

EDITORIAL

Beyond the chaos

Nick Garland and Emily Robinson

This issue goes to press at a moment of considerable uncertainty, as Putin's war in Ukraine rumbles on. The first and most pressing impact is on the Ukrainian people, and it is vital that the UK maintains and extends its support for the Ukrainian government, its military, and for refugees fleeing the conflict. The conflict's longer-term implications for British politics remain hard to predict. By exacerbating a pre-existing cost-of-living crisis driven by rising energy prices, it has helped bring the political economy of energy and the politics of inflation back to the fore of British politics. The Chancellor has shown himself reluctant to take the action necessary to ease the impact on millions of households. Meanwhile the fallout from 'partygate' and the constant rumble of corruption and hypocrisy at the heart of government leaves the futures of both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor in doubt, but the field of credible alternative leaders is small and strikingly open.

The profound gulf between the demands of the Conservative selectorate and the nation may be unbridgeable. There are opportunities for Labour ahead. In the previous issue of *Renewal*, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite started to set out a strategy for Labour 'to win power, to govern effectively, and to transform British society and political economy'. One of the core parts of this strategy, she argued, must be a clear-sighted analysis of our opponents.¹ This issue, therefore, is concerned with understanding the nature of this Conservative government and the apparently profound changes the party has undergone since 2019. In the 1980s and 1990s, journals like *Marxism Today* produced powerful intellectual resources for reimagining socialist politics in a changing world, based crucially upon an analysis of Thatcherism as a coherent ideological project that reflected and shaped large-scale economic and social shifts. With some honourable exceptions, there has been a relative absence of equivalent efforts to come to terms with the ideological, political-economic and strategic contours of contemporary Conservatism.²

A decade ago, the left could be very clear what it was arguing *against*, even if its arguments were not necessarily popular or persuasive. Cameron and Osborne pursued an electorally successful and economically radical right-wing project (coupled with some degree of social liberalism) in moderate garb, even if that could not be sustained. What they shared with Thatcher was great success in narrating a moment of crisis, pinning responsibility on a tired and unpopular Labour government, and presenting a profoundly and ideologically right-wing agenda as a common-sense alternative to social-democratic failure. However, since the 2015 election, we have heard time and again that the Tories have ‘stolen Labour’s clothes’ or ‘parked their tanks on Labour’s lawn’ – from George Osborne’s raised and rebranded minimum wage, to Theresa May’s commitment to tackle Britain’s ‘burning injustices’ and prioritise ‘ordinary, working-class families’, to Boris Johnson’s talk of ‘Levelling Up’, a ‘green industrial revolution’, and an end to austerity. We have also been reminded each time of the hollowness of such words, but Labour has often struggled to acclimatise and respond. The anti-austerity critique which struck a chord in 2017 fell short in 2019 – in part (not overlooking the deep unpopularity of the Labour leader, and the politics of Brexit) because the Conservatives had redressed their biggest weaknesses, on public services in particular.

The Conservatives’ successful adaptation to the sharply polarised politics of the late 2010s, culminating in the 2019 triumph, marks (as Richard Hayton explains in this issue) a divergence with Europe’s mainstream right, which has floundered electorally in the face of a similar set of structural challenges. But while Conservative adaptability is an electoral asset, it is also a political liability. Since 2016, the party has been continually reshaped by factors at least in large part beyond its control: Brexit, Covid, and now the revived politics of inflation, energy and European war. It has been led in unpredictable directions, and left a series of irreconcilable commitments behind it. Having distanced itself so successfully from Cameron and May, the party can tell no compelling story about the cumulative achievements of twelve years of Conservative government. Especially so because these governments have failed comprehensively to deliver the traditional goals of a popular capitalism or property-owning democracy – economic growth, lower taxes, and expanded asset ownership. Indeed, these aspirations appear increasingly out of reach. And there is little sign that the Conservatives possess a coherent vision with which to impose themselves on British society. The challenge for Labour is that this presents us with a moving target. Are we confronting – and will we confront in the next General Election – continuity Osbornism, radical populism, big state clientelism, or indeed a post- or anti-‘globalist’ neoliberalism? Certainly, post-2016, it is no longer sufficient, if it ever was, to think of present British politics as a continuation of four decades of monolithic neoliberalism. That may offer exciting opportunities, but it also presents considerable intellectual challenges.

Many of the essays in this issue concern themselves with questions of continuity and change: to what extent do the personnel, politics and policies of this government represent a deviation from Conservatism (or ‘conservatism’), and to what extent are they a natural evolution? Even the most seemingly deviant elements – like the bizarre alliance of Conservatives with ‘Revolutionary Communists’ – are not new at all. In fact, the enmeshing of Conservative politics, media and think tanks with profoundly unconservative influences reaches back even beyond early nineteenth-century modernisation, as Morgan Jones and Phoenix Andrews show in their examinations of the RCP diaspora and the career of Toby Young. Meanwhile, as Christine Berry and Laurie MacFarlane suggest, although electoral self-interest might have pushed the Conservatives to declare new economic objectives, many of the underlying economic interests (in particular, rentier capital) to which the party is committed have not changed.

It is not simply that there are continuities with previous Conservative governments, but that some of the features which made *this* government distinctive may already be over. The most recognisably ‘ideological’ figures in Johnson’s Downing Street – like Dominic Cummings and Munira Mirza – have departed. Radical planning reform was swiftly abandoned. ‘Levelling Up’ has been hamstrung – despite the leadership of one of the government’s most effective operators in Michael Gove – by Treasury resistance and (as Berry and MacFarlane note) by the active contradiction between its stated aims and the Conservatives’ commitment to rentier capital. We are left with a government defined by contradictory aims and irreconcilable differences between its leading figures, as illustrated last year when Sunak delivered what was billed as a spending budget, with a coda extolling his belief in low taxes and a small state.

However, Liz David-Barrett and Jun Pang highlight the dangers of treating politics as business as usual, and this government as just another government. While they show that its attacks on democratic norms and civil liberties build on existing currents, they are also both clear that the nature and severity of those attacks is new. And noting that Johnsonism does not come from nowhere should not, in itself, be cause for reassurance. As Robert Saunders asks, if Johnson is a political weathervane, then what is the wind by which he is blown? And what does it tell us about both the deep currents within Conservative thought and practice, and the wider shifts in society that have led us to this moment? As Jo Littler underlines, even Johnson’s idiosyncrasies – the chaotic and disarming style with which he distracts and deflects – reflect significant transnational political and cultural trends.

We need to move beyond the stale questions of whether Johnson fits best into a Thatcherite or ‘One Nation’ mould, and whether his government is interventionist or small-state. Instead we need to ask what this mass of contradictions, this refusal to be bound by the need to make choices – Johnson’s ‘cake-ism’ – tells us not only

about this government, but about the terrain of British politics more widely. Can such an approach hold together a diverse and often fractious electoral coalition, Saunders asks, amidst the return of the politics of inflation and the associated sharpening of political choices? Our analysis needs to be embedded not in simplistic binaries – constrained by attachment to imagined, unchanging political traditions – but in an understanding of British society as it actually exists, with the different political coalitions and economic choices that opens up.

Even after a disastrous few months for the government, we must be clear-sighted about the Conservatives' underlying electoral strength. They remain, in the terms of twenty-first century British politics, in relatively rude health in the polls – even if the underlying structural weaknesses that hampered Labour after 2010, on the economy and leadership, have subsided. A coalition grounded in age and home-ownership still endures, although this may be time-limited by contrasting cultural and demographic trends, as Patrick English suggests.

There has been a tendency to view Johnson's successes either with incredulity, as a sign that politics is now beyond rational analysis, or with fatalism, as a reassertion of inevitable Conservative dominance. Indeed, one of the perennial questions of British political history has been how the Conservative Party managed to dominate the twentieth century, despite the arrival of mass democracy. Part of the reason for the left's continual fascination with co-opting parts of the Conservative tradition supposedly vacated by the Tories (evidenced most recently in the Burkean tone of Labour Together's *Labour's Covenant*³) is the sense that Conservatism is somehow in touch with 'ordinary' people's feelings, possessing a sentimental, affective appeal that progressive reason cannot touch. This has never been straightforwardly true (as Conservatives themselves have continually feared), but there are reasons to believe that it is particularly untrue today. Johnson's government has repeatedly shown themselves to be out of step with public attitudes, from everything to the England football team's decision to take the knee at the Euros, to the cost-of-living crisis. Rather than prioritising the latter, ministers take aim at largely imagined targets on the assumption that culture-war dividing lines are a one-size-fits-all election-winning trick. There is very little evidence to support such a view – least of all during the worst hit to living standards since records began. Moreover, as Jon Lawrence has argued in these pages, when the government has been more aligned with the public mood, as in the initial response to the pandemic, this is because they were drawing on a longstanding tradition of 'vernacular social democracy' which made any other response unthinkable.⁴

While there is every reason to have confidence in our own traditions and values – and the possibility of marshalling a winning coalition of interests for a recognisably social-democratic politics – we must also recognise the forces working to shore up Conservative support. It is crucial to demythologise Conservatism – both its

historic appeal, and the chaotic charisma of Johnsonism. We should ask: what are the foundations – political, economic, and cultural – upon which this new coalition of interests is built? Some of these are old, many are new. Some are solid, many fragile. But while its internal contradictions pile up, we can't assume they will be enough to topple it from the inside. Structural analysis is required in order for demolition to begin.

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Notes

- 1 Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Work to do', *Renewal* Vol 30, No 1, 2022, pp5-9.
- 2 Will Jennings, Lawrence McKay and Gerry Stoker, 'The politics of levelling up', *Political Quarterly*, Vol 92, No 2, 2021, pp302-311; James Meadway, 'Why condemning austerity won't be enough to restore Labour to power', 18 February 2021: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2021/02/why-condemning-austerity-won-t-be-enough-restore-labour-power>; Political Economy Research Centre, 'The Rise of "Rentier Nationalism"', 13 April 2022: <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/04/the-rise-of-rentier-nationalism>.
- 3 Labour Together, *Labour's Covenant: A plan for National Reconstruction*, London 2022: <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/4d7c163f-631f-432d-993c-bb9b032617c4/1642417707278Labour's%20Covenant%20.pdf>. For an analysis of its Burkeanism, see Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Covenant v. contract, liberalism v. communitarianism', 24 January 2022: <https://renewal.org.uk/contract-v-covenant-liberalism-v-communitarianism/>.
- 4 Jon Lawrence, 'Vernacular social democracy and the politics of Labour', *Renewal*, Vol 28, No 3, 2020, pp38-42.