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Conservative Party Modernisation and David Cameron's Politics of the Family

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Introduction

A key feature of David Cameron's electoral appeal is his carefully cultivated image as a 'family man'. Cameron has repeatedly stressed the importance of the family to his political views and stated his desire to see marriage rewarded through the tax system. At the same time, Cameron has presented himself as a modernising leader, keen to demonstrate that he and his party are in touch with contemporary society. Central to this effort to detoxify the Conservative brand has been an emphasis on social liberalism. The potential conflict between these two objectives reflects the division in the party between social liberals and traditionalists, which has become increasingly apparent over the past decade. Within the context of the debate over modernisation, this article examines Conservative Party policy and rhetoric on social and moral issues since 1997, particularly gay rights and family policy. It argues that Cameron has effectively balanced his commitment to social liberalism with his emphasis on the centrality of family policy, notably by his acceptance of civil partnerships as of equal value to marriage. However, the article suggests that a significant divide remains in the Conservative party between social liberals and traditionalists, so in this respect Cameron's modernisation project remains far from complete.

Mods versus Rockers: Conservative divisions over social and moral issues

Social and moral issues have long been of concern to Conservatives, and form a distinctive aspect of conservatism. The notion that positioning on such issues is an important divide for Conservatives is an increasingly prevalent one, linked to the need to develop a post-Thatcherite agenda. Such issues have also come to form a more central feature of Conservative politics as self-identification as the anti-socialist party has diminished. The

potential pitfalls were highlighted however, by the ill-fated 'Back to Basics' campaign of 1993-94. This effort to re-launch John Major's government sought to divert attention to social issues after the economic debacle of withdrawal from the ERM, but quickly unravelled in the face of allegations of sleaze and immoral behaviour on the part of Conservative MPs. The experience of this widely ridiculed campaign influenced the intraparty debate over how the party should modernise after the 1997 general election. Whilst many Conservatives agreed the party should be more circumspect about making moralistic pronouncements, social liberals and social conservatives disagreed over whether and how they should reorientate their position on issues such as gay rights and marriage.

Commenting on this disagreement in 1998 *The Times* argued that the key dividing line in the Conservative Party was no longer over Europe or between Left and Right, but that: 'the real division is between liberals and reactionaries, modernisers and traditionalists, those armed primarily with principle and those whose first instinct is to take shelter in institutions'. Furthermore, for the Conservatives to regain power, the 'liberals must first win the battle of ideas within their party'. The leader went on:

The more important argument the Conservative Party still needs to have is between those sensitive to changing times and those inclined to nostalgia. It is a battle, we believe, between Tory Mods and Rockers. In the Sixties the former were those comfortable with change, the latter those who followed old fads. It is the difference between those with a gaze fixed on new horizons and those either blinkered or still dreaming.

Regardless of their personal preferences, electoral necessity demanded that Conservatives recognise the changing society in which they had to operate. 'Wise Conservatives deal with the world as it is, not as it should be or once was. They respect the changing landscape and are sensitive to its contours'. The Conservatives could demonstrate this pragmatic attitude 'by showing a liberal face to the electorate and extending an emancipating hand to all voters', and by taking 'government out of the boardroom and the bedroom', contrasting themselves with an interventionist statist Labour Party.¹

The version of modernisation sponsored by *The Times* in 1998 bears a notable resemblance to that advanced by David Cameron since he became Conservative Party leader in December 2005. Nonetheless, positioning on the social and moral dimension has been the source of significant disagreement within the party, interlaced with the broader strategic question of how to change the party in order to broaden the Conservatives' appeal. This debate reflects in

part the ideological legacy of Thatcherism which has continued to frame party positioning since 1997. For Heppell, ‘Thatcherism constituted a self-conscious ideological strategy to redefine the Conservatives as a party of *economic liberalism, national independence and moral authoritarianism*’.² Whilst the doctrines of economic liberalism and national independence (at least in terms of Euro-scepticism) now appear to be firmly embedded in the party, moral authoritarianism does not have the same grip. It has, however, been a significant feature of the debate over gay rights and family policy since 1997. The following sections review Conservative positioning on these issues under the leadership of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard. The article then considers Cameron’s approach in relation to his predecessors as leader of the opposition since 1997.

