely based on the Bulpitt's original conception of it, only Buller has used statecraft in a manner that is consistent and faithful to the original outline. There is also an omission from the existing statecraft literature in the sense that it hasn't previously been systematically applied to a party in opposition<sup>105</sup>. This is a surprising gap in the literature given that Bulpitt highlighted how periods in opposition often offer a party the greatest freedom and incentive to reformulate their statecraft. Because the statecraft approach is concerned with how parties both seek to gain and retain office, it is argued that it is applicable to a party in opposition, and how this can be achieved is outlined.

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<sup>105</sup> Bulpitt did examine the origins of Thatcherism prior to 1979 as part of his article on the first Thatcher government, but it was not subjected to a systematic statecraft analysis as the period in office was (Bulpitt, 1986).

However, before the framework suitable for application in the subsequent empirical chapters is outlined, the methodological assumptions that have proven problematic are explored, and many of the claims that have been levelled at Bulpitt's statecraft approach are refuted. The statecraft approach has traditionally been regarded as either intentionalistic or excessively agential in the way it is focussed on a party and its leadership's attempts to secure office. A further problem has been the assumption of rationality Bulpitt briefly attributed to the party leadership in the way they pursue office, and that it downplays or ignores ideational factors. It is argued that all of these claims result from the scant detail about the methodological and theoretical assumptions of the statecraft approach Bulpitt provided<sup>106</sup>, and a failure to 'read between the lines' or interpret greater detail about these assumptions from Bulpitt's empirical work. As a result, Chapter 2 examines Bulpitt's empirical work, deduces greater detail about the underlying assumptions of Bulpitt's approach, and integrates this with the explicit detail Bulpitt provided, including drawing on the concept of the natural rate of governability (NRG). The result is a refutation of the claim that statecraft is necessarily intentionalistic or agential, and instead it is argued that statecraft is and has always been entirely compatible with a dynamic or dialectical interrelationship of structural and agential factors in line with the strategic-relational position.

This is further supported by the location of statecraft within the critical realist tradition, and this assists in the refutation of charges of imbuing actors with an unrealistic notion of rationality, and claims that statecraft ignores ideational factors. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the statecraft framework is applied in the three subsequent empirical chapters. In this thesis, the statecraft cycle is examined through an analysis of its four component parts. This has only been attempted on one previous occasion, and in that case it did not take the systematic form envisioned here. Instead, the components of party management, strategy, political argument hegemony, and competence are outlined, adapted for application to opposition, and crucially the dynamic interaction of each of these with the others, and the 'feedback' that occurs within each of these components is

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<sup>106</sup> This is particularly unfortunate because Bulpitt was usually very open about the limitations of his approach, and often provided a very brief outline of his methodological assumptions, at a time when this was uncommon in political science. However, in attempting to do so briefly, he often posed more questions for the reader than he answered.

emphasized as is the way all of these occur and constantly interact with the wider party political environment. The result is a framework that serves to structure the analysis of the Conservative Party and help provide a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the period.

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 attention turns to the application of the statecraft framework. In Chapter 3 the Conservative Party under Duncan Smith is investigated, and it is argued that the statecraft approach not only provides an account of the period in its own right, something that has been insufficiently addressed in the literature, it also offers transcends the dominant theme of Duncan Smith's leadership failings to provide a more complex account of the party during this period. In particular it emphasizes the statecraft efforts made by Duncan Smith and the party in an attempt to improve the party's electability, but that even the limited efforts that were made, were overambitious in light of the considerable constraints acting on the party and leader at this time. Duncan Smith undoubtedly had serious failings as a leader, but this alone does not adequately explain the party reaching its nadir in late 2003. It has to be placed within the wider party political context which then sees the interaction of a weak leader with a dominant Labour government with a renewed and strengthened mandate to govern which would always have caused problems for party management, strategy, competence and attempts to compete for political argument hegemony (PAH).

In particular, the strongly negative associations that remained of the Conservative Party from its previous period in office (and opposition) and reinforced by division and weak leadership would mean that Conservative attempts to improve their PAH lacked credibility. However, Labour's dominance of PAH in combination with these problems would mean that despite Duncan Smith's efforts to create a strategy that would develop Conservative policy and provide an avenue to attack Labour's record, Conservative PAH would deteriorate further between 2001 and 2003. As a result of this constraint in particular, improving the party's electability would be fraught with danger for the party, because leadership action and direction that is not rewarded with increased electoral support or in this case led to support falling away, only serves to undermine a party's statecraft.

It is against this background that the weakness of Duncan Smith's leadership and the Conservative Party's interaction with the wider party political context that the limited attempts to create party policy and a putative statecraft failed, leading to a coup driven by the party's MPs' fears over their prospects in the approaching election. In the face of a deterioration in the party's electability, party management (which was always likely to be hard to for a weakened leader like Duncan Smith who didn't appear competent), became even more difficult, and resulted in the party's statecraft position worsening to the point that Conservative MPs replaced their leader.

