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Compassionate Conservatism and the Limits of Reform

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Compare and contrast the following documents:

DOCUMENT A

Gentlemen, another great object of the Tory party, and one not inferior to the maintenance of the empire, or the upholding of our institutions, is the elevation of the condition of the people. Let us see in this great struggle between Toryism and Liberalism that has prevailed in this country during the last forty years what are the salient features. It must be obvious to all who consider the condition of the multitude with a desire to improve and elevate it, that no important step can be gained unless you can effect some reduction of their hours of labour and humanize their toil. The great problem is to be able to achieve such results without violating those principles of economic truth upon which the prosperity of all states depends.

You recollect well that many years ago the Tory party believed that these two results might be obtained – that you might elevate the condition of the people by the reduction of their toil and the mitigation of their labour, and at the same time inflict no injury on the wealth of the nation. You know how that effort was encountered – how these views and principles were met by the triumphant statesmen of Liberalism. They told you that the inevitable consequence of your policy was to diminish capital, that this, again, would lead to the lowering of wages, to a great diminution of the employment of the people, and ultimately to the impoverishment of the kingdom. […] And what has been the result; and what do we now find? That capital was never accumulated so quickly, that wages were never higher, that the employment of the people was never greater, and the country never wealthier.

> I ventured to say a short time ago, speaking in one of the great cities of this country, that the health of the people was the most important question for a statesman. It is, gentlemen, a large subject. It has many branches. It involves the state of the dwellings of the people, the moral consequences of which are not less considerable than the physical. It involves their enjoyment of some of the chief elements of nature – air, light, and water. It involves the regulation of their industry, the inspection of their toil. It involves the purity of their provisions, and it touches upon all the means by which you may wean them from habits of excess and of brutality.
>
> Now, what is the feeling upon these subjects of the Liberal party – that Liberal party who opposed the Tory party when, even in their weakness, they advocated a diminution of the toil of the people, and introduced and supported those Factory Laws, the principles of which they extended, in the brief period when they possessed power, to every other trade in the country? […] Why, the views which I expressed have been held up to derision by the Liberal Press. A leading member – a very rising member, at least, among the new Liberal members - denounced them the other day as the 'policy of sewage'.

Benjamin Disraeli, Speech at the Banquet of the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations, at the Crystal Palace, on June 24th, 1872, in T.E. Kebbel (ed.), *Selected Speeches of the late Right Hon. The Earl of Beaconsfield,* London: Green & Co, 1882, Vol.2, pp.531-532.

DOCUMENT B

After three successive electoral defeats since 1992, and four leaders in that time, David Cameron appeared to be successfully addressing the crucial issue of party transformation and self-renewal. The Conservatives under Cameron asserted that they had made significant progress in decontaminating 'the brand'; utilising a number of interlaced themes of 'compassionate conservatism', 'progressive ends – conservative means' and 'social responsibility' in -order to negate an image of it as the 'nasty' and 'singularly economics' party. Of course, there would be mistakes along the way, the 'the heir to Blair' claim and the appeals on the environment and crime that were parodied as 'hugging trees, huskies and even "hoodies"'. Part of the ideological claim of the Conservative Party is that it draws from the well of British tradition in order to safeguard personal freedom. In this context the 'Big Society – Big Government' theme worked perfectly well for the party's internal philosophical debate, which is crucial for its renewal and transformation, as it addressed the perennial fundamental discussion in the party concerning the relationship of the state to the individual and the optimum level of state intervention under a Conservative government. But internal policy debates do not necessarily translate into core election messages that can give clarity of argument to the mass electorate. […]

It was the week of the manifesto launch when, in reality, we saw the elevation to prominence of the 'Big Society' theme. It was utilised by Cameron in his Hugo Young memorial lecture in November 2009 but one party insider clearly identified the problem with its use in the campaign: 'polling showed that even those voters who did not think it was simply a code for shrinking the welfare state were not sure what it meant.' Thus, this was not to be the core message that could offer meaning to the campaign.

David Seawright, "The Conservative Election Campaign," in *Cameron and the Conservatives, The Transition towards Coalition Government*, ed. Timothy Heppell & David Seawright, Palgrave, 2012, pp. 38-39.

DOCUMENT C

[…] Third, after a decade of austerity, people need to know that their hard work has paid off.

Because of that hard work, and the decisions taken by the Chancellor, our national debt is starting to fall for the first time in a generation. This is a historic achievement. But getting to this turning point wasn't easy. Public sector workers had their wages frozen. Local services had to do more with less. And families felt the squeeze. Fixing our finances was necessary. There must be no return to the uncontrolled borrowing of the past. No undoing all the progress of the last eight years. No taking Britain back to square one.