Hague: Bandwagon politics?

During his leadership campaign and in the early part of his tenure William Hague was keen to portray himself as embodying a fresh face for conservatism. As such, he recognised the need to present himself and his party as at ease with modern British society, including its non-traditional and multicultural aspects. Another element of this strategy was a more liberal approach and softer tone on sexual and moral issues such as gay rights. In this respect, Hague could point to his own record as having voted to equalise the age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual acts at 16. He also sent a message of support to a Gay Pride event and publicly rebuked members of the ‘old guard’ such as Norman Tebbit who criticised his stance on homosexual rights and multiculturalism.

However, this socially inclusive and liberal-minded conservatism, even if it reflected Hague’s own personal preferences, was short-lived. The most obvious reason for this is that it did not reflect the opinion of the majority of Conservative MPs, and Hague failed to convince them to alter their approach. For example in the 1998 vote on lowering the age of consent for gay sex to 16, only sixteen Conservative MPs voted in favour of equalisation.³ The Conservatives also campaigned in favour of the retention of Section 28, with Hague imposing a three-line whip against the government’s proposal to abolish it. This was just one element in a panoply of populist positions adopted by Hague throughout 1999 and 2000, on issues such as asylum, Europe, fuel duty and the Tony Martin case. For Matthew Waites, these kind of issues were deliberately linked together by the Conservatives in an effort to define the party under Hague, and ‘may be interpreted as including partially-coded appeals to certain racist and homophobic

elements of the electorate, presenting Conservatives as defendants of the imagined British nation beloved of traditionalists, in contrast to the modernising multiculturalist Blairites'.⁴

Hague's hard line on Section 28 led to the defections to Labour of MP Shaun Woodward, who had been sacked from the frontbench for refusing to support it; and Ivan Massow, the prominent Conservative businessman who had sought the party's nomination as candidate for Mayor of London. Massow lambasted the 'skinhead conservatism that has marked the "tabloidification" of the Conservatives' and claimed that on the issues of race and sex Hague had been manipulated against his better instincts by 'loony right-wingers' amongst the party membership, who 'set the tone of the party by their sheer dedication to "the cause"'.⁵

Populist appeal, as Waites suggests, was undoubtedly a factor in the Conservative leadership's decision to oppose the repeal of Section 28 during Labour's first term. Party pressures, as Massow argues, were also a factor, although the picture he presents of a leader powerless to resist the wider membership is overdone. A more telling factor on Hague's decision was opinion within his own shadow cabinet and parliamentary party, illustrated by the free votes on the age of consent. The position on Section 28 can also be seen as part of a wider move towards a more traditionally Conservative stance on family life and marriage, which quickly encroached upon Hague's early flirtation with a socially liberal agenda. By the time the government began its legislative attempts to repeal Section 28 in 1999, the Conservatives' traditional stance on family values was firmly embedded. Indeed, the first hints of this outlook were contained in Hague's 1997 conference speech, when he declared that: 'I personally believe that it is best for children to be brought up in a traditional family. That means their mother and their father in their home'. In this speech, he attempted to combine a pro-family stance with a liberal agenda. He noted that Conservatives should show 'understanding and tolerance of people making their own decisions about how they lead their lives', whilst also claiming 'that doesn't alter our unshakeable belief in the enduring value of traditional family life'.⁶

The flagship policy adopted on the family under Hague was a commitment to introduce a new married couple's tax allowance, replacing that which had been finally abolished in the April 2000 budget. This would, the 2001 manifesto claimed, be worth £1000 a year to married couples. In addition, Child Tax Credit for families with a child under 5 would be

increased by £200 a year, and those with children under 11 and not using all or part of their personal tax allowance would be able to transfer it to their working spouse.⁷

