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Slow burn: Re-examining the legacy of Conservative Party modernization

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This article reconsiders the longer-term legacy of David Cameron's attempts to 'modernize' the Conservative Party. In doing so, we aim to make three main contributions to existing scholarship. Firstly, whilst Cameron's modernization project is judged to have been a failure by most scholars, we show that Conservative leaders post-Cameron have continued a process of party adaptation that exhibits striking continuities with many of its key elements. Secondly, whilst these developments have co-existed alongside a ratcheting up of seemingly 'anti-modernizing' populist and nationalist rhetoric, we contend that such moves show important continuities with Cameron's own attempts to balance modernization with gestures towards Thatcherite politics. Thirdly, we offer a reconceptualization of Conservative Party modernization as a fluid and contingent aspect of Conservative Party statecraft marked by an oscillation between, and sometimes a fusing of, modernizing rhetoric with more traditional Tory appeals.

Keywords: Conservative Party; modernization; statecraft; David Cameron; Theresa May; Boris Johnson.

1. Introduction

After fourteen years in government, the Conservative Party find themselves in opposition following a landslide electoral defeat. The soul-searching and process of political renewal which tends to accompany such defeats is, at the time of writing, only beginning to get under way. The situation draws to mind the leadership

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and legacy of David Cameron. Upon becoming party leader in 2005, Cameron was tasked with reviving the party's fortunes after three successive general election losses. To restore the party's electability, Cameron embarked on a project of party modernization. This aimed to broaden the party's electoral appeal by signalling a putative break with some of the more toxic elements of Thatcherism. However, by the end of his leadership, the modernization project was widely judged to have been a failure (Kerr and Hayton 2015; Bochel and Powell 2018; Newman and Hayton, 2022), with some scholars pointing to a more general right-wing populist 'backlash' against modernization (Ford and Goodwin 2014; Kerr et al., 2018).

This article undertakes an audit of Conservative Party modernization in the post-Cameron era. In doing this, we argue that successive Conservative leaders have continued a process of party adaptation that exhibits striking continuities with key elements of Cameron's modernization project. In particular, Tory leaders, to varying degrees, have: promoted greater diversity and descriptive representation of minoritized groups within the party; placed increased emphasis on 'levelling-up' agendas and a more interventionist economic policy; and have stressed their commitment to tackling the climate crisis.

We also argue that these continuities extend to aspects of more recent Conservative Party adaptation which ostensibly mark a shift away from Cameron's modernization project; namely, the amplifying of English nationalist, populist rhetoric and a hardening of the party's stance on the 'core vote' issues of immigration and Europe. We contend that while these changes would not be seen as 'modernizing' within the existing literature, important continuities can be identified if we reconsider the character of Cameron's modernization project as part of a broader statecraft that sought to balance a reliance on modernization with gestures towards Thatcherite politics.

In what follows we argue that, whilst Cameron's modernization was ostensibly an attempt to soften the party's Thatcherite image, Cameron periodically faced discontent from the right of the party and had to respond in particular to the electoral threat posed by UKIP, which encouraged the invocation of more traditional Thatcherite themes. Interestingly, some of these strategic moves were framed within the language of modernization. As such, we reconceptualize Conservative modernization as a fluid and contingent aspect of party statecraft.

Statecraft here is used to denote the strategic manoeuvring Conservative leaders engage in to best secure a series of key objectives—party management, a winning electoral strategy, and political argument hegemony—in order to secure their (re)election and achieve an image of governing competence in office (Bulpitt 1986 for a recent application see (Critch, 2024; Hayton 2024). We see modernization as a part of this in the sense that we consider it a discursive tool which has been deployed by a number of Conservative leaders as part of attempts to construct a compelling political argument and electoral strategy. However, we also note

how the discourse of modernization has been used in tandem or even fused with appeals to more traditional Conservative politics, which play a key role in internal party management and electoral strategy. Overall, we contend that Conservative statecraft, in seeking to construct a narrative which can unite the party and appeal to its core voter base *and* to broader constituencies, has been characterized in recent years by a strategic oscillation between modernization and more traditional Thatcherite themes.

In exploring this dynamic, our aim is to show that Conservative Party modernization, previously written off as a failure by the majority of scholars, continues to evolve in the post-Cameron era as a form of statecraft seeking to strike a balance between Thatcherite conservatism, which appeals to the party's parliamentarians and core base, and the introduction of a more modern, less toxic and divisive politics that has a broader electoral appeal.

2. Modernization: party adaptation, but of what kind?

As a starting point for our analyses, it is important to define modernization. In the literatures we engage with here, modernization is primarily associated with processes of party adaptation. Both Labour and Conservatives are seen to have gone through modernizations in response to periods of prolonged electoral failure (Butler and King 1965; Gamble 1994; Hay 1999; Denham and O'Hara 2007). Within such modernizations, the diagnosis is often that parties have become electorally unviable because they have fallen 'behind the times' or are 'stuck in the past', failing to meet the concerns of modern voters. Blair's tenure as Labour leader is considered an archetypal example of this. In rebranding the party as 'New Labour', Blair consciously sought to project an idea that Labour was attuned to the new realities of globalized capitalism. This step was taken to distance the party from the 'spectre of "Old Labour" in government' whose supposed failures, particularly around the 'Winter of Discontent' were judged as pivotal to Labour's electoral struggles (Hay 1999). Scholars have noted that this modernization was multifaceted, involving changes to policy, party organization, and presentation (Massey 2020).