But the British people need to know that the end is in sight. And our message to them must be this: we get it. We are not just a party to clean up a mess, we are the party to steer a course to a better future. Sound finances are essential, but they are not the limit of our ambition. Because you made sacrifices, there are better days ahead.

So, when we've secured a good Brexit deal for Britain, at the Spending Review next year we will set out our approach for the future. Debt as a share of the economy will continue to go down, support for public services will go up. Because, a decade after the financial crash, people need to know that the austerity it led to is over and that their hard work has paid off.

The final challenge is about the future we want for our economy. We stand on the threshold of technological changes that will transform how we live and work, travel and communicate. This has the potential to improve the lives of everyone in society, but only if we take the right decisions now.

At times of change in the past, the benefits have not been evenly spread. Some communities have been left behind. This time it must be different. Because we are all worse off when any part of us is held back.

That means doing things differently. Our Modern Industrial Strategy is helping the whole country get ready for the economic change that is coming. We are investing in infrastructure. We are doing more than anyone since the Victorians to upgrade our railways. Our road-building programme is the largest since the 1970s. We have taken the big decision to build a third runway at Heathrow. We are driving up research spending – so we can be the ideas factory of the future. We are investing in our workforce – helping people train and

retrain. In our schools, we are keeping standards high. And where
40 Labour want to roll-back reform, scrap academies and kill off free schools, we will build more of them, because every child deserves a great start in life. Every child, in every town and city, across the whole country. […]

This is a moment of opportunity for our party. To champion
45 decency in our politics. To be the moderate, patriotic government this country needs. To be a party not for the few, not even for the many, but for everyone who works hard and plays by the rules. And it's a moment of opportunity for our country.

To honour the result of the referendum. To come together to
50 make a success of the decision we took. To build the homes we need. To get the next generation on the housing ladder. To help people who are struggling to make ends meet. To invest in our vital public services. To renew our precious National Health Service. To lead the world in the technologies of the future. To ensure every family and
55 every community shares the success. To tackle the burning injustices that hold people back. […]

Theresa May, Speech to the Conservative Party Conference, Birmingham, 3rd October 2018.

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/10/03/theresa-mays-conservative-party-conference-speech-full-transcript/

When studying conservative politics, one tends to emphasise the values of tradition, stability and order. Their anchoring policy in values of the past and in well-established practices is meant to guarantee social peace in the present. Yet these documents, two Conservative Party leader speeches and an extract from an academic book about yet another leader's campaign, spell out a wish for change, which at first glance may appear to be counter-intuitive. This paradox is a good illustration of the '*Le Présent dans le Passé*' topic in this year's curriculum. It may be explained by the deeply political nature of those texts. Whilst Benjamin Disraeli and David Cameron are hoping to secure power, Theresa May is already Prime Minister, though in a precarious position. Here we are given a section of

her most important speech of the year, delivered at the annual party conference. Its ancestor is the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations, addressed by Disraeli in document A and that he had set up himself. And the extract from the academic book also reflects on the party's electoral platform. Thus, in this electoral or peri-electoral context, the emphasis on action and flexibility is only natural. However, all three documents pose more fundamental questions about the social philosophy of conservatism and its ability to respond to the people's needs in the democratic age. They seek to move beyond the common perception (since it is political communication that we are looking at) according to which the party, owing to its valuing of the past, would necessarily retain the non-democratic ethos of that past. Here the three Tory leaders promote a social policy the aim of which is to improve the living conditions, perhaps even the welfare, of the population as a whole. Our analysis should therefore aim to assess whether in a rapidly-changing world, either that of the Industrial Revolution or of Brexit, the Tories' 'policy of sewage' (to borrow the words from document A) or modern 'compassionate conservatism', represent a true break from the past and provide a new ideological basis that would integrate a progressive agenda of social justice; or whether such reforms perpetuate a traditional paternalistic view of the world, whereby attempts to build social cohesion also serve to protect the private interests of an élite.