Hague's approach to social, moral, and sexual politics was a consistent part of the core vote strategy he adopted from the October 1998 conference onwards, initially under the 'British Way' label, and later as the 'Common Sense Revolution'. Like Duncan Smith and Cameron in subsequent years, Hague hoped to address the charge that the Conservatives were not interested in society, and were merely concerned with economics. In this respect, Hague was engaged with 'one of the most important imperatives of post-Thatcher conservatism', namely the attempt to balance the Thatcherite legacy with the construction of a Conservative politics that 'could escape the allegations of harshness and economic monomania' that had dogged Thatcherism.⁸ The form that this took however, illustrated the enduring hold of the traditional values promoted by Thatcher on the Conservative Party. For Waites, 'Thatcherism signalled the resilience of homophobia on the political right',⁹ and Hague's stance on Section 28 was consistent with this. His prescriptive stance on marriage and the desirability of 'traditional' families was in harmony with the socially authoritarian aspects of New Right thinking, and parallels can be drawn with the 'compassionate conservatism' of George W. Bush. In this sense Hague's offering at the 2001 election – of economic liberalism, vigorous nationalism, and traditional social values – was firmly within Thatcherite parameters.

A final consequence of Hague's strategy was to increase division within the party on the social, sexual and moral policy divide, and to highlight the emerging rupture between mods and rockers. His initial dalliance with social liberalism gave credence to the modernising view that embracing societal change was essential for Conservative electoral revival, and his abandonment of it provided the modernisers with ammunition with which to attack his leadership. Intraparty discord over social, sexual and moral issues would intensify under his successor.

Duncan Smith and Howard: (mis)managing divisions

Duncan Smith attempted both to re-orientate the Conservatives' policy focus towards public services and social justice, and to downplay 'core-vote' campaign themes such as tax, Europe, and immigration. However, he did not regard this as modernisation, preferring instead to highlight his agenda for 'change'.¹⁰ Duncan Smith's distaste for the concept of modernisation derived from its association with his rival in the 2001 leadership election,

Michael Portillo, who as the doyen of the mods had campaigned on a socially liberal platform. It also reflected his own traditionalist leanings on social and moral issues. These came to the fore in 2002, when Duncan Smith opted to impose a three-line whip against government proposals to grant adoption rights to unmarried and gay couples on an equal basis with married couples. For the Conservatives this question went to the heart of the debate over the status of marriage that had featured heavily during the Hague years. Should they take a liberal view and accept these different forms of family life, or continue to advocate their preferred traditional model for raising children?

Duncan Smith's instinctive response was to seek to defend the traditional view of marriage, but he was unable to carry a significant element of his party with him. Thirty-five Conservatives absented themselves from the Commons, and eight MPs defied the whip and voted against the party line. The most high profile rebel was John Bercow who resigned from the Shadow Cabinet, because he both felt strongly about the issue and was unhappy with the direction of the party under Duncan Smith's leadership. Not entirely inaccurately, Duncan Smith interpreted this rebellion as a conspiracy designed to destabilise his position, leading him to make his desperate call for the party to 'unite or die'.¹¹

Duncan Smith's leadership was badly damaged by his mishandling of what became known as the 'gay adoption' episode. It exposed both his ineptitude as a party leader and the problematic context he faced. The party was clearly divided, and a modernising leader would have faced similar (or perhaps even more acute) difficulties in terms of keeping the party together. However, the incident also exposed Duncan Smith's personal failings and the barely-muffled murmurs of discontent with his leadership became thunderous. However, lessons were learnt both by himself and his successors as leader, who from then on allowed free votes on subjects seen as a matters of conscience – for example the repeal of Section 28, which was finally achieved in 2003. Keen to avoid a repeat of the rebellion over adoption, Duncan Smith and his Party Chairman, David Davis, devised a compromise on Section 28 whereby Conservative MPs were ordered to vote for a Conservative amendment to replace rather than abolish the Clause. By suggest a middle-way between abolition and retention the leadership hoped to garner support from both modernisers and traditionalists, thus presenting an image of unity to the electorate.¹² However, another amendment to retain Section 28 was also tabled by the traditionalists Edward Leigh and Ann Widdecombe. On a free vote, 71 Conservatives supported this amendment (including Duncan Smith and Michael Howard)

whilst just 23 voted against (although on this occasion the clause was finally scrapped). As such, the Conservatives clearly remained fundamentally divided on these issues, although the free-vote tactic helped defuse them in party management terms.