Chapter 4 moves to examine the Conservative Party between 2003 and 2005 and as led by Michael Howard. As highlighted in Chapter 1, this period has been dominated by accounts focussing on the supposed 'core vote strategy' the party pursued in the 2005 general election, and in the limited attention it has received, it has often been examined as a precursor to the more successful Cameron era that followed. Furthermore, there is a paradox in the existing literature which regards Howard as a more competent leader than his two immediate predecessors, but consequently judges him more harshly for the failure to make greater gains in the 2005 general election.

It is argued that these narratives arise principally from a failure to adequately account for the constraints that were acting upon the Conservative Party and its leader at this time, and an overstatement of the difficulties the Labour government faced and the degree of improvement in the Conservative Party. Furthermore, it is argued that whilst Howard and the Conservative Party still hoped to, and wanted to win the next general election in 2005<sup>107</sup>, Howard became leader with a limited mandate, albeit of a different kind to that Duncan Smith received, which required a cautious approach with an emphasis on maintaining in the improvement in the party's position that his election brought, rather than imperil that in the unlikely hope of a more adventurous strategy bringing them electoral reward. Given that the Conservative Party had appeared to be on the edge of the abyss in late 2003, the caution of the Conservative approach was justified on the grounds that it

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<sup>107</sup> Of course, didn't know with any certainty that it would be in 2005, but it was widely expected.

was more important to retain the appearance of greater unity, and competence than move to a more radical and unpredictable approach to competing with Labour which may have imperilled this.

The traditional purist of office via the crafting of a party's statecraft position is always tempered by a concern not to cause problems for party management and competence as a result of divisions caused by failure and worsening electoral prospects, but given the Conservative Party's recent history, these fears were heightened. However at this time the Conservative leadership were concerned with something that had to come before the pursuit of office- recovering its position as a viable political party- only then could it improve its electability and compete for office.

Whilst the Conservatives under Howard did recognize the need to compete on 'centre-ground' issues of high saliency to the electorate, and did produce policy on these areas, they were policies based on a traditional Conservative approach for improving public services which resulted in mixed messages about their degree of conviction on such issues. Despite this, it is argued that the Conservative strategy under Howard was not one based on 'core-vote' principles because it was not just intended to maximize the election turnout from their exiting supporters; but was instead designed to maximize the support they attracted as a result of campaigning on policy areas where they had credibility and resonance, which they thought would maximize their support.

Statecraft is about winning office, and clearly in strict terms the Conservative Party failed this test in 2005. However, with the regard to the component areas of statecraft the party performed much better in terms of party management, was more competently led, and the strategy which Howard pursued performed reasonably as far as its limited aims went. In PAH terms the party performed less well, but this is also a factor of the limited strategic aim combined with the further constraints resulting from Labour's continued dominance, which remained despite growing disenchantment in some areas. In the end, the 2005 general election only saw limited gains for the Conservative Party of 33 seats, but given the starting point less than two years earlier, and the fact they were faced with a



Labour Party that remained dominant on the high saliency areas of PAH, this is not the disastrous performance than it has usually be regarded as.

Chapter 5 alights upon the Conservatives under David Cameron between 2005 and 2010, a period that differs somewhat from those covered in the previous two chapters because it is seen as a period of statecraft recovery. At the general election in 2005 the Conservative Party achieved its third worst result in modern history, was almost immediately faced with the prospect of a leadership campaign that would take six months to finally be settled, and a Labour Party that seemed to have become the natural party of government. In 2010 the Conservatives would return to office, albeit as the major constituent of a coalition, and some would question why the party hadn't performed better given the governing problems, and difficult NRG that the government had faced in the light of economic and internal party problems.

It argues that Cameron's strategy should be seen simply in terms of how best to restore the party to a position of electability, and not a pursuit of ideological consistency, or brand decontamination- these were the means to achieve office, not ends in their own right. In ideological terms, and drawing on the work of Buckler and Dolowitz, this chapter argues that Cameron was concerned with attempting to shape a statecraft that amalgamated traditional Conservative beliefs and ideology with a message of change in order to best seek office but also maintain strong party management, appear competent, and that would importantly allow the party to compete for PAH. However, crucially, Labour's PAH dominance was weakening, as the NRG deteriorated, which in combination with Cameron's greater credibility to pursue a broader challenge to Labour's dominance of certain policy areas, provided greater autonomy for the Conservatives to reformulate their statecraft. It is the interaction of these various statecraft components, within and between parties and the wider party political environment that best captures the complexity of the Conservative position during this period. Furthermore, it argues that whilst statecraft is about winning office in order to govern alone, if this is not possible, governing as part of a coalition is the next objective.

In statecraft terms it is argued that a more sophisticated, and historically informed consideration of the election in 2010 shows that even at times when governments have faced real difficulties in office, the electorate can still exhibit a reluctance to change governments. At times when the NRG is difficult, and when the country is faced by serious governing problems, any lingering doubts about how an opposition party might govern, how suitable its policy offerings are to addressing these problems, and how competent it might be are likely to be exacerbated and the ‘better the devil you know’ option might come into play. In 2010 there were still doubts about Conservative competence (particularly the wider parliamentary party) and the Conservatives had failed to secure PAH dominance, even if they performed much better in this area than they had done for nearly two decades. Ultimately, it is argued that these doubts would only be dispelled, or reaffirmed by an assessment of *how they actually govern* once in office as this is the real test of competence, and a party’s policy platform.

