

The Nasty Party

Falling Down: The Conservative Party and the Decline of Tory Britain

Phil Burton-Cartledge

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The British Conservative Party is one of the most successful election winning machines in the world. It has been in power, either on its own or as part of a coalition, for 71 of the 104 years since 1918. Although it suffered shattering defeats at the polls in 1997 and 2001, it has made a triumphant comeback, increasing its vote in 2005 and at every subsequent General Election. It returned to office in 2010 as senior partner in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration and since 2015 has governed alone. It won a thumping victory over Labour in 2019, a return of 365 MPs on 43.6 per cent of the popular vote providing it with a handsome Parliamentary majority of 80 seats over all other parties.

This record is clearly evidence of a political organisation deeply rooted in British society and capable of mobilising millions of voters. It would, therefore, seem at best counterintuitive – and at worst just perverse – to argue that the Conservatives are in fact facing an existential crisis and, come the late 2020s and after, could find themselves consigned to long-term political irrelevance and obscurity. Yet that is the argument made by Phil Burton-Cartledge in *Falling Down*. A lecturer in Sociology at the University of Derby, Burton-Cartledge is a very experienced commentator, having for years been the author of All that is Solid,¹ one of the very best political blogs in the business. Written from a Leftist perspective, this is an excellent demonstration of how the best Marxist writing can both educate and produce enlightening insights beyond the reach of conventional liberal-empiricist scholarship.

Two Nations

Burton-Cartledge's thesis is that the Conservatives are likely to be undone as a serious political force thanks to the very success of Thatcherism in changing the British economy and society after 1979. This

¹ The blog can be found at <<http://averypublicsociologist.blogspot.com/>>.

transformation followed from the deindustrialisation of the UK, the defeat of the trade unions in large set piece battles (the miners' strike of 1984-85 being the key example), the selling off of publicly owned industries and the sale of council houses. Out of this wreckage emerged a new Britain, one where economic power was located in the City and the multinational corporations. The country's wealth became increasingly dependent on the service sector and a growing number of consumer industries catering for individual rather than collective tastes and for a privatised recreational culture. Examples of these included leisure, personal care, hospitality, tourism and (increasingly) computer games. Occupations and activities such as education, health, social care and public transport, once run by the state and local authorities on the basis of criteria which emphasised need and public welfare, were now opened up to the free market. Pay and conditions deteriorated for many workers, and along with large-scale unemployment in the early and mid 1980s, encouraged a trend to self-employment and a rise in the number of small businesses.

Life became unpredictable and sometimes precarious for many; but Thatcher offered compensation to the old working class in the form of popular capitalism. This was based on possession of assets. These generally took two forms: either shares, a consequence of privatisation; and home ownership, a result both of the right to buy social housing and of liberalisation of mortgage availability to stimulate the private housing market and encourage buying to let. Many who had never owned capital before benefited from windfall gains on the stock market, and from steady income from tenants in a buoyant private rented property market. Above all, many new homeowners saw their personal wealth increase thanks to rising house prices. This trend was rooted in the shortage of accommodation caused by deliberate neglect of social housing by successive governments. The continuous rise in prices was only twice – temporarily – reversed by downturns in the property market in 1990-93 and 2008-12.

Thatcher's Britain encouraged individual enterprise and property ownership and sought to deliver (not always successfully) rising living standards for those in work, while demonising people on benefit. The era saw a return of the old Victorian dichotomy between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in a largely successful attempt to build what Burton-Cartledge calls a 'two nations Britain'. This involved the construction of a popular coalition of voters which included not just traditional Conservative supporters from middle class professional groups but working class and

former Labour voters drawn to Thatcherism by its commitment to aspiration, equality of opportunity, entrepreneurship, asset ownership and the accumulation of personal wealth. Conservative propaganda deliberately contrasted these 'virtuous' citizens with those accused of scrounging and idleness, dependent on State assistance paid for by hard working taxpayers. It was a tactic which went down well with many in the electorate, and has been used time and again to good electoral effect by Thatcher's successors. David Cameron and his Chancellor George Osborne liked to talk about how their governments championed the 'strivers', all of them (so it was argued) good British folk, not the 'skivers'. By the time of Boris Johnson's General Election victory in 2019, the list of undesirables had grown to include immigrants, asylum seekers, Travellers, nuclear disarmers and Scottish Nationalists. 'Getting Brexit done' was a highly effective rallying cry: it united all the 'patriotic' Britons in a crusade to leave what was depicted as an undemocratic multinational political and economic racket run by corrupt and wasteful foreigners only too keen to see the UK overrun by millions of feckless migrants.