This pattern was repeated under Duncan Smith's successor, Michael Howard. Howard sought to restore party discipline and the image of public unity. Howard's strategy reveals an effort to downplay party divisions on a number of controversial social, sexual and moral questions by allowing free votes. Notably, he opted for free votes on the Civil Partnership Bill, which gave gay couples entering into a civil partnership the same rights as married couples; and on the Gender Recognition Bill, which gave transsexuals legal recognition and the right to marry in their adopted sex.¹³ One effect of the free votes was that many Conservative MPs did not vote at all, but those that did vote revealed the depth of the split on such issues in the party. On the Gender Recognition Bill, a total of 36 Conservative MPs voted in favour of either Second or Third Reading (or both) and a total of 44 Conservative MPs voted against either Second or Third Reading (or both). Combining the votes on the Second and Third Readings of the Civil Partnership Bill reveals 'similarly stark splits', with a total of 74 voting in favour on at least one occasion, and 49 opposing it at least once.¹⁴

Howard's relatively brief tenure as leader of the Conservative Party can therefore be regarded as period of better party management tactics on the social, sexual and moral policy cleavage, but it was still characterised by significant internal division on such questions. Howard also lacked a clear strategy to improve the image of the party by moderating positions on such issues: whilst morality/individual behaviour has remained a low salience issue in terms of having a direct impact on how people vote, such issues may affect a party's image.

Under Howard, the party gave the impression that it was reluctantly conceding to social change, rather than welcoming and adapting to it enthusiastically. The following section considers whether David Cameron has finally resolved this problem by forging a distinctive position on the social, sexual and moral policy divide. If Cameron has been able to resolve this question, it will mark an important conclusion to the ideological differences highlighted by this case study, and indicate strategic learning from past mistakes by the party leadership.

David Cameron: The family man?

David Cameron has repeatedly sought to emphasise his credentials as a ‘family man’. He has put the family at the heart of his policy agenda and his public image, and has stated on a number of occasions that his family is more important to him than his political ambitions. In some key respects (discussed below) Cameron’s policy on the family represents a clear continuation of the direction set by Iain Duncan Smith, who he appointed Chair of his Social Justice Policy Group in December 2005, and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in May 2010. Cameron has frequently claimed that his central priority is to ‘mend Britain’s broken society’, and has argued that strengthening families is central to this. Yet in contrast to Duncan Smith and Howard, Cameron has also sought to portray himself as a social liberal, at ease with contemporary British society. In 2005, the central message of his leadership campaign was that the party must ‘change to win’. He described himself as a ‘liberal Conservative’, and deliberately went ‘out of his way to strike a very different note about asylum seekers’, and gave strong support to civil partnerships for same-sex couples.¹⁵ This liberal element of Cameron’s approach conforms to the strategy identified by Thomas Quinn, of changing party image by moving closer to groups not traditionally part of the Conservative support base, rather than necessarily through a wholesale policy shift.¹⁶ The question for Cameron is whether this socially liberal image can be successfully balanced (or maintained) with a strong family policy.

In June 2008 Cameron gave a speech entitled ‘Stronger Families’ to Relate, the family counselling service. In it, he echoed William Hague’s comments a decade earlier, when he noted that ‘for too long, politicians here have been afraid of getting into this territory, for fear of looking old-fashioned or preachy’.¹⁷ His message that he wished to see marriage once again as a ‘positive social norm’ was one that could have appeared in a speech by any of his three predecessors as leader of the opposition. The family, he observed, is the ‘best institution’ for raising children, and (again echoing policy under Hague) reiterated his commitment to delivering a tax break for married couples, a pledge he first made during his leadership campaign (although one that has fallen victim, at least temporarily, to the demands of coalition with the Liberal Democrats). Cameron also made clear that any tax cuts for married couples would also apply equally to people in civil partnerships. This represented a significant shift in the Conservatives’ attitude towards homosexuality, and fitted with his efforts to rebrand the party as more socially inclusive and tolerant. Nonetheless, in essence Cameron’s position remains fundamentally Conservative and consistent with that of his

predecessors, in that he regards marriage as the best model of family life and believes that the state should recognise and promote it in some way.