Finally, there is a brief epilogue that explores the formation of the coalition, and the very early stages of the coalition in action. It argues that, despite the need for coalition being seen as a failure of party statecraft, it might also offer a number of benefits to the Conservative leadership as they are faced with a number of challenges of preponderant proportions in the coming years. The ability to ‘spread the blame’ for decisions, or even use the coalition as an excuse for a cautious strategy may assist the Conservative leadership in governing competently if they can achieve this, seek re-election (as a majority government) in 2015.

In summary, this thesis argues that a clarified, improved and updated version of Bulpitt’s statecraft can be used as a framework for analysis that offers much to the study of the Conservative Party between 2003 and 2010 and indeed the study of political parties generally. Furthermore, its macro-perspective and focus on how a party seeks office, and electability, allows a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of Conservative history, which eschews misleading overarching narratives, and instead focuses on the complex relationship of the Conservative Party at this time, with its opponents and the wider party political environment, and the constraints acting on both the leader

and the party. It avoids the explanation of political phenomena being reduced to structural or agential factors, instead stressing the interaction of the two and offers a rich set of answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this thesis. It explains why the Conservative Party seemed to languish in opposition for so long before 2005; and why the improvement in the party's performance was so marked after 2005.

## **Contribution**

### *Theoretical*

This thesis makes two principle contributions to the existing corpus of political science: one theoretical, and the other empirical. Theoretically, this thesis has critically examined the influential statecraft approach Jim Bulpitt developed for the study of British political parties, sought to address the criticism and weaknesses of the approach by clarifying the limited theoretical detail Bulpitt provided, reinterpreting these assumptions in light of an examination of Bulpitt's empirical work, leading to an improved version of statecraft for application in the empirical chapters. In particular, whilst Buller argued that in the limited detail Bulpitt provided about the theoretical underpinnings of the statecraft approach is potentially compatible with a realist position, Chapter 2 argues that a re-examination of Bulpitt's empirical work, shows that the statecraft approach has always been implicitly based on such a foundation, and clarifies this position. Furthermore, the traditional view has regarded the statecraft approach as being blighted either intentionalistic or excessively agential in the way it treats political and social phenomena, something this thesis refutes. It is argued that a strict reading of Bulpitt's limited theoretical work might lead a reader to adopt this view, but a re-reading of his empirical work, and drawing on his putative concept of the NRG, shows that not only do structural (and agential) factors exhibit significant causal forces; it is also perfectly compatible with a dynamic or dialectical relationship between structure and agency, and in particular a strategic-relational conception of this relationship.

The way the statecraft framework is conceived has also been re-examined so that it offers greater utility in the way it is applied to study a political party's history. In particular, the constant dynamic

interaction of each of the four components areas of statecraft with each other has been emphasized, rather than treating them as discreet components of a broader statecraft cycle. Furthermore, the constant ‘feedback’ both between and within each of the four components of statecraft is highlighted, and explicitly located within the wider party political environment in which a party operates and competes with other parties for office. As a result an improved version of statecraft is produced, based on explicit metatheoretical assumptions, a dynamic relationship of structure and agency, and a clear framework for application in the three empirical chapters in this thesis, and wider applicability.

This framework is then applied to the Conservative Party between 2001 and 2010, a period when the party was in opposition. It is argued that the omission of a systematic application of the statecraft approach to opposition represents a serious deficiency in the existing literature, which has been addressed with the improved version of statecraft developed in Chapter 2. Given that it is whilst parties are in opposition that they often change or reformulate their statecraft most significantly, it merits attention from the statecraft perspective as much as periods of government. Indeed, it is argued that it has the potential to contribute to the field of British political science by offering a way of studying political parties in opposition from the perspective of how they seek office, something that is often insufficiently addressed.

### *Empirical*

The principal empirical contribution to the literature on the Conservative Party has been to emphasize the importance of the influence of the wider party political environment in which a party operates, and in particular, how parties seek office and attempt to improve their ‘electability’ whilst highlighting the considerable constraints on a party’s ability to do so. Rather than focus just on specific aspects such as a party’s ideology, policy, or personnel as most of the existing literature does, this thesis has sought to highlight how parties and their leaders try to improve their electability, even if they fail either to improve it, or to win office. By examining the Conservative Party under the leadership of Iain Duncan Smith, Michael Howard, and David Cameron the

importance of seeking office has been analysed and emphasized to not only remedy a deficiency in the literature, but also to highlight the unhelpful narratives that have dominated the way each period is viewed in the existing literature. The narratives of personal failure under Duncan Smith; the narrative of the pursuit of a 'core vote strategy' under Michael Howard; and the pursuit of 'brand decontamination' under Cameron obscure a more nuanced understanding of what each leader was principally concerned with: seeking to return their party to a position of electability in order to compete for office.

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