Analyses of Conservative modernization under David Cameron tend to proceed along similar lines. When Cameron became Conservative leader, he was tasked with restoring the party's electability after three successive election defeats. Cameron's solution was to distance the party from its recent past by projecting an image of newness. Bale, for example, explicitly examines Cameron's modernization through the lens of 'party change' (2008: 272). On similar lines, Denham and O'Hara conceptualize Conservative modernization as comprising three key elements: leadership, policy, and party organization (2007). Dorey (2005), and later Dommett (2015), likewise argued that modernization should be analysed

as a process of party adaptation, with change occurring at the micro-, meso- or macro-levels.

For these scholars, Cameron's modernization had several defining characteristics related to changes made to the composition and policy platform of the party. Bale (2007) notes the initial focus that Cameron placed on 'appointing fresh faces' and diversifying 'its list of candidates' to achieve greater gender and ethnic diversity (see also Campbell and Childs 2015a). For Dommett (2015), Cameron's modernization was primarily 'focussed on policy change and new principles linked to specific policy agendas'. These changes were highlighted by Cameron in his speech to the 2006 Conservative Party conference: 'today, people want different things. The priorities are different. Safer streets. Schools that teach. A better quality of life. Better treatment for carers. That's what people are talking about today' (Cameron, 2006). The nature of this policy shift, however, is ambiguous. Dommett identifies 'issues such as flexible working, climate change, and female representation' as central foci and highlights flagship policy achievements such as the introduction of equal marriage and international aid spending as expressions of the modernization agenda (2015: 263). More recently, Newman and Hayton (2022) have claimed that Cameron's 'Big Society' programme and the development of a social justice agenda were also crucial parts of aspects of the modernization project.

3. What underpins Conservative modernization?

Party adaptation features prominently in analyses of modernization, but what types of adaptation this implies remains unclear. As Dommett (2015: 249–50) notes, it is 'difficult to state with certainty what Conservative modernization would look like, what kind of change it would entail and how its success could be determined'. In reviewing the literature, we suggest that there are two contrasting views on the underpinnings of Conservative Party modernization: one is that it represents a resurgence of 'one-nation' ideology within the party, the other, which we take to be more convincing and seek to build on, is that processes of party adaptation that are considered modernizing are rather more vague 'dynamic, relational, and contingent' (Kerr et al., 2018).

3.1 Modernization and one-nation ideology

The first account of Conservative modernization under Cameron considers it to have been underpinned by 'a programme of ideological change … towards a form of more liberal conservatism' (Dommett 2015: 258). In diagnosing the electoral struggles of the party, Cameron argued that they had 'revelled too much in the triumphs of the Thatcher years' (Denham and O'Hara 2007: 186). This meant they had developed an image as the 'nasty party' and become trapped as 'the prisoner

of an ideological past' (Dorey 2005, 143), obsessed with relitigating the debates of the 1980s and with fringe issues. This left them ill-equipped 'to consider the challenges of the future' (Denham and O'Hara 2007: 186). Considering this, Cameron's modernization project was seen to mark an ideological move towards a mode of conservatism 'which is socially tolerant and compassionate, embraces cultural diversity and pluralism, and is consequently located nearer the 'centre ground' (Dorey 2005: 143).

This understanding of modernization sets Cameron within the broader ideological milieu of the Conservative Party; particularly the perceived opposition between adherents to a Thatcherite ideology—which celebrates the power of markets and is marked by social authoritarianism expressed in hard-line law and order stances (see Hall 1985; Gamble 1994)—and a one-nation stance that is 'more socially progressive in its attitude'—and sees a role for government in promoting social harmony (Dorey 2005: 139). Crucially, within this understanding of Conservative modernization, these tendencies are typically considered to be *in opposition*. (Dorey and Garnett 2015).

Cameron's modernizing ethos is considered 'redolent of the one-nation strand of conservatism which had appeared otiose during the Thatcher years' (Dorey 2005: 139; see also (Webb, 2024). In defining his modern conservatism as compassionate, Cameron attempted to define himself in opposition to Thatcherism's divisive legacy and hard-line style. This opposition was most clearly expressed in Cameron's repeated assertions that 'there is such a thing as society' (see, e.g. Cameron, 2005), a disavowal of Thatcher's famous declaration to the contrary. Cameron also made high-profile apologies for some of the most divisive aspects of Thatcher's governments (Dorey 2005).

A view which associates Cameron's modernization with one-nation ideology has intuitive appeal and accurately accounts for Cameron's initial ideological posturing when he became party leader in 2005. However, the idea of Conservative modernization as an ideology that is defined in opposition to Thatcherism runs contrary to the wider literature. Indeed, in one of the most famous analyses of Thatcherism, Bulpitt rejects the idea that Thatcherism 'represents a radical break with past Conservative practice' (1986: 19). Instead, Bulpitt contends that 'there is a greater similarity between the Conservative Party led by Thatcher and its predecessor under Churchill and Macmillan than is often suggested' (1986: 39). As such, whilst the 'relationship between Margaret Thatcher and one-nation conservatism has usually been presented in negative terms', there is a 'more positive reading of the relationship' which sees them as having similar objectives and ideals (Evans 2009: 101, 103).

This purely oppositional viewpoint therefore papers over a more complex empirical reality and feeds into analyses which claim that Cameron's modernization has been 'overstated' and 'ultimately failed' when Cameron retreated into

Thatcherite ideology and distanced himself from the one-nation tradition in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (Bale 2008: 271; Dommett 2015: 271). This diagnosis is problematic in that it overlooks several developments which show a broad continuity with, and in some cases, a strengthening of, the modernizing direction initiated by Cameron. Some recent literature has begun to acknowledge this dynamic. Peele (2021) for example, suggests that Cameron helped 'set in train a repositioning of the Party in policy and image', and that this process of identity change has continued since the 2016 Brexit referendum. Peele highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic enabled the party to depart (at least temporarily) from a Thatcherite direction with a greater emphasis on strengthening the public sector and increasing state spending. She writes:

> Combined with a levelling-up agenda, this is not an agenda in the Thatcherite mould. Nor is it easy to see how it can be paid for without—in the longer term—some major tax increases. There is also likely to be a renewed attempt to improve the delivery of policy and a retreat from the fragmented decentralized state (2021).

Along similar lines, Willetts (2021) argues that the development of the levelling up agenda shows the Conservative Party's 'agility in responding to economic discontent'. Crucially, this agenda was explicitly constructed as an attempt to reform the British economy by addressing historic geographical inequalities and to bring Britain's lagging regions 'up to speed'. Levelling up has therefore been considered a strategy of 'blue-collar *modernization*, focused on the North and Midlands' (MacKinnon 2020: 17–8, emphasis added).

These analyses remain tentative, but they point to the significant impact that Johnson's leadership had in temporarily re-orientating the party's electoral appeal towards non-traditional Tory voters in the North, while shifting its broader ideological positioning away from key elements of Thatcherite economic policy. Yet, this type of analyses generally overlooks the fact that Johnson's direction of travel predated his leadership and has its roots in Cameron's earlier modernization project. It also overlooks the important contributions of Theresa May, who attempted, albeit much less successfully, to undertake a modernization of the Conservative Party's economic statecraft in launching an Industrial Strategy which sought to build 'a Britain fit for the future' (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017).

Conversely, while Cameron's modernization agenda attempted to move the party in a social liberal direction, as we have seen, scholarship has noted that it was always accompanied by a divergent tendency to reassert right-wing issues and an element of English nationalism (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021). In this sense, Cameron's modernization agenda pre-empted and underpinned the process of rightward drift in the Conservative Party during the post-Cameron years.

3.2 Modernization as an 'empty signifier'

We argue that a better way to make sense of these developments is to avoid defining modernization as a process of party adaptation underpinned by a particular ideology and instead see it as something more fluid and emptier. Finlayson's analyses of New Labour's modernization can be taken as a starting point for this perspective. Finlayson argues that for New Labour, modernization became 'a kind of code word for … everything we have to do' (Finlayson 2003: 77). Rather than modernization representing a specific set of ideological tenets, New Labour's modernization was altogether more totalizing, but also therefore vaguer.

This idea of modernization as a fluid discursive practice has led some to describe modernization as an empty signifier (Byrne et al., 2012; Kerr et al., 2018): a resonant emotive device that relates to the ideas of avoiding becoming 'stuck in the past' and 'keeping up with the times', but which is vague enough to encompass different, even disparate, initiatives and policies. For New Labour, commitments to concepts as diverse as: third way ideas, globalization, marketization, multi-level governance, social justice, multiculturalism, social pluralism, freedom of information, an ethical foreign policy, and constitutional reform were all amenable to being framed as modernization (Kerr et al., 2018: 294). In contrast, for the Conservatives, the articulation of one-nation ideas, a critique of Thatcherism, a move to the centre ground, a diversification of the party, and a commitment to tackling 'issues such as flexible working, climate change, and female representation' were all variously framed as part of a modernizing agenda (Dommett 2015: 263).

As we noted at the outset, several scholars have noted a lack of definitional clarity regarding modernization. But more restrictive, fixed definitions which cast modernization as a list of ideological beliefs or specific policy commitments appear unable to capture the flexibility of modernization as a concept and the diverse ways in which it has been utilized within political discourse. From an alternative approach, defining modernization as an empty signifier acknowledges that whilst modernization is bound up with processes of party adaptation and therefore becomes associated with a specific set of ideas, policies, and organizational changes, the manifestation of these adaptations does not necessarily cohere to a consistent internal logic.

From this perspective, Cameron's balancing of modernizing discourses with Thatcherite instincts indicates modernization's inherent fluidity and contingency and its role as a discourse to be deployed alongside others as part of a strategic form of statecraft—an attempt to balance competing tendencies within the party. This view of modernization as an empty signifier, operating in a way that is 'dynamic, relational, and contingent' (Kerr et al., 2018), allows us to capture this interplay between different tendencies within the Conservative Party. This framing therefore provides a means to analyse in more depth the idea that party adaptation and

a set of agendas framed within Cameron's initial modernization discourse, have played a continued role in post-Cameron Conservative Party politics.

4. Auditing modernization

Having built a definition of modernization as a process of party adaptation that seeks to bring the party into line with modern conditions, but which also pays attention to the fluid nature of modernization as a discursive strategy, we can now turn to our empirical analyses. As we note above, most existing literature views Conservative modernization as incomplete and as having ended when Cameron left office, as the Conservatives reoriented themselves towards a more right-wing 'English Toryism'. In contrast, we show that Conservative statecraft post-Cameron has continued to be characterized, at least in terms of discourse, by the interplay between a modernizing discourse seeking to align the party with 'modern times' and appeals to traditional English Toryism (Gamble 2021). To show this, we examine the course of party modernization in four areas that were key to Cameron's modernization project: 1 the feminization and diversification of the party; 2 the 'levelling-up' agenda; 3 the commitment to environmental issues; 4 the adoption of 'English Toryism'. While other areas, such as international aid or the Big Society agenda, were also widely seen to be key to Cameron's modernization project, focussing on these areas highlights several important aspects of an ongoing modernization process. The latter area—the shift to nationalist populism and English Toryism—is often said to be the antithesis of Cameron's modernization, but as our analyses shows, strong aspects of continuity can be located here as well. This further demonstrates the fluidity and emptiness of modernization discourse.

4.1 Feminizing the party and expanding diversity

Campbell and Childs (2015a) argue that Cameron's attempts to 'feminize' the party and increase the descriptive and substantive representation of women was a 'leitmotif' of modernization. Declaring women to be 'scandalously underrepresented', Cameron reformed the selection of parliamentary candidates, introducing an a list 'of candidates for marginal seats composed of women and ethnic minority candidates' (Dommett 2015: 260). This drive was accompanied by several manifesto pledges specifically 'for women', including a commitment to increase the number of women on company boards and the promotion of flexible working arrangements (Campbell and Childs 2015a: 149; Campbell and Childs, 2015b).

This agenda continued apace in the post-Cameron era (Jeffery et al., 2018: 267; see also; Childs and Webb 2012). Theresa May's time as PM, having previously been Minister for Women and Equalities under Cameron, is indicative of a continuing drive towards increasing the representation of women within the

party. The descriptive representation of women in the parliamentary party has also increased over time, from 67 female MPs in 2017 to 87 in 2019 (Uberoi et al., 2020: 46).

Furthermore, whilst May's first Cabinet was only marginally more gender diverse than Cameron's in 2015 (BBC 2019), the number of female MPs occupying key Cabinet positions increased. Amber Rudd was made Home Secretary; Justine Greening was given the Education portfolio; Liz Truss became Justice Secretary; and women also occupied the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, International Development, and Culture, Media and Sport briefs (Allen 2017). Thus, while May did not appoint substantially more women to her Cabinet than Cameron, two of the four great offices of state were now occupied by women. In addition, May continued the Cameronite legacy of creating policy packages for women. Part of May's rhetorical commitment to overcoming 'burning injustices' concerned tackling gender and racial pay gaps, which were addressed in the Conservatives' 2017 manifesto, along with the issue of domestic violence (Conservative Party, 2017).

By contrast, Boris Johnson's leadership marked a shift towards an 'implicit sexism' in his rhetoric (Sunderland 2020). Disclosures from the COVID Inquiry into the government's handling of the pandemic have pointed towards a 'sexist culture', the frequent use of sexist and misogynist language, and a lack of concern for the gendered impacts of the pandemic within Johnson's core team (Cohen 2023). Johnson's Cabinet included fewer women than May's (BBC 2019), although one great office of state was assigned to a woman (Priti Patel becoming Home Secretary). In terms of diversification more generally though, Johnson's first Cabinet included a record number of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, including two BAME Cabinet members in great offices of state, with Priti Patel being accompanied by Sajid Javid (and later Rishi Sunak) as Chancellor. Tellingly, Johnson described his Cabinet as a 'cabinet for modern Britain' (BBC 2019).

Most recently, Rishi Sunak's premiership was seen as the apotheosis of this diversification agenda. Sunak was the first British Asian PM, and academic commentary explicitly connected this achievement to Cameron's earlier diversification agenda (see Sherwood 2022). That Sunak himself did not make much reference to his ethnic background upon becoming PM can be seen as a reflection of Britain's multicultural society. The Home Secretary, Grant Shapps, noted that his background was no more than 'an afterthought', a comment that framed Sunak's trajectory as an expression of modern Britain (Sherwood 2022).

It is worth noting that Cameron's own commitment to 'lead the charge on women's equality, on women's empowerment, [and] the empowerment of girls and women worldwide' (The Standard 2014) was paralleled by rhetoric and policies that betrayed an implicit sexism. Throughout the austerity era, Cameron often employed binary rhetoric, designating people as either 'shirkers' or 'strivers': 'those who work hard … against those who prefer "sleeping off a life on

benefits'" (Allen et al., 2015: 908). Crucially, this undeserving underclass were often constructed in gendered terms, with blame for social unrest often shifted onto the figure of 'the lone, working-class mother' (De Benedictis 2012: 1). The most prominent example of this occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 London riots, which Cameron blamed on 'feral parents' (De Benedictis 2012), suggesting that the rioters came from households where there is 'no father at home' (Cameron, 2011). This led to the reinvigoration of the 'troubled family' discourse (Jensen 2013; Cummins 2021: 109–10), which casts single, working-class mothers as driving social decay. Thus, whilst on one hand Cameron presented a commitment to female empowerment, his government consistently denigrated (a certain group of) women as the cause of social unrest due to their failure to live up to the traditional gendered ideals of the 'thrifty housewife' and the 'do-it-all mum' (Allen et al., 2015). In this sense, Cameron's discourse on women reflected a statecraft which oscillated between 'two poles', exhibiting a 'combination of modernizing tendencies and nostalgic notions of community and civic involvement' (Cummins 2021: 105).

Johnson modernized the party in terms of diversity in further ways. His electoral success in 2019 was prefaced on making gains in traditional Labour heartlands (Cutts et al., 2020), leading to the emergence of a group of 'red wall' Conservative MPs, organized within the New Conservatives parliamentary group (Dawson 2023). These red wall MPs included more women and were more likely to identify as LGBTQ than previous Conservative intakes (Butler 2022). Thus, 'the 2019 cohort of Conservative MPs [was] significantly more diverse than older cohorts on most measures', reflecting 'a continuation of long-standing trends' (Butler 2022).

In sum, since Cameron's resignation, the party has continued to creep, albeit slowly, towards greater descriptive representation and diversity. However, such moves are limited in the extent to which they substantively address systemic inequality within the party or beyond. Indeed, feminist analyses have demonstrated that descriptive representation is only one dimension of increasing substantive representation (e.g. Campbell and Childs 2015a), and have highlighted the gendered logics inscribed within formal political arenas which reproduce gender inequalities even in the face of increasing representation (Miller 2021; Childs 2023). Furthermore, the effects of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government's austerity programme have disproportionately affected women (Hastings et al., 2023), and Cameron's governments made it harder to track the impact of policies on women and other minoritized groups. (Annesley and Gains 2012: 718; 2014). Yet, the moves to increase descriptive representation and address women's issues suggest that some elements of Cameron's modernization continue apace and have even reached beyond what Cameron himself was able to achieve.

4.2 One-nation agenda and levelling up

A second key plank of Cameron's modernization involved distancing the party from traditional Thatcherite economics in favour of a modern, compassionate conservatism which worked to address spatial inequality, Britain's industrial decline and economic hardship. This involved placing greater emphasis on issues such as 'insecurity in the face of globalization, degradation of the environment, and rising expectations of public services' and placing less emphasis on traditional Conservative touchstones such as tax cuts and shrinking the public sector (Denham and O'Hara 2007: 186).

However, this attempt to articulate a more moderate economic approach has been considered one of the least successful aspects of Cameron's modernization. The role of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis is key here, because before 2007–8 'social welfare policies and state investment' were considered viable policy commitments within the party due to 'the presumption of [continued] economic growth' (Dommett 2015: 259). Following the crisis, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government implemented an austerity agenda which imposed stringent Thatcherite measures aimed at reducing state spending. A shift framed as an inevitable adjustment in the face of hard economic times, rather than a political choice (Wamsley 2023). This falling back into traditional Thatcherite economics was seen to represent the end of the Conservative modernization project, indicating its inherent tenuousness within a party still ultimately committed to Thatcherite principles. As such, it has been argued that 'dry economic liberalism [has become] "firmly embedded"' within the parliamentary party (Hayton 2010: 493).

Yet, the post-Cameron period has seen an acknowledgement within the party that austerity politics wrought deleterious effects and created significant social division (Hickson et al., 2020: 340), fuelling the anti-politics which drove the Leave vote during the Brexit referendum (Jessop 2017; Bailey 2018). From this point, the referendum result required political adaptation, meaning that 'the Conservatives' mission could no longer be … balancing the books' (Allen 2018: 111). This has led each of the party leaders since Cameron (with the sole exception of Liz Truss) to seek to distance themselves from Thatcherite economics.

This desire to modernize the party's economic policy platform was clearly articulated by Theresa May, who self-consciously identified with the party's 'moderate and modernizing wing' (Hickson et al., 2020: 339). May sought to make 'a substantive departure from the statecraft and economic policy choices' of the austerity era to move past its toxic legacy (Lee 2023: 121). May suggested that making Britain 'a country that works for everyone' would be her government's central mission, promising to address social divisions and 'bring Britain together' by tackling 'burning injustices' (May 2016b). Furthermore, May rhetorically distanced herself from the Thatcherite emphasis on free markets, suggesting that government should 'set the market right' and 'rebalance the economy', through a more active

role for the state in setting a 'proper industrial strategy to get the whole economy firing' (May 2016a). This industrial strategy was framed as aiming to 'build a Britain fit for the future', again drawing on the modernizing themes of futurity and moving forward (Department for Business, 2017).

This agenda was ramped up by Johnson's government when, following the 2019 general election, 'Johnson declared the defining ambition of his government to be "unite and level up"' (Jennings et al., 2021: 302). Johnson revived the Northern Powerhouse idea, first devised under Cameron and Osborne, who themselves created a 'levelling-up taskforce' aimed at generating policies to broaden the Conservative voter base 'through a strategy of "blue-collar modernization, focused on the North and Midlands"' (MacKinnon 2020: 17–8). Johnson's own focus on the North represented a continuation of this strategy by 'breaking with austerity', committing to 'addressing regional inequalities' and 'increasing infrastructure spending' to modernize dilapidated left-behind areas (MacKinnon 2020: 18). Johnson's rhetoric also emphasized state spending to 'give the public services the resources they need' (Conservative Party, 2019). This was often articulated with a particular focus on police funding and recruitment (Home Office 2019). Thus, a commitment to a modernizing economic agenda was articulated alongside a renewed emphasis on law and order (Ward and Ward 2023; Ward and Da Costa Vieira 2024), a classic Thatcherite theme. This again indicates how Conservative Party statecraft often fuses modernizing rhetoric and traditionalist Thatcherite tropes.

Like Cameron, both May and Johnson found their ability to turn a modernizing economic rhetoric into reality was limited. Where Cameron's economic agenda was shaped by the Global Financial Crisis, May's commitment to tackling burning injustices was side-lined by Brexit and her efforts to secure a Withdrawal Agreement with the EU (Hickson et al., 2020: 344). A task further complicated by internal party divisions (Schnapper 2022) and a slim parliamentary majority. Likewise, Johnson's attempts to pursue a one-nation economic policy also lacked substance. Indeed, several scholars have noted 'the incoherent nature of the levelling up agenda' (Jennings et al., 2021: 302), branding it 'ideologically ambiguous' (Newman 2021: 312) and 'confused' (Tomaney and Pike 2020: 46). Nevertheless, despite the substantive limitations of this policy shift, it is indicative of persistent, if typically tentative and faltering attempts to modernize Conservative economic policy by moving away from hard-line Thatcherite ideals towards an approach that focuses on Britain's lagging regions that has continued in the post-Cameron era.

4.3 Environment

Cameron's promise that his would be the 'greenest government ever' (Randerson 2010) was another signature part of his modernizing agenda (Carter and Clements

2015: 204). Part of this emphasis was rhetorical and performative: Cameron 'frequently mentioned the environment during his leadership campaign'; took a 'trip to a Norwegian glacier to observe the effects of global warming at first hand' and oversaw a 'green makeover' where the party's torch logo was replaced with an oak tree (Carter and Clements 2015: 207). However, this commitment to a greener politics also expressed itself in policy. In opposition, the Conservatives committed to increasing 'the share of public revenue raised by environmental taxes' and supported the Friends of the Earth 'Big Ask' campaign to secure a Climate Change Bill (Carter 2009: 236). In government, several important environmental policies were implemented, including the Climate Change Act, the creation of a Green Investment Bank, and a Green Deal to boost household energy efficiency (Carter and Clements 2015). However, despite some achievements, the Cameron governments also abandoned key climate commitments, pursued policies that were widely regarded to be environmentally damaging (e.g. fracking), and de-emphasized green commitments in the context of austerity (Carter and Clements 2015).

Post-Cameron, both May and Johnson re-affirmed the party's commitment to tackling climate change. The 2017 Conservative Party manifesto promised that Britain would 'continue to lead international action against climate change' and to 'lead the world in environmental protection' (38). The manifesto also emphasized a tradition of climate change action within the party, noting Cameron's implementation of the Climate Change Act, 'which Conservatives helped to frame' (2017: 40). This rhetoric was accompanied by the launch of a *Clean Growth Strategy* and later, the Conservatives' *25 Year Environment Plan*. A policy package which 'addressed topics such as animal welfare, access to the countryside, plastic waste, climate change, and air quality' (Pitt 2023: 167), and which included pledges to spend £5.7 million to plant 50 million trees, ban plastic microbeads, and use agricultural subsidies to reward environmentally-friendly farming (Stefanini and Cooper 2018). May framed these issues as a 'central priority' for her government (May 2018). As with Cameron, the extent to which this green rhetoric was matched in policy was limited. Some of the *25 Year Environment Plan* commitments, such as the ban on plastic microbeads, were implemented. However, as with her economic agenda, May's environmental policies were a distant secondary priority to Brexit. Moreover, May abolished the Department for Energy and Climate Change, subsuming it into the newly formed Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and pressed on with a number of policy initiatives that have been criticized as environmentally damaging. These include endorsing the construction of Hinkley Point C nuclear power station (Stefanini 2016) and blocking the construction of new onshore wind farms (Bloomberg 2017).

Johnson likewise 'talked up his green credentials' in office and framed himself as spearheading action on climate change (Whyte 2022: 33). Johnson's premiership coincided with COP26, held in and presided over by Britain. Johnson took

this opportunity to emphasis the party's green credentials, stressing that 'it's one minute to midnight on that doomsday clock and we need to act now' (Whyte 2022: 34). Environment Secretary Alok Sharma used COP26 to call for urgent action on climate change and apologized that the conference had not done more (BBC 2021). Beyond the rhetoric, Johnson's government set out a 'landmark' strategy for achieving net-zero by 2,050 (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021), outlined a ten-point plan for a 'Green Industrial Revolution' in Britain (Prime Minister's Office 2020), and imposed a moratorium on fracking (Bradshaw et al., 2022). During the pandemic, Johnson's government also placed a windfall tax on oil and gas companies. However, like May, Johnson's substantive record on the environment is, at best, mixed. The windfall tax, for instance, largely exempted money spent on fossil fuel projects in the North Sea, accelerating the development of North Sea fossil fuel infrastructure (Whyte 2022: 33). Johnson's government also 'fast-track[ed] a number of major oil and gas projects' (Whyte 2022: 34), a commitment later carried forward by Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, who both sought to row back on earlier green pledges. Onshore shale gas exploration was also reviewed as part of the government's energy security strategy, opening the 'door for fracking in response to the Ukraine war' (Pickard and Thomas 2022).

At face value, Sunak's time in office marked a departure from this environmental modernization agenda. Whilst PM, Sunak watered down Britain's net-zero commitments, pushing back dates for abolishing the sale of petrol cars and the installation of gas boilers, and shelving plans to force landlords to better insulate their rental properties. Interestingly, however, Sunak framed these changes as part of a realistic long-term approach to tackling climate change, as opposed to measures which he deemed short-termist or unrealistic. In describing his action on the climate crisis, Sunak suggested that 'the real choice confronting us is do we really want to change our country and build a better future for our children, or do we want to carry on as we are' (2023). Sunak contrasted himself to those who do not recognize the threat of climate change and those calling for action on the climate crisis, which was deemed to be unrealistic or too disruptive. In positioning himself as plotting a course between these 'extremes', Sunak constructed his plan on climate as one which faced up to modern realities and the risks of 'imposing costs on hard-pressed families, at a time when technology is often still expensive and won't work in all homes', but which was also ambitious and would deliver 'the new green industries of the future' (2023). In both senses, policies widely condemned as a backward step were framed in modernizing language: grappling with modern realities and constraints, while being future-oriented and ambitious. This again demonstrates the fluidity of modernization in being applicable to a series of policy shifts which at face value point in different directions.

Thus, post-Cameron, successive Conservative administrations have failed to achieve a firm policy agenda commensurate to Britain's climate commitments.

Yet, both May and Johnson utilized the language of environmentalism to re-affirm the party's commitment to tackling climate change. Conservative messaging constructed both May and Johnson's agendas as continuing the modernizing project started by Cameron on the environment, and this was accompanied by the development of long-term strategies on climate change and moves in the direction of green policy initiatives. As such, whilst some scepticism can be directed towards the Conservatives green credentials in government, the party's desire to be perceived as taking a lead on tackling climate change has continued into the post-Cameron era.

4.4 National populism/English Toryism

A key development in Conservative Party politics which appears to contradict the continued significance of modernization is the rise of English nationalism. A growing sense of 'Englishness' (as distinct from Britishness), coupled with an idea of British 'exceptionalism' were key drivers of the Leave campaign during the EU referendum (Kettell and Kerr 2020). After the referendum, the Conservative Party increasingly sought to be seen as the party of Brexit. May's premiership was 'defined by one overriding objective: taking the UK out of the EU' (Hayton 2022: 348), and under her leadership many Conservative parliamentarians who had been 'reluctant remainers' accepted the need to deliver Brexit (Lynch and Whitaker 2018: 39). Furthermore, though May's Cabinet did not feature significantly more leavers than Cameron's (Lynch and Whitaker 2018: 41), leavers were appointed to key positions (Hayton 2022: 348). Under Johnson, a more thoroughgoing remoulding of the parliamentary party took place, which 'drove out the waverers who were unwilling to accept Brexit at any cost' (Hayton 2021: 415). In 2019, Johnson removed the whip from 21 MPs who had voted against the government to take the possibility of a 'no-deal' Brexit off the table. In addition, the 2019 general election saw the Conservatives capture constituencies in Labour's traditional heartlands, many of which had voted Leave in the referendum (Fieldhouse et al., 2023). The 'New Conservatives' representing these seats promised to be the 'constant voice' of voters who wanted to 'get Brexit done' (Gullis 2023).

Since 2016, the party has increasingly played on the type of English nationalism which expressed itself within the EU referendum campaign. Both May and Johnson pitched their economic policies as working in the interests of the 'left behinds' or 'just about managings'. Within this populist appeal, 'the people'—this left-behind grouping—were defined in rather narrow terms—typically a bloc of white, English, working-class voters who live in areas adversely affected by processes of deindustrialization and globalization. As Hayton (2021: 412) writes: 'leaving the EU demands a renewal of the national community, which … *is framed as a narrow Anglo-Britishness, centred on an essentially English understanding of the Union of the United Kingdom and of Britishness itself*' (emphasis added).

The Conservatives' adoption of this English nationalism can be read as taking the party away from the broad direction of Cameron's more inclusive, one-nation vision, and towards a more antimodernizing project that seeks to assert culturally and socially traditionalist themes. However, the emergence of this 'English Toryism' is more contiguous with Cameron's leadership than it first appears. The development of an English agenda, aimed at placating the right of the party and responding to the electoral threat posed by UKIP, was a key aspect of Cameron's leadership (Hayton 2010; Webb et al., 2017). Although Cameron's initial strategy for dealing with UKIP dismissed them as a party of 'fruitcakes, loons, and closet racists' (Lynch and Whitaker 2013: 298–9) and sought to de-emphasize the issues of immigration and Europe (Hayton 2018), Cameron increasingly ceded political ground (Bale 2018). On immigration, Cameron adopted a series of 'restrictive, hard-line, and at times, both hyperbolic and hyperactive' policies despite initial promises of an 'evidence-based approach' (Bale et al., 2011; Partos and Bale 2015: 169–70), to create a 'hostile environment' for illegal immigrants and, indeed, for immigration generally. The 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts turned 'a whole host of professionals—from landlords and letting agents to doctors and nurses—[into] border guards', requiring checks on the immigration status of those they offered their services to (Webber 2019; Goodfellow 2020: 2).

Scholars have noted that the term hostile environment 'has a longer history elsewhere in the Home Office, where it originally referred to dangerous overseas locations used, for example, in government guidance for journalists working in warzones' (Griffiths and Yeo 2021: 524). In 'appropriating a phrase that was previously only used to refer to warfare, terrorists and serious criminals' and applying it to immigration, a key plank of Cameron's political project became 'the de-legitimization, criminalization, and securitization of mobility, as well as fundamentally altering the UK's border practices' (Griffiths and Yeo 2021: 524). All of this bears striking continuities with the more explicit English nationalism of later Conservative governments.

Cameron's time in office was also marked by Britain's distinct national identities becoming more pronounced, with more citizens identifying as Welsh, Scottish or English over British (Skey, 2011). The rise of a distinct English identity has been viewed as a response to devolution, with 'the increasing assertiveness of other national groups within Britain' provoking a growing sense of grievance that distinctly English concerns had no avenues for their expression (Skey, 2011: 106; Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021). Cameron's advocacy of 'English votes for English laws'—the idea that 'legislation referring specifically to England, or to England and Wales, cannot be enacted without the consent of MPs representing constituencies of those countries' (Hayton, 2015: 127)—sought to play on this grievance. Following the 2014 Scottish referendum, Cameron announced plans for a commission which would develop proposals for constitutional reform in line with this principle (Hayton 2018: 229).

Again, this reveals how Cameron's modernization project sought to balance broadening the party's appeal beyond traditional voters with placating the party's traditional right, especially as pressures from UKIP increased. This balancing act can be seen as indicative of the incoherent, contradictory nature of Cameron's modernization. However, it is also notable that Cameron attempted to fuse more traditionalist and modernizing themes, sometimes cloaking the policy of English votes for English law in modernizing language, arguing that it was time for Britain 'to come together and to move forward' through a 'devolution revolution', empowering all constituent parts of the UK (Cameron quoted in Wintour, 2014). Thus, Cameron played on a growing sense of English grievance but with an emphasis on modernizing British governance and placing power closer to citizens through devolution. In this way, rather than viewing the more explicit English nationalism of Boris Johnson as an 'outlier' or divergence, it should be seen as 'a typical representative of [a] tradition' (Gamble 2021: 465) which Cameron also drew on within his modernization project.

5. Conclusion: modernization and fourteen years of Conservative government

In this article, we have re-examined the legacy of Conservative Party modernization in the post-Cameron era. Building on the notion of modernization as an empty signifier, we have sought to show the ways in which key elements of David Cameron's modernization agenda have continued to play a role within Conservative Party statecraft in the post-Cameron era. By necessity, our survey has been nonexhaustive, analysing the continuing revalence of modernization within Conservative attempts to: 1 diversify the party to construct an image of themselves as reflecting modern Britain; 2 initiate environmental policy initiatives and rhetoric as a means of demonstrating a receptiveness to the contemporary salience of the climate crisis; 3 maintain a discourse around bringing Britain's 'left-behind' regions 'up to speed'; and, 4 appeal to more traditional Conservative voters through the deployment of national populist rhetoric.

In demonstrating the continuing relevance of modernization to contemporary Conservative statecraft, we have pushed against the dominant perspective within the literature that Conservative modernization ended when Cameron left office following the EU referendum result. In addition, by exploring and mapping out some of the uses and key expressions of a continued modernization, we have offered a novel perspective on Conservative statecraft post-Cameron.

More indirectly, we also aim to contribute to contemporary discussions of British governance. At the time of writing, the Conservative Party have concluded a fourteen-year stint in government. Over that time, discussions regarding the nature of British governance have pointed towards its tendency to produce short-term policy interventions which lack endurance, systemic thinking and fail to

adequately address deep-set structural problems (Richards et al., 2023; Diamond et al., 2024). Scholarship has offered institutional explanations of these policy pathologies, pointing to the 'incoherent' set up of the British state and arguing that issues of institutional design, such as the high degree of centralization of power in Britain's political system (Ward *et al.*, 2024) or the outsized role of the Treasury in economic policy-making, consistently produce poor policies (Warner et al., 2021). Scholarship on Conservative policy-making post-Cameron has similarly highlighted a number of examples of inconsistent, poorly thought out, short-term political solutions, such as the levelling up agenda (Tomaney and Pike 2020; Newman 2021).

The analyses we have provided here can be used to compliment this perspective. While Britain's institutional architecture encourages short-term and inconsistent policies, so too has the character of contemporary party statecraft. Our empirical analyses points to a party-political problem in British governance. Namely, that the ways in which modernization—as a fundamentally empty concept—has been utilized by both main parties, has allowed recent governments to avoid developing a longer-term and more consistent ideational grounding for policy-making. In its place, a culture of short-termism has developed, in which statecraft manoeuvring too often stands in for longer-term and coherent strategic policy vision.

Looking forwards, it is important to note that modernization is not only a part of Conservative Party statecraft. Labour also often utilize modernizing discourses as part of their own statecraft (Finlayson 2003). With Labour back in government, assessments of whether the Starmer project has a consistent ideational underpinning or represents mainly a strategic electoral project are well under way (see Diamond and Pike 2021). The Labour government have been at pains to demonstrate that they will seek to properly address long-standing issues such as Britain's low growth and productivity. At the same time, it is arguable that Labour has already begun making use of modernizing discourses in their plan for the launch of a decade of national renewal (see Webb 2023). The interpretation we have presented here demonstrates that a key challenge for Labour is to not allow an empty modernizing discourse to stand in for real, consistent thinking and a comprehensive, systemic approach to achieving their policy-making goals.

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