As under Iain Duncan Smith, supporting marriage has been explicitly linked by Cameron to the issue of social justice and his stated aim to renew the societal fabric. Commenting on the publication of the Social Justice Policy Group's report *Breakthrough Britain* in July 2007, Cameron said: 'I welcome this report's emphasis on the family, and on marriage, as the basis for the social progress we all want to see' adding that: 'If we can get the family right, we can fix our broken society'.¹⁸ The report itself argues, in effect, that unmarried couples are damaging society, as 'the ongoing rise in family breakdown affecting young children has been driven by the dissolution of cohabiting partnerships', the majority of which 'are less stable than marriage'.¹⁹ Family breakdown is correlated with crime, drug abuse, educational failure and anti-social behaviour. The state should therefore 'create a positive policy bias in support of marriage' and end the 'downgrading' of marriage in official discourse which fails to recognise the 'marked discrepancies in the stability of married and cohabiting couples'.²⁰

Cameron has offered some reassurance to Conservative traditionalists with his strong message on the importance of the family. This aspect of his policy programme remains compatible with the fundamental tenants of Thatcherism, and has consequently been the cause of some unease amongst the modernisers. Where he differs from his predecessors, however, is that his broader programme of modernisation has allowed him to make marriage and the traditional family the centre of his social policy without appearing intolerant to other groups, and thus undermining the whole project. The formation of a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats offers Cameron the opportunity to further the modernisation of his party by emphasising its liberal aspects, with less hindrance from the Conservative right-wing. Indeed, Cameron's liberalising modernisation strategy as leader of the opposition was an essential precursor to his alliance with Nick Clegg. It is impossible, for example, to imagine the two parties linking-up in 2005 (had the election result made it a mathematical possibility).

However, the area of family policy could prove to be a cause of significant tension between the coalition partners. The coalition agreement published in May 2010 notes that the government: 'will bring forward plans to reduce the couple penalty in the tax credit system as we make savings from our welfare reform plans'.²¹ This represents a watered-down version

of the Conservative manifesto pledge to ‘*end* the couple penalty’ and ‘recognise marriage and civil partnerships in the tax system’²² – a policy that was opposed by the Liberal Democrats. Nonetheless, the two parties have found common ground by prioritising increasing the personal allowance for income tax over other tax cuts, and the large fiscal deficit provides Cameron with cover for not fulfilling his undertaking on a tax break for married couples.

Given the state of the public finances and the constraints of coalition it is unlikely that the Conservatives will seek to bring forward a radical change in the tax system targeted at marriage in the near-term, although a symbolic gesture remains possible. Indeed, in his emergency budget in June 2010 the Chancellor George Osborne announced a number of measures that could be seen as penalising families, including a three-year child benefit freeze, and deep cuts in child tax credits. The Treasury has also made it clear to the Department of Work and Pensions that further radical welfare reform is needed to deliver further savings – something that will inevitably hit the poorest hardest and cause discontent amongst Liberal Democrats.

Conclusion

Over the last ten years the most significant division in the Conservative Party has been along the social, sexual and moral policy divide. Cameron’s rebranding of the party as more tolerant and inclusive cannot disguise the fact that over the past decade on issues such as Section 28, civil partnerships and gay adoption the Conservatives have been deeply divided. Unlike in the economic sphere, the ideological ascendancy of Thatcherism is far from complete, but socially authoritarian spokespeople for ‘Victorian values’ remain vocal on the party’s backbenches. Since entering opposition in 1997 the debate between modernisers and traditionalists on social issues has also become inextricably intertwined with the wider question of how the party should seek to revive its electoral fortunes. A consensus quickly emerged in the party that a key factor in the electoral success of New Labour was the perception that Conservatives were disinterested in, and unable to offer solutions to, problems beyond the economic sphere. Conservatives did not agree, however, on how to address this difficulty. Should they seek to extend the economic liberalism of Thatcherism into the social sphere, or aim to ‘remoralise’ politics in a manner akin to American Republicans?

Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all quickly abandoned initial tentative moves towards social liberalism when they failed to yield positive opinion poll results and came under fire from within the party. A renewed emphasis on the family did occur under Hague's leadership, although along strictly traditionalist Conservative lines, involving an implicit (and occasionally explicit) criticism of the Thatcher and Major governments for failing to do enough to support marriage, particularly through the tax system. Combined with his hard-line on Section 28, this amounted to a populist appeal to the Conservative core vote. Under Duncan Smith, a significant broadening of the party's agenda on social issues occurred, particularly in terms of his efforts to position the party as concerned with poverty, social exclusion and 'championing the vulnerable'. If this strategy had been pursued for longer, it may have helped dispel the Conservatives' image as selfish and socially exclusive. However, in some ways the socially conservative approach taken on these issues (for example the emphasis on marriage) may have actually reinforced public perception that the party was old-fashioned and stuck in the past, and risked alienating support amongst excluded groups such as single parents. Under Howard, the party attempted to downplay divisions on the social, sexual and moral policy divide, and although he did not solve them he was more successful in party management terms. Public disunity between mods and rockers subsided, and the party went into the 2005 election with the vague pledge to 'govern in the interests of everyone', whether they be 'black or white, young or old, straight or gay, rural or urban, rich or poor'.²³

Cameron enjoyed a more favourable context than his three predecessors for the successful pursuit of a modernisation strategy. Most of New Labour's legislative programme for sexual equality was complete by the end of their second term, so he could reasonably argue that the Conservatives simply had to accept this new reality, as it would be very difficult to reverse it. Failure at three previous general elections also gave him more room for manoeuvre, as even the most intransigent Conservatives began to acknowledge the need for some sort of change. Most fundamentally however, Cameron benefitted from a much more propitious electoral context – firstly with the final tired years of the Blair premiership, and latterly with the extraordinary implosion of Brown's. It was these auspicious circumstances and the accompanying Conservative poll leads that muted criticism from traditionalists and allowed Cameron to maintain his modernising course, and ultimately to form a civil partnership few had predicted: with Nick Clegg.

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- ² Tim Heppell, 'The ideological composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party 1992-97', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 4(2), 2002, p. 302, original emphasis.
- ³ Peter Dorey, 'Conservative policy under Hague', in M. Garnett and P. Lynch (eds.) *The Conservatives in Crisis*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 134.
- ⁴ Matthew Waites, 'Regulation of Sexuality: Age of Consent, Section 28 and Sex Education', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 54(3), 2001, p. 503.
- ⁵ Ivan Massow, 'Nightmare on Downing Street', *New Statesman*, 2 October 2000.
- ⁶ William Hague, 'Speech to the Conservative Party Conference', 10 October 1997.
- ⁷ *Time for Common Sense*, Conservative Party General Election Manifesto, 2001, pp. 3-4.
- ⁸ Martin Durham, 'The Conservative Party, New Labour and the Politics of the Family', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 54(3), 2001, p. 471.
- ⁹ Waites, *op. cit.*, p. 502.
- ¹⁰ Richard Hayton and Timothy Heppell, 'The Quiet Man of British Politics: the Rise, Fall and Significance of Iain Duncan Smith', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 63(3), 2010, pp. 425-445.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 432-3.
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- ¹³ Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'Mapping Conservative divisions under Howard', 2004. Downloaded from: <http://www.revolt.co.uk/Conservative%20splits.pdf>
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- ¹⁵ Andrew Rawnsley, 'Focus: The David Cameron Interview', *The Guardian*, 18 December 2005.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Quinn, 'The Conservative Party and the "Centre Ground" of British Politics', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 18(2), 2008, pp. 179-199.
- ¹⁷ David Cameron, 'Stronger Families', speech to Relate, 9 June 2008.
- ¹⁸ David Cameron, quoted in 'News story: Fixing our broken society', 10 July 2007. Available at: http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2007/07/Fixing_our_broken_society.aspx
- ¹⁹ Social Justice Policy Group (SJPG) *Breakthrough Britain (Volume 1): Family Breakdown*, London, SJPG, 2007, p. 3.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 5-6.
- ²¹ *The Coalition: Our programme for government*, London, HM Government, 2010, p. 19.
- ²² *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, Conservative Party General Election Manifesto, 2010, p. 41, *emphasis added*.
- ²³ *It's Time for Action*, Conservative Party General Election Manifesto, 2005, p. 1.