All three texts present the Tory party in a fragile political situation, which explains why each leader recommends change. Disraeli gave his 'Crystal Palace speech' three-and-a-half years after the Tories had lost the 1868 election to the Liberals. Disraeli himself had only been Prime Minister for a short time between February and December of that year. In fact, the party split that occurred in 1846 over the repeal of the Corn Laws, between the Peelites who had favoured free trade and the protectionists like Disraeli, had ushered in a period of "weakness" (38) and the Conservatives had been in power for little more than four-and-a half years put together since ("the brief period when [the Tories] possessed power", 40). Hence Disraeli's ironic but bitter comment on the "triumphant statesmen of Liberalism" (17-18), although this may point to his much-publicised rivalry with the Liberal leader (and PM) William Ewart Gladstone, which tended to prevail over party matters. In a similar fashion, by the time of the 2010 General Election, the Conservative Party had been out of power for over a decade since Labour had won in 1997, each successive leader ("four", we are reminded, B1) failing to win back the

trust of the voters. This sparked a real crisis of confidence in the party, who in turn emulated the enemies, Cameron being cast as "'the heir to Blair'" (although Seawright calls this a "mistake", 9), Theresa May both aping and mocking Labour's slogan ("To be a party not for the many, not even for the few, but for everyone", 46-47), and went back to conventional rhetoric as the Tories have had to "clean up a mess" left by Labour (13). By late 2018, May too was in troubled waters. She had only been PM for just over a year when she delivered that speech but was already the weakened leader of a party in turmoil. Her majority in parliament had collapsed after she had called a snap election in 2017. Her plan had been to strengthen the government's hand in "honour[ing] the result of the referendum" (49) and in leading the Brexit negotiations. But in the new hung parliament she only managed to hold on to power thanks to a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Northern Irish DUP and her party became even more divided over Brexit. Thus, each leader is aiming at securing internal unity as much as wider popular support. Before the Tory party divisions degenerated into the chaos that we know today, there had already been "internal policy debates" (B15-16, 20) and a "perennial […] discussion" (B17), giving the impression of long-standing differences. A crack had also appeared within the party during its time spent in opposition in the early 1870s, many criticising Disraeli for failing to efficiently challenge Gladstone.

Those internal and external political misfortunes are connected in each document to the party's difficulty to cater for the people's needs, especially in times of social hardship. Document B speaks of the necessity to "negate the image of [the Conservatives] as the 'nasty' and 'singularly economics' party" (8-9), a reputation confirmed (rather than earned) during the 1980s when the Thatcher governments, inspired by neo-liberal doctrine, had launched an ideological crusade against welfare dependency and the 'overbearing state' in the name of the free market; a reputation that Thatcher's successors at the head of the party had not managed or even attempted to reverse. The issue of the human cost of privileging economics over social matters had become particularly acute in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-8, the most serious of its kind since the 1930s, which is the backdrop to document B. In the intervening years between document B and document C, very little seems to have changed, as Theresa May speaks of "burning injustices" (55) inflicted on the British people and the "sacrifices" (15) they have had to make for an entire "decade" (1, 19). The Conservative-led coalition government had indeed introduced from

2010 onwards an extensive series of spending cuts amounting to more than 30 billion pounds in policing, housing, welfare and social services that were meant to offset the debts incurred by the Labour government in its attempt to manage the crisis. Though on line 8 May praises the balancing of the books visibly achieved ("Fixing our finances was necessary"), she is nonetheless aware of the social consequences as she bemoans the fate of the "left behind" (28) and announces that from now on "austerity […] is over" (20). Many social commentators have spoken of the social impact of austerity over the past decade, amongst which a sharp increase in poverty (notably child poverty), the spiralling use of food banks as well as rocketing crime rates – an aspect that May, as former Home Secretary during Cameron's premiership, could not have ignored. Reforms such as the 'bedroom tax' or the drastic reduction of eligibility for disability benefits proved deeply unpopular. Obviously May does not dwell on those embarrassing details for her party and she does present austerity as a necessary evil ("sound finances are essential", 14). But her use of the phrase "the left behind" may reveal a desire to reconnect with a part of the electorate that is deemed to have suffered from those measures. More tellingly, the same phrase was often used both by the media and politicians (sometimes simplistically) in the months following the Brexit referendum to account for the blue-collar Leave vote in economically depressed and politically disaffected parts of the UK that had not fully benefited from the globalised free market, notably the north of England. If, according to this line of analysis, Brexit could partly be explained as a protest vote not only against the E.U but also against the entire socio-economic "Establishment", May saw engaging with those people as paramount. Disraeli on the other hand does not point the finger of blame at his own party, telling them why and where they have gone wrong, but he merely suggests that in the fight against dominant liberalism, in "this great struggle between Toryism and Liberalism that has prevailed in this country during the last forty years" (4-5), the Tories could be doing more to broaden the appeal of their party. The approach is not reflexive but purely constructive. In this passage of the speech at least, Disraeli does not explicitly speak of social discontent that might warrant policy changes.