Burton-Cartledge argues that the Conservatives' hitherto successful electoral strategy is now approaching the point at which it ceases to become viable, thanks in large part to the results of Thatcher's revolution. Party membership has been falling steadily for many years, a development which has accelerated since the 1990s. The decline has followed, in part at least, from the privatisation of culture encouraged by Thatcherism, eroding willingness to participate in the collective, communal activity of Party organisation, social events and meetings which was once such a big part of Conservatism. This is an indication of a much deeper problem, namely that of becoming a Party with dwindling core support and declining new membership and dependent on old voters and old members. (Which is why Cameron and Osborne were so keen to establish the 'triple lock' on State old age pensions).² The statistics are clear enough: by 2019 the Party had 160,000 members, down from 300,000 in 2001.³ Almost all of these (97 per cent) were white, 71 per cent were male (according to a 2017 study⁴), over half were more than

² On which see
<<https://www.nerdwallet.com/uk/pensions/triple-lock-on-state-pensions-explained/>>.

³ Burton-Cartledge, *Falling Down*, pp. 13, 156.

⁴ Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti, *Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think and what they do* (London: Mile End Institute, Queen Mary University of London, 2018), p. 7, Figure 1.

60 (with 44 per cent being over 65), and 54 per cent of them lived in London and the South.⁵

Burton-Cartledge might have added that the Conservative Party has historically tended to be strongest in the South, around London and the Home Counties. In 1910 the radical sociologist J. A. Hobson noted how its composition reflected the large numbers of people in that area who were retired and living off their capital or involved in the finance and service sectors, light industry, the professions and service in the armed forces.⁶ These were voters who tended to stress their patriotism and supported international projections of British military and financial power. It is clear that this identification of the Party with the complex of values and institutions which Hobson called 'Consumer's England' was reinforced during the Thatcher years. Tory advances into the so-called Red Wall in 2019 notwithstanding, that remains stronger than ever. It leaves the Party, at least in terms of its composition at the grass roots level, woefully unrepresentative of the nation as a whole – in terms of age, gender, location, class and political outlook. Yet this is the electorate for the current contest between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, not just for the leadership of the Conservative Party but for the Prime Ministership.

Keep Right

Burton-Cartledge argues that neither the abrasive right-wing politics nor the size and demographic composition of Conservative Party membership are likely to alter in the near future. The social location of those who turned to the Tories – thanks to Thatcher's encouragement of home and share ownership – became more and more analogous to that of the *petit bourgeoisie*: in other words people not in receipt of a wage or salary but dependent on self-employment; and, after retirement, on fixed incomes (notably State and private pensions), personal savings and assets. This group of modern Tories generally work in non-unionised industries, are therefore lacking in the social support available to their unionised contemporaries, and tend to be isolated from fellow citizens and live inside a personal network of privatised leisure and family obligations. As socially atomised individuals, such *petit bourgeois* are particularly vulnerable to inflation, the state of the economy, the movements of the

⁵ Ben Quinn, 'Tory members are male and grey but choice of leader is less clear cut', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2022. <<https://tinyurl.com/mwrkdnb5>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jul/08/tory-members-over-60-white-male-choice-of-leader>>

⁶ J. A. Hobson, 'The General Election: a Sociological Interpretation', *Sociological Review*, volume 3 (1910).

stock market and to changes in State pension levels. This can all make for considerable anxiety, a state of mind likely to be intensified by rapid shifts in the political, economic and social environment. What had been seen as the stable and unchanging values of the world, in which this generation had grown up and lived as adults, was liable to be undermined. Burton-Cartledge could have added – with good reason given the examples of Italy in the early 1920s and Germany a decade later – that Leon Trotsky identified the representative figure of this group as the *'wildgewordene Kleinburger'* (the *petit bourgeois* run amok),⁷ capable of mass mobilisation in support of Fascist movements. Since 2010 contemporary Britain has also experienced the mass mobilisation of its own *'wildgewordene Kleinburger'*. This has not gone as far as Fascism but has certainly embraced, and brought into the political mainstream, an outlook characterised by right-wing views which were regarded as extreme in this country a generation ago.

The increasing potency of extreme right-wing views in the UK, especially in England, developed as a reaction to the transformation of British society during the half century after 1960. By 2010 the EU had replaced the Empire and Commonwealth in external affairs, economic globalisation and immigration on the part of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities had transformed many of the nation's cities, capital punishment had long been abolished and marriage was open to gays as well as heterosexuals. These changes, along with an economic insecurity compounded by the financial crash of 2007-9, led many Conservative voters to seek lost certainties and find in them a refuge from an unpredictable and capricious world. It was a search which led them to homophobia and a distaste for 'woke' culture (encouraged by Tory-supporting newspapers), growing nostalgia for the Britain of the 1950s, a hyper patriotism, dislike of foreigners, distrust of the professions (especially in the legal and the educational systems), thinly veiled (and sometimes open) racism, and support for tough penal sanctions on those deemed to be offenders, the workshy and social security scroungers. Politically, these sentiments came together over time in hostility towards the EU – membership of which being increasingly identified by a growing number of Conservatives as embodying everything that was perceived to have gone wrong with the country. The result after 2000 was rising Euroscepticism, seen in the growth of UKIP and increasingly evident in a Tory Party keen to stem the loss of support caused by Nigel Farage and his ilk effectively stealing the right-wing – traditionally the most loyal

⁷ See Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 1168-9.

section of the party. When she had been Chair of the Party, back in 2002, Theresa May warned Tories attending their annual Conference that the public tended to see them as 'the nasty party'.⁸ Half-hearted efforts to escape this sobriquet during the leadership of David Cameron petered out under the pressure of electoral expediency. It is hardly surprising that both Truss and Sunak have run increasingly right-wing campaigns, playing to the paranoia and xenophobia of many Tory members, to which a number of senior Conservatives inside and outside Parliament have responded with dismay.

The values and policies of this 'nasty party', favoured by so many ageing Tories, are in a minority among younger voters, especially those under 45. They are far removed from the social liberalism of many twenty-first century workers. Often working in the service sector at the sharp end of exploitation by employers and on short-term and zero hour contracts, these form a new army of 'immaterial labour'.⁹ Many of them are either unionised or have been engaged in campaigns for trade union recognition by of their employers. They are to be found in jobs where interpersonal skills and a basic ability to work with others are not just desirable qualities but essential skills. Over the last decade their lives have been made more hazardous and economically precarious by benefit cuts, deregulation of measures to protect health and safety at work and by Brexit (where the 'hardest' and most damaging route out of the EU was chosen over more rational options leaving the UK still in a European common market). They have little reason to back the Tories, are becoming increasingly militant and have few difficulties supporting policies anathema to many Conservatives, such as returning to the EU, a fairer tax system, more funding for the public services, stronger protection for workers and support for migrants, BAME groups and LGBTQ communities.

The Impossible Reform

Its current make-up in terms of demography and outlook therefore reduces the Conservative Party's chances of gaining supporters from the new, growing working class rooted in 'immaterial labour'. This is not only because of incompatible political views. Real material interests are involved as well. Many of the rising generation have been denied access

⁸ Michael White and Anne Perkins, "'Nasty party" warning to Tories', *The Guardian*. 8 October 2002.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2002/oct/08/uk.conservatives2002>>

⁹ Burton-Cartledge, *Falling Down*, p. 30.

to the Conservatives' chosen vehicle for winning over supporters and promoting social mobility, namely property ownership. Given the (deliberately created) high price of housing, these mainly younger workers struggle to afford mortgages and homes. A national programme of house-building by private developers and councils, much as happened in the 1950s and 1960s under both Tory and Labour governments, would be a solution to this problem. The difficulty here for the Conservatives is that an increase in the supply of homes would tend to lower property values. This would undermine the financial security of the generation which turned to the Party after 1979, embracing the Thatcherite project of encouraging every citizen to be an owner of capital. It would, in short, threaten the interests of the very coalition which Thatcherism built and which now sustains the Conservative Party. As a result, the Tories are held back from taking measures to increase the supply of housing. Their claim to support property ownership now rings hollow for many. This greatly compounds the difficulties faced by Conservatives in acquiring new voters. With the Party driven by its current, ageing *petit bourgeois* membership to make political and economic choices materially disadvantageous to a large fraction of the population, its ability to gain widespread popular backing in future seems very limited. Burton-Cartledge argues, very plausibly, that even when younger voters finally become property owners themselves, probably thanks more to inheritance than to the market, they are unlikely to turn to the Conservatives. As they grow older and retire they will for years have held the Party responsible for all the difficulties and insecurities they experienced throughout so much of their working lives.¹⁰

In sum, given the age profile of Tories, natural processes are likely to remove many from the electoral register over the next decade; but it does not seem probable that there will be many new recruits to replace them, unless the Party completely changes and embraces the Conservative social democracy¹¹ of the Macmillan years or the German Christian democracy of Angela Merkel. But as Burton-Cartledge says, 'such a transformation is utterly fanciful and can only exist as a thought experiment'. If the Party were able to make such a change and embrace social liberalism into the bargain 'it would not be the Conservative

¹⁰ Burton-Cartledge, *Falling Down*, p. 281.

¹¹ For a discussion of this formulation see Scott Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain 1960-2016. A Political and Economic History* (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 1.

Party'.¹² Burton-Cartledge concludes that the future looks bleak for Britain's Conservatives because they are drawn from a small and diminishing fraction of the population which has turned itself into an angