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The Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Conservative Educational Policy

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ABSTRACT Contemporary Conservative education policy may seem to be hastily formulated and executed, but, it is arguably founded on deeply held ideological beliefs. By briefly examining the history of the British Conservative party and its complex formation and disparate ideological traditions, including the broader conservative diaspora, four key Conservative educational beliefs – namely: support for traditional practices; anti-intellectualism; economic liberalism and the power of the market; and support for inequalities of outcome – beliefs are discussed. These are then examined against contemporary policy initiatives such as practice-based teacher training, the marketisation of schools and curriculum reform.

Introduction

For academics still engaged in university-based teacher education, it is quite common to hear the refrain that the current (2010 onwards) Conservative administration is simply making up educational policy as it goes along. This is certainly the sense one gets when a government white paper outlining a plan to convert all state schools into academies by 2022 (DfE, 2016) is then rescinded within days (Adams, 2016); but what this article argues is that the Conservative administration is actually reflecting a number of deeply held ideological principles which can be identified from an examination of the history of the party. That stated, two important qualifications need to be made. To begin with, the small c 'conservative' diaspora is obviously much broader than the Conservative and Unionist party which was founded in 1832 under the leadership of Robert Peel (Blake, 1970), and includes writers and philosophers from outside the party; second, one of the claims Conservatives make about themselves is that they are non-ideological (Gilmour, 1977), even 'anti-theory',

and therefore ideology is a word that has to be applied judiciously. Nevertheless, a number of important unifying beliefs can be identified.

Formation of the Conservative Party

Hugh-Cecil (1912) argued that the Conservative party that had developed by the end of the nineteenth century, particularly under the leadership of Disraeli, was an amalgamation of both Tory and Whig political movements. Both parties were broad coalitions: the Tory party has generally been defined as the party of the shires, the gentry (the so-called squirearchy), in religion high church (with Catholic sympathies) and with a strong belief in tradition and order (Huntingdon, 1957). The Whig party, by contrast, was arguably a broader coalition which included religious non-conformists and the great land-owning aristocrats (oligarchs), that came under the increasing influence of factory owners and capitalists. It also supported practical and empirical forms of reasoning, proven by experience, in opposition to some of the more radical ideas associated with the Enlightenment. Both parties identified with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and the dangers of the application of pure reason to government and society; and both also favoured the principles of tradition and the reform of existing institutions, rather than radical change.

By the end of the nineteenth century, having combined most capital and wealth and the social elites within the Conservative party, Disraeli took the organic, hierarchical and empirical aspects of Tory and Whig thought to create something he described in a 1872 speech as 'one nation' (Blake, 1966). This was essentially based on the ideas of common sense allied to paternalism and pursuit of a common good – though admittedly with very unequal claims to wealth, power and influence. Arguably one-nationism was the party's guiding principle for much of the twentieth century. It latterly included support for social welfare and limited economic redistribution. But since the 1970s the Conservative party has also been influenced by the international movement that has often been termed the 'new right'. According to Honderich (1990), this movement is self-avowedly more intellectual, conceptual and ideological than traditional conservatism, and it can be further delineated between the neo-conservatives – influenced by Hayek (1944), and who combine arguments for free market economics with high levels of authority to maintain traditional and religious values – and the neo-liberals (also termed libertarians), for example, Nozick (1974) – who have argued for limited state legitimacy in any sphere of influence. Nevertheless, all theorists from a new right perspective believe in the superiority of market forces combined with high levels of competition.

Four Quadrants of State Intervention

Just how broadly conservatism can be defined is illustrated by the adaptation of Dunleavy and O'Leary's (1987, p. 8) four quadrants of state intervention shown in Figure 1.

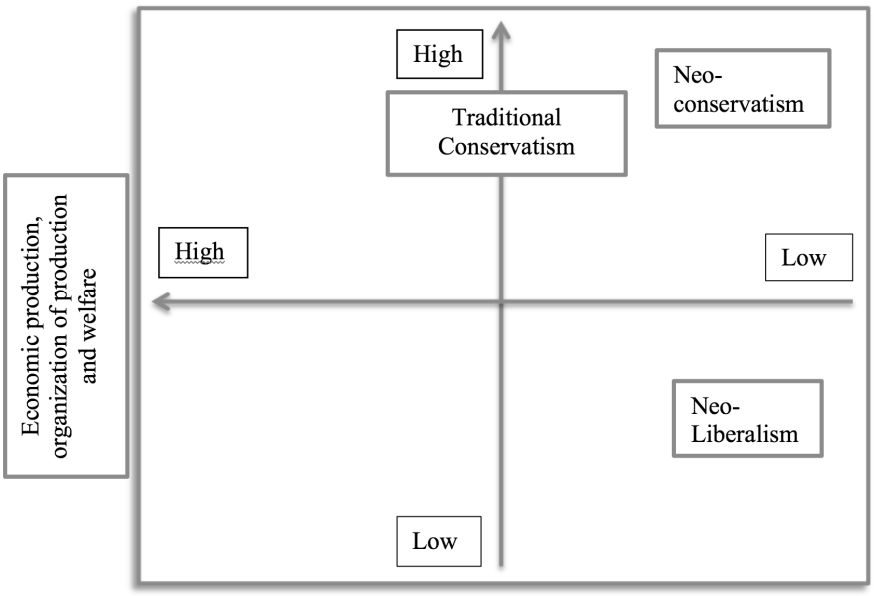

Figure 1. Quadrant of state intervention.

Core Conservative Educational Beliefs

This disparate set of influences may make the Conservative party difficult to pin down, but also flexible and adaptable when it comes to policy. Nevertheless, there are some core educational beliefs. To begin with, Conservatives ultimately wish to conserve, and therefore they have a naturally tendency to favour educational 'traditions' – for example, drawing from empirical evidence of what has worked, what continues to work, and what has traditionally been valued by important stakeholders. This is combined with a long-standing suspicion of educational theory and expertise. Michael Gove, as the chief architect of policy between 2010 and 2015, was vocal in his dismissal of educational experts. (Indeed, he was even more dismissive of the economic experts who warned against Brexit.) A key influence on Gove, the philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1962/1947) argued that theory is only useful when it can be linked to measurable outcomes and allied to practical instruction (Oakeshott, 1962/1947). A belief in economic liberalism and the power of market forces is also shared by most Conservatives, and therefore an educational model based on

competition allied to a focus on educational outputs, rather than the previous concerns with inputs and investment, has predominated in Conservative administrations since 1979 (Apple, 2001). It should also be recognised that Conservatives do not necessarily believe in equality in any form, other than rather vague Tory notions of a purely formal sense of equality in the sight of God or basic rights in civil law. While some aspects of the new right are keener on notions of equality of educational opportunity (though certainly not equalities of outcome), it is reasonable to claim that the majority of Conservatives –for example, Hailsham (1959) and Scruton (1984) – believe that people are not equal in temperament, judgement, intelligence or aptitude, and that attempts to engineer greater educational (and social equality) would be doomed to failure, and deeply illiberal. A belief in inequality tends to be combined with a deeply held belief in authority and hierarchies of control (Greenleaf, 1964).

Ideology and Recent Educational Policy

In terms of ideology in action, three recent policy initiatives can be analysed against this schema. Since the publication of the white paper 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010), the responsibility for initial teacher education (ITE) has increasingly been taken out of the hands of higher education institutions and placed into schools. Although the variety of possible routes to gain qualified teacher status (QTS) are now Byzantine in their complexity, the essential message Gove (2010) presented was that schools are better equipped to support trainee teachers in learning the 'craft' of teaching than university-based 'experts'. This is not a new belief: in the early part of her first administration, Margaret Thatcher supported interventions to reduce the amount of theory contained in teacher training courses, and a corresponding increase in school placements. However, she had more pressing economic and social concerns to occupy her, and so it fell to Cameron's government to fully enact this policy. Moreover, the whole question of the status of teaching and whether a formal qualification is required has been mooted, and the waters muddied by the right of academies and free schools to appoint unqualified teachers, even non-graduates. Despite the fact that this policy reverses the increasing trend towards professional qualifications in many occupations, it is arguably grounded in three core Conservative beliefs. Most Conservative politicians either have been privately educated or would aspire to educate their own children privately (Michael Gove being an honourable exception), and it is known that independent schools often appoint unqualified teachers, and non-graduates in some areas, and yet they dominate educational league tables. Moreover, many of these schools can trace their origins to long before the state system began. For Conservatives, this is clear evidence that traditions of educational success demonstrate that gaining QTS is itself no guarantee of high-quality teaching standards, and therefore it is better to be guided by what has worked (empiricism and tradition) than by educational expertise. This, naturally,

leads to the second belief that educational theory's role in ITE has very little value because it is disembodied from the practical concerns of teaching and learning, and therefore there is no clear and measurable evidence of the success and impact of theory-based teacher training. Therefore policy should be guided by evidence of what has worked and continues to work, and practical, school-based learning is more efficacious. It also draws from the core belief that powerful knowledge is more important than theory. Here it is possible to be sympathetic since research does suggest that the knowledge and expertise that teachers bring to the classroom are good indicators of their impact on learning (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Klassen, 2016). Thus, recruiting the best candidates, irrespective of the training they receive, is arguably a reasonable policy.

Curriculum Reforms

Curriculum reforms have also reflected core ideological beliefs. Influenced by Hirsch (1988), Gove's first act as secretary of state in 2010 was to dismiss Rose's revised curriculum which reflected the movement towards more subject integration and creative approaches to the curriculum. Gove (2009) had previously stated his belief in the importance of separate subject teaching, and he then formulated a revised national curriculum (DfE, 2013) which introduced far more content into primary schools alongside autocratic and strictly monitored instructions for the teaching of reading based on synthetic phonics and an increased role for rote learning in mathematics. Secondary schools were faced with the removal of course work elements in final examinations. Much of the work to raise the status of vocational qualifications for the key 14-18 sector was reversed; for example, the recommendations of the Tomlinson Report (Tomlinson, 2004) were replaced by the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011) and the language of 'basic skills', 'new apprenticeships', 'crafts' and 'trades'. Young (2011, p. 273) rightly observed that only Michael Gove uses this sort of archaic language, but the message was clear: academic knowledge trumps practical skills, and children ought to be segregated into either academic or vocational streams. Here we can detect the hierarchies and inequalities of academic attainment and a strong whiff of social class. We can also detect the core belief in traditional forms of knowledge and the irony of preparing children for employment in the twenty-first century by looking back to the practices of the nineteenth century (White, 2011).

The Free Market for Schools

Even though the academy programme was introduced by the previous Labour administration – although initially restricted to either struggling or highly successful schools – this policy, clearly based on free market principles, has been adopted with relish by the current Conservative government. The academy programme has been hugely expanded and conjoined with the policy for

interested parties to bid for funding to create free schools. It is clearly a prima facie example of the influence of the new right supporting the idea of parental choice and a market for schools. It is also a policy that could easily have been predicted based on a raft of previous initiatives, not least the introduction of league tables for schools, that was clearly meant to separate the wheat from the chaff; and newly released government papers indicated that Thatcher intended a free market for schools to happen early on in her administration (Berg, 2014). Differentials in pay and conditions are already starting to create a similar market for teachers, mirroring some of the aspects of practice in private schools. This should be no surprise, for what we are now seeing is the beginning of a state-funded independent school system; the strong shall survive, and presumably expand through franchises, and the weak will theoretically close. But will this happen in deprived areas where strong schools are needed most? Ironically it is the exact reversal of the policy after the 1902 act where failing independent schools requested entry into the state system to survive. The Conservative belief in educational selection, linked to nostalgic views about grammar schools and therefore inequalities of provision and opportunity, has re-emerged (Coughlan, 2016). Yet in many respects the market for schools has already created an unofficial selective system, with middle-class parents moving into the catchment areas of oversubscribed, successful state schools, and thus thwarting the social mobility that Gove, in an RSA speech from 2009, stated as one of his purported priorities.

Reasonable Questions

A brief article like this can only raise issues without fully exploring them, but there are a number of key questions that ought to shape future research.

In terms of ITT reforms, is there any evidence that recent initiatives have attracted or retained the best candidates, or that schools are providing consistently good teaching apprenticeships, or that there has been a positive impact on learning?

Apart from genuine mavericks like Gove, do the majority of small and large 'c' conservatives really desire a very high-performing state system and high levels of social mobility? It is hard not to conclude that for many Conservatives the state system is ultimately meant to produce biddable young people suitable for relatively low-status employment and ready to take their place as economically productive members of society, but in no sense, apart from a small number of exceptions, challenge the hegemony of the independent sector and its access to top universities, thus replicating the advantages of wealth and privilege enjoyed by wealthy and powerful elites.

How can schools in the poorest and most deprived regions ever truly compete with schools with markedly wealthier cohorts? And arguably the biggest conundrum surrounds the rhetoric of success and failure. As Taylor (2015) argued, all schools must be seen to improve and be 'above average',

while higher results only confirm an erosion of standards. Ultimately the market for schools legitimises and reinforces failure.

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