Thus, documents B and C advocate a clean break from the past. "No return to […] the past", says May (8-9), who presses for "change" (a word used three times: 23, 27, 33) and for something "different" (29, 31). She sees the present as a "turning point" (5-6) and a "moment of opportunity" (44, 48) and renewal ("the first time in a generation", "a historic

achievement", 4-5). Document B, because of its analytical outlook, speaks more clearly of "party transformation and self-renewal" (3, also 16), when the official 2010 election campaign slogan for the Tories had simply been 'Vote for change'. It is even "progress" that permeates the political language of modern conservatism (B5, C9), Cameron wanting to appear as a "progressive" (B7). Once again, document A stands slightly apart, Disraeli probably balking at using a concept (progress) which was then even less consensual than today and readily associated with his Liberal enemies. Disraeli is effectively recommending change: for his party to stop being perceived solely as the party of the landed élites, as had been the case since at least the Corn Laws, and to be catering for the needs of the industrial working classes. But this is not presented as change. Rather, it is passed off as a natural emanation of conservatism. "The elevation of the people" is a "great object of the Tory party" (1-3), even "the most important question for a statesman" (27-28), steeped in Tory tradition, a belief that characterised the party "many years ago" (12), and Disraeli quotes the "Factory Laws" (39) of former Tory governments (such as the 1844 Factory Act which regulated the hours of work for women and children). If change there is, it is implicitly given as an organic development both for party and society rather than an engineered break imposed upon them. Disraeli's conception is also hierarchical: his wish is to "improve and *elevate*" "the condition of the multitude" (6-7). Whether the "multitude" is strictly synonymous with the "people" (3, 14) for Disraeli remains unclear, but May's intention is simply to "improve the lives of everyone" (25) and to be as inclusive as possible, in a horizontal manner. She keeps repeating "everyone" (25, 47), "every child", "every child, in every town and city, across the whole country", "every family and every community" (42-43, 54-55). Conservatism thus redefined is one that listens – "we get it" says May (12) – and one that shows empathy: May wants "to champion decency in our politics" (44-45) whilst document B uses the phrase "compassionate conservatism" (6) and speaks of the "social responsibility" (7) of government. Both phrases have a turn-of-the-21st-century flavour and evoke a cross-Atlantic messaging behind politics. 'Compassionate conservatism' had indeed been one of the slogans during G.W. Bush's presidential campaign in the USA in 2000, and when the Tories were still in opposition, it was none other than Theresa May herself who, as party chairwoman, as early as 2002, had wished her party supported the idea of 'compassionate government' rather than the authoritarian anti-welfarism that had made them the "nasty party" in the eyes of so many (B8-9). May and Cameron thus belonged to a younger

brand of Tory politicians who sought to distance themselves from the recent Tory past and became intent on "decontaminating the brand" (B5), pleading for a conservatism of the centre ground that was closer to the social needs of the people. Such efforts characterised Cameron's tenure as leader from the moment of his election in 2005. They were inspired by so-called 'Red Toryism', an idea promoted by philosopher and think-tank director Philip Blond, and came to a head with the policy devised in the run-up to the 2010 election, "the Big Society" (B25).

Hence, those documents do not only provide a justification for evolution from the past but also offer a glimpse of the reforms recommended. What do they say about the nature of these reforms?

In the "Hugo Young memorial lecture" (26) in 2009, David Cameron had complained that poverty should be allowed to continue to exist side-by-side with wealth and spoken of the necessity to make the free market compatible with social solidarity. The idea was not to rely on the state, as British governments had done in the period of the 'post-war consensus' from 1945 to Thatcher's first election victory in 1979, but to foster within society a new kind of civic communitarianism that would help the worse-off. "The 'Big Society – Big Government' theme" (14-15) speaks in fact of an opposition. The policy recommended devolving power away from an overcentralised government machine to local government as well as to communities themselves, who should be assisted by private companies and encouraged to promote volunteerism (through co-ops, charities, grass-roots and philanthropical organisations). Interestingly, Theresa May also developed similar themes of compassion and care and mentioned repeatedly the ordinary, working people 'who just about manage', or here, "people who are struggling to make ends meet" (51-52) and "families [who had] felt the squeeze" (7). At the launch of her leadership campaign in July 2016, she vouched for "a different type of Conservatism […] [that] makes a break with the past".[1] Once elected, she sacked the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne who had been the chief architect of austerity since 2010 and appointed 'Red Tories' within her staff. In January 2017, she spoke not of a 'great' but of a 'shared society', and she too emphasised the role of charities and social enterprises. Quite unlike their mighty predecessor Margaret Thatcher who had infamously said 'there is no such

[1] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/

thing as society' in order to promote individual responsibility and attack welfare dependency, both Cameron and May placed a clear emphasis on 'society' and seemed willing to steer the party towards a post-Thatcherite, post neo-liberal centre. Disraeli's policy, derided by the Liberals as the "policy of sewage" (44-45) translated once the party was indeed returned to power in 1874 into a series of reform measures which pointed towards an increased role for the state: the Factory Act (1874) which protected the female workers and limited hours of work to ten hours a day, the Artisans' Dwelling Act (1875) for slum clearance and the building of housing estates the Public Health Act (1875) through which local authorities provided water and sanitation in their areas, and labour laws like the Employers and Workmen Act (1875), which provided the workers with some legal protection. This 'ministry of sewage', as it later came to be known in a nod to this speech, was but furthering a wider and more ambitious redefinition of the Conservative Party's objectives. This had started with Disraeli championing the 1867 Reform Act which had almost doubled the number of voters to two million by widening the franchise to a large part of the urban better-to-do working-classes. Seen in this light, Disraeli's social reform, just like Cameron's and May's plans, could be viewed as an additional effort to 'empower' the people in the widest sense. Filled with lofty ideals, the 'Crystal-Palace speech' later acquired a reputation as an informal manifesto of Tory-Party ideology.

Yet all three reform projects remain deliberately vague both about their method and their outcome. Disraeli had been egged on by his rivalry with Gladstone, who had been the first to endorse electoral reform. But he had come to accept that the economic weight of industrial Britain rested on the shoulders of the growing urban working classes and that there was no choice but to integrate them. The 1867 Act, often described as a 'leap in the dark', backfired, for as we know the first election under the new system in 1868 returned a Liberal majority. But the metaphor is Lord Derby's, not Disraeli's, who knew beforehand there was a high likelihood that the Liberals would win most of the city boroughs. His strategy was more of a long-term gamble. He truly believed in the power of traditionalism among the people. And the 'policy of sewage' could be a means to deliver in the long run a popular conservative vote, the party showing that it did not just satisfy the interests of the landed class from whom the Tories had traditionally drawn their support but also those of the newly enfranchised industrial centres. Having said that, the speech sounds like a collection of what would today be called soundbites, at best vague

guidelines for a sort of 'relief' policy about "the dwellings of the people […], air, light and water […] the regulating of their industry, the inspection of their toil […] the purity of their provisions" (29-34) rather than an integrated and coherent reform programme. Historians point out that it is only in the wake of the 1867 Act that parties started to tie themselves to a precise legislative agenda in the run-up to a general election, when traditional practice had in fact shied away from any notion of accountability, and Disraeli's speech may stand precisely at this juncture. In her speech, Theresa May remains equally vague. The "decade of austerity" is declared over (19-20) but she offers few details about how public services will run and how the wages of public workers will be un-"frozen" (6), especially since at the same time public spending is meant to decrease ("Debt as a share of the economy will continue to go down", 18; no more "uncontrolled borrowing", 9). In document B, fudge and haziness turn into the outright failure of the Tories to get their message across to the public, according to David Seawright's underwhelming assessment of the 'Big Society' programme: "internal policy debates do not necessarily translate into core election messages that can give clarity of argument to the mass electorate" (20-22) and "polling showed that […] voters […] were not sure what it [the Big Society] meant" (28-30). It could not "offer meaning to the campaign" (30-31). This undermined further the credibility of a campaign that already struggled to have the notion of compassionate conservatism taken seriously by the public, the extremely comical "hugging trees, huskies and even 'hoodies" (11-12) being on an ironic par with Disraeli's "triumphant statesmen of Liberalism" and "very rising member" (17-18, 43). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the party failed to win enough seats to secure a majority in the House of Commons in the next elections.

Such confusion might in fact stem from the very nature of the exercise. In pre-electoral times, and when a party is bitterly divided, blanket statements may be a way to avoid or deepen the divide. However, for all the talk of "debates" (B20), the Conservative Party seems to be in all three documents uniformly dictated to in its choices by the laws of the capitalist market. And for all the handwringing within the Cameron campaign about the "optimum level of state intervention under a Conservative government" (19), at least one part of the population (this is the only sort of public opinion mentioned here) suspected 'the Big Society' of being a cynical ploy to cut public services ("simply a code for shrinking the welfare state", 29) whilst support for unregulated capitalism remained.

Many critics indeed argued that shifting the responsibility of the state on to local communities, and ultimately individuals, amounted to a retrenchment of government intervention pure and simple. In other words, for those people this was *politics-as-usual*, or at least the politics that had prevailed since the 1980s throughout the years of Conservative and New Labour rule: the free economy, the minimal state and escalating levels of social inequality. May's speech begs the same kind of questions. She wants government to take on its responsibility but its role and its relation to civil society are not entirely clear. That is, of course, unless the private sector, and therefore questions about equality of access to services, are brought back into the equation. Mrs. May speaks of the "housing ladder" (51), not social housing. She declares "every child deserves a great start in life" (41-42) but picks "academies" and "free schools" (40-41) that are independent or semi-independent from the state (academies are run by trusts and receive extra support from corporate sponsors). "To renew our precious National Health Service" (53) could mean just about anything, such as involving a greater transfer of funding and management to the private sector. Equally, Disraeli seems intent on reassuring his fellow Conservatives that his ideas about social policy would not be implemented at the expense of private income. He recognises that this balance might be fragile: "The great problem is to be able to achieve such results without violating those principles of economic truth upon which the prosperity of all states depends" (9-11), to "at the same time inflict no injury on the wealth of the nation" (15-16). But he gives a triumphant assessment of past Tory performance, building the reputation of the 'party of economic efficiency', an image promoted by the party ever since: "The capital was never accumulated so quickly, […] wages were never higher, […] the employment of the people was never greater, and the country never wealthier" (23-25). Here, the Tories' deeply-rooted distrust of the 'big state' since it started expanding in the 18th century meets with a new kind of orthodoxy not at much of a variance with the economic liberalism advocated by their Liberal rivals. All in all, though social policy is deemed "not inferior" (A1-2) to other objectives, it is very much circumscribed by capitalist imperatives, be it "the relationship of the state to the individual" (B18) or "the national debt" (C4). Such limitations may explain the piecemeal, rather than systematic, approach chosen by those governments but also what may sometimes appear to be half-hearted commitment (Disraeli is known to have dozed off during cabinet meetings over his 'sewage laws') and a relatively minimal impact (famously the Artisans'

Dwelling Act was permissive and not obligatory, empowering but not forcing local authorities).

Yet, it is obviously difficult to measure the outcome of those policies from such documents, and perhaps their transformative potential can be gauged from looking at their philosophical underpinnings.

As already noted, Cameron and May insist on change, and in an attempt to galvanise the troops, May even promises a brighter "future" (13, 22, 38). However, it could be argued that they need a model from the past ("part of the ideological claim of the Conservative Party is that it draws from the well of British tradition", B12-13) and that this model is none other than Disraeli himself. Cameron used to say that Disraeli was his favourite Tory, whilst in her first party conference speech as leader in 2016, May praised the 19th-century statesman's work to heal divisions in society. In a sense both leaders also tapped into a more recent Tory past, that of the time of reconstruction after the second world war when Conservatives like Harold Macmillan, known for his concern for working-class housing, also claimed a Disraelian legacy. In his younger days, Disraeli himself had developed ideas about social responsibility that he had gladly associated with the past – the pre-industrial past. He belonged to a political group *Young England* that took issue with the destructive impact of industrialisation on the social fabric. They lamented the fact that the new economy had transformed people's lives and reshaped social relations beyond recognition. The result was a degradation of the nation's material as well as moral well-being. An entire mass of people was now living and working in the direst of conditions and gone were the harmony and stability of yore. Numerous writers joined in the chorus of execration against the lack of basic human decency of the industrial age, such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens, some of them fearing the resulting social unrest, like Thomas Carlyle in *Chartism* (1839) or *Past and Present* (1843). Disraeli made his own contribution to what has become known as the "Condition-of-England writings". The most famous one is his novels *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845), in which he warned of the dangers of letting society split into the 'rich' and the 'poor'. He denounced the 'rapacious' instincts of the commercialist and industrialist middle-class and recommended the benevolent protection of the aristocracy, who had an ancestral moral obligation towards their social inferiors (*noblesse oblige*). This reviving of the old bonds of society through paternalism would not only restore the poor to their dignity but also reunite the 'two

nations', hence the use of the moniker 'one-nation Toryism' when referring to Disraeli's social philosophy. After several decades in politics, Disraeli's instinctive dislike of the middle and commercial classes had somehow subsided, together with his romantic ideal. After all, he gave that speech in the middle of the Crystal Palace, originally built to celebrate the achievements of British industry. But in his 'policy of sewage' we may find evidence of an enduring paternalism which even extends to those fellow Conservatives at the banquet who may object to his proposals for he intimates he 'knows better' than them, and that this is 'all for their own good'. The question remains what outcome this paternalism, or in the case of May, maternalism, may produce. For in its original conception, one-nation Toryism is perhaps unsurprisingly non-transformative. Society is a hierarchical organic system in which every individual has a predetermined role and place, as well as a series of privileges and rights, those of the élite being to rule and protect, those of the people to work and obey. Everyone should know their place. And it is precisely thanks to its superior status that the natural governing aristocracy which should be at the head of the state will guarantee the stability and happiness of the weak and the poor and thereby prove to be their true allies. The Crown and the Church with its doctrine of Christian charity (and alluded to, lines A2-3) should be the other pillars. This is in stark opposition to the selfish pursuits of liberalism which pose a constant threat to people's economic security despite promises of greater equality. Such ideas may however clash with Cameron and May's 'progressive' agenda, unless of course progress does not involve a principled attack on the notion of social hierarchy, whether in its fantasised aristocratic form or in its modern neo-liberal version.

For indeed those leaders' actions may be guided by utility as well as by idealism. In the era of Brexit, as well as that of the 19th-century Industrial Revolution, social unrest could have extremely destabilising effects. The background of document A is the rise of the labour movement and of working-class activism. The number of unionised workers greatly increased from the 1860s onwards and they resorted to direct action such as strikes to obtain bargaining power. The pervasive fear of a social revolution resurfaced among the possessing classes. In this passage, Disraeli does not mention this at all but only speaks in a rather condemnatory fashion of the "habits of excess and of brutality" that he would like the "multitude" to be "weaned" from (34-35, 7). And naturally his audience still has in mind the revolutionary events of the Paris Commune just the year before, which had sent shivers down the spine of

the entire British Establishment. In the era of Cameron and May, the threat might come from an emerging 'precariat' alienated by economic as well as cultural insecurity, which has been ignored by government for too long and could now prove to be politically volatile. Though outright repression of revolutionary activity was not (and may still not) be discarded as an option, it is in fact the kind of social protection recommended in these documents which is intended to placate grievances and cool heads. The idea is to give just enough to the people, so their rebellious intentions are appeased, and their activism stops short of challenging the status quo. Disraeli's message is clear: the price for the possessing classes to pay in order to preserve social peace and maintain their position of prominence, that is, to avoid a revolution, was to agree to the extension of suffrage and have a better regard for the conditions of the labouring classes. Social protection becomes an instrument of social control. Perhaps aware of a potential loss of voters to other political parties, not least UKIP, and of the wider social implications of the rise of what has been dubbed 'populism', Cameron and May would like to connect with this specific electorate. For May, the task is particularly hard as it is her own party and a government that she was a member of that imposed the austerity she now wishes to end. But unlike Cameron and May who play contrite before a people that has been let down by the Tories, Disraeli does not have to deliver on past promises or present a substantial legislative agenda as the Tories' 'popular politics' is yet to be built. If anything, it is the new electorate that he has helped create which should be grateful for the vote as well as for their now-to-be improved conditions. Critics might say that this paternalism only brings limited emancipation, for the gratitude that it elicits from the people may coax them into allegiance or even submission. After all, Disraeli believes that service and protection warrant the deference of social inferiors. This may also explain why there is no soul-searching and no emphasis on party mutation in this extract of the speech. The Conservative Party was simply destined to become the 'national party', as he had declared after the passage of the reform bill. The aim was to achieve Tory hegemony by transcending the class struggle, not to encourage more hostility between society's ranks, or even, like the budding Marxists of his time, a 'class war'. Disraeli is not naïve enough to believe that class antagonism will die but he hopes that this kind of gratitude will at least breed social stability, which is the point made by admirers of Disraeli's pragmatism then and now. The flipside of stability, however, is the preservation of a status quo which is synonymous with a hierarchical society. Disraeli does not seek a literal democracy which would totally

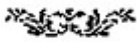
enfranchise the "multitude" already mentioned (a further five million men, not to speak of all women) as well as bring about greater equality, but rather a controlling system whereby all interests are subsumed under those of the political and economic élites. This is the true meaning of what was later called 'Tory democracy'. In the same fashion, neither B nor C wishes to address the issue of inequality. At no point during the Big Society campaign did Cameron deny that he was solely fighting for equality of opportunity, and not equality of outcome. He even used the notion of 'hierarchy' to distinguish between the volunteers and their recipients. Document C presents a hierarchy based on individual responsibility: on the one hand we find those who do not shy away from "hard work" (2, 3, 21, 47) and are "playing by the rules" (47) and implicitly, on the other hand, those who do not. This harks back to a distinction that was popular in the era of Disraeli (though arguably a lot older): 'the deserving' v. the 'undeserving poor'. Often during her premiership, May addressed the concerns of the 'ordinary, working families of the nation', to be pitted against an 'underclass' living off welfare benefits. Though potentially instating a new kind of division between 'two nations', May argues that it is the current system that is unfair: "at times of change in the past, the benefits have not been evenly spread" (27-28), in other words, it is the same working families who are funding benefits that they cannot claim themselves. In this line of thought, a truly meritocratic system would bring about true justice. However, what is to become of the poorest, the unemployed and the underprivileged here is not clear. May's implicit emphasis on the work ethic and self-reliance would in fact sit very well with Thatcher.

There is consistency in those approaches: the point of policy change is not to transform society but to stabilise it, or even to preserve its structure: a truly conservative policy. Power relations are to remain intact, both at home (between the different social actors, classes and "institutions", to be upheld, A2-3) and abroad (between the UK and the former "empire", to be maintained, A2, and perhaps too between the "patriotic" UK, which should "lead the world", C45, 54-55 and a floundering European Union). What is to be transformed instead is the party's image, or "brand", as Seawright puts it (5). Indeed, document B showcases a very good example of how party image has become dominant in contemporary politics, sometimes over content. Cameron's successor, May, knew this, although she showed on numerous occasions that she really struggled with her public image. This is far from being Disraeli's

case, who, at the same time as Britain was gradually entering the democratic age, had an almost postmodern understanding that in politics image is as important as reality, if not more so. For this reason, he is either held up as a brilliant strategist, or accused of opportunism and using self-serving tactics to get him 'up the greasy pole'. For example, the 1867 Reform was conceived in such a way that counties and rural boroughs would without fail return Tory candidates. The Liberals and the Radicals could have the cities but the power of 'the county squire' remained unthreatened. Besides, the enfranchising of the urban 'mob' would drive former middle-class Liberal voters into the fold of the Tory party, seen as more able to enforce law and order. To see document A as one of the first formulations of welfarism would thus be anachronistic. Disraeli was not a believer in a 'welfare state'. Reform was almost 'rhetorical', that is, necessary in assisting political objectives. The same question can be asked about the pragmatism of "moderate" (C45) Cameron and May. For instance, those who had seen the Big Society as a thinly-disguised rolling-back-of-the-state felt vindicated when the implementation of the programme coincided with the introduction of spending cuts once Cameron became PM. Likewise, both his and May's disregard of social scientists' opinion that poor relief depending on volunteering and private charity is bound to fail reignites the debate about the potential sheltering of private interests behind a solely strategic 'compassionate conservatism'.

As we come to the end of our analysis, it appears that the aim of conservative social policy as presented in those documents is to strike the right balance between being bold enough for change when necessary and retaining from the past what has consistently shown to be efficient. This is one possible interpretation of the topic '*Le Passé dans le Présent'*. In the name of social and economic stability, Disraeli and his 'one-nation' successors Cameron and May favoured a pragmatic and moderate centre-ground which would reconcile social relief with capitalist imperatives and provide a harmonious platform where private interests would enhance, not counter, the public good / sector. However, critics have been quick to point out that the effects of their policies, both social and political, have been limited. Disraelian 'Tory democracy', whose intention was to uphold traditions and established institutions but also offer political democracy and a social programme that would benefit the lower echelons of society, did breed a Tory working-class electorate but did not respond adequately enough to social discontent as the rise of the labour left at the turn of the 20th century was unhampered. More recent attempts at one-nation Toryism

have had mixed results, to say the least. As new Conservative leader, Cameron sought to distance himself from the Thatcherite legacy and to revive a less individualistic strand of conservatism. But the emergency large-scale cuts in public expenditure and temporary austerity programmes he introduced once he became Prime Minister in 2010 jeopardised the social cohesion that he claimed to hold so dear. By 2013, however, Cameron announced that public cuts would become 'permanent' and that his aim was to create a 'leaner, more efficient state'. On the day after Thatcher's death in the same year, he also said 'in a way, we're all Thatcherites now'. In the wake of the Brexit referendum, May seemed more 'left wing' than Cameron, never once publicly attacking the N.H.S. for instance, and trying to foster blue-collar conservatism. Nonetheless she did not opt for tax-and-spend or redistributive policies and continued to roll out Universal Credit, the Coalition's mangled reform of the social benefits system. Now, with Brexit, growth could be endangered in the future, slashing tax revenues and putting further pressure on social expenditure.[2] It is thus very difficult to determine how much this sort of Tory pragmatism is a credible stab at stability and moderation or the preservation of private interests under the guise of the public good. Social policies at a minimal cost may defuse social unrest and boost the paternalistic profile of the élites but, short of social solidarity, would fail to challenge the injustices that they decry. The aim of conservatism here would be the conservation – precisely – of the traditional *and unequal* structure of society. Ultimately, 'compassionate conservatism' would be first and foremost an image, designed to bring about social harmony mainly by its power of conviction, the party reverting to it multiple times, in a sort of a never-ending cycle of promises and disappointments, showing in the process how difficult it is to wrench oneself from the past and to invent new politics.



[2] https://journals.openedition.org/osb/2303