

# The 'modernising agenda' – remember that?

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*By Ben Philips*

As in life, so in politics, there is nothing so 'ex' as an ex-Prime Minister and nothing more unfashionable than the governments they once led.

In fairness, every administration depends on the passing moods and whims of voters in order to get elected, which is why they look so hopelessly out of date when the zeitgeist moves on.

This phenomenon first struck me nearly forty years ago. I was a university student at the time, voting in my first ever general election which returned Margaret Thatcher with an unprecedented majority for a third successive term. Such was her dominance that there seemed no part of our lives over which her philosophy did not have some bearing.

A few months later, towards the end of that long summer vacation, I remember watching a BBC documentary about Bob Dylan, the pied piper of the Sixties generation whose own philosophy was about as far removed from Margaret Thatcher's as one could possibly conceive.

I sat mesmerised as the archive footage unfolded. Barely twenty years separated that generation from mine, yet here they were gyrating in fields on the Isle of Wight, high on dope and worshipping everything from nettles to polystyrene. It seemed another age, another eon. Had these people completely taken leave of their senses? My generation wore sharp suits and shoulder pads not bandanas and kaftans. We

were looking to buy up second homes on the Isle of Wight not camp there in communes.

It is often said fashions don't change they merely come full circle. I've now lived long enough to see that observation come true. From Woodstock and Glastonbury to Vietnam and Gaza the trans-Atlantic parallels are obvious. From hippie to yuppie and back again, welcome aboard the cultural merry-go-round.

In like manner it has taken the Conservative Party nearly twenty years to travel around the block in its quest for an identity, and once again we find its putative leaders prostrating themselves before the Party's members, promising anyone who will listen that they really, really do understand people's frustrations and will promise to act on them. Honestly. *"I know we let you down for fourteen years but this time we really mean it."*

Watching anyone trying to reinvent themselves is never pretty, like the poor geek at school who finally abandons his flares and pudding bowl haircut long after everyone else. But by then it's too late. Nobody is convinced.

Do you recall 'Call me Dave' standing on that rostrum in Blackpool in 2005 with his 'modernising agenda' which he told us would propel the Conservative Party back to power? He would do so by aping the policies of New Labour at precisely the moment when that party's own popularity with the voters had started to wane.

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In doing so, the heir to Blair hoped to change the Conservative Party beyond recognition, abandoning any pretence to stand up for the principles upon which it was founded. Between 2005 and 2008 it seemed to work. In came gay marriage, an eco-friendly photo-shoot with huskies in the Arctic and a promise to match Labour pound for pound on the NHS.

And then came the Global Financial Crisis. In the blink of an eye all bets were off. The extravagant promises now had to be withdrawn and instead of basking in the afterglow as Blair's chosen successor, Cameron was faced with an economic slump, unprecedented debt and years of austerity.

From the outset therefore his administration was still-born, victim to forces beyond its control and the decade of consumer expansion his predecessor had enjoyed now came to an abrupt and shuddering halt.

But instead of making a virtue of changed circumstances, the Conservative Party merely doubled down on its pre-existing mantras. While the country certainly felt the cold winds of Thatcherite austerity, many of the cuts appeared to be arbitrary and misplaced and damaging to long-term growth such as cuts to training budgets for young people.

Happy to promote gay marriage but squeamish about heterosexual marriage, Cameron also lost his nerve when it came to school reform, eventually caving into the teaching unions by dismissing Michael Gove as his education secretary instead of backing him.

In higher education too, the Tories carried on Blair's misguided policy of sending fifty percent of all school children to university irrespective of aptitude whilst continuing to neglect the hugely important vocational sector.

And instead of mapping out a bold vision for a health and social care system fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and openly and honestly encouraging private health care as an important part of a revitalised system, we had the botched reforms of Andrew Lansley whose attempts at de-centralisation within a centralised system eventually had to be abandoned, costing billions in the process, and pleasing neither reformers nor its opponents.

On immigration our esteemed leader promised to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. Like Chamberlain's peace for our time, those words now have a sickening ring of emptiness about them.

And finally on Europe – a running sore inside the Party that remains unresolved to this day – Cameron's good-cop-bad-cop routine convinced no one. Angela Merkel described DC as her naughty nephew which says all you need to know about the power-balance in that relationship, while attempts to come to constructive accommodation with the French remained as elusive as ever.

Forced eventually to choose between Britain and the European Union in the 2016 Referendum, Cameron chose the EU and a return to a pre-Thatcherite relationship with Europe, thereby consigning himself and his administration to oblivion.

Notwithstanding all that, one has to concede that the 'modernisation' agenda cooked up by Osborne and Cameron to ingratiate the party with a hostile media still has deep roots. On the face of it Boris Johnson broke that bargain by campaigning to leave the EU – a radical pledge by any measure – but the UK's decline which began under Blair and accelerated under Cameron now threatens to spiral out of all control.

Any meaningful attempt to arrest this decline is as remote as it was in 2010 when David Cameron himself stood in the Rose Garden of 10 Downing Street with his Lib-Dem chum Nick Clegg

promising a new beginning.

The only difference is that things now are even worse than they were then. That's quite some legacy to live down. Given the gravity of the crisis, I wonder how our prospective leadership candidates will explain away their own involvement in this sorry tale of decline.

The lesson surely is clear. To court popularity by abandoning the very principles upon which the party was founded and ditching policies you know to be necessary for fear of upsetting vested interests will only ever end in tears.

That is where David Cameron and his successors' 'modernising' agenda has led us. Even the word is misleading. If by 'modern' you mean new, clean, efficient and improved, how much of what you see around you would fit that description? The reality of most people's lived experience is the precise opposite: old, clapped out, rusty and inefficient. What an appalling betrayal.

None of this will be reversed until those who wish to be elected to the highest office display courage, conviction and honesty based on sound and immutable principles, irrespective of the cost to their personal popularity.

Those are the criteria by which we should judge the next leader of the Conservative Party and we must hold them to that standard. Otherwise we risk a repeat of the long-running fiasco that has been the story of this country over the last thirty years.

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**About the author:** *Ben Philips is Deputy Chairman and Communications Director for **CIBUK,Org**, the oldest campaign group of its kind, dedicated to upholding sovereignty, democracy and freedom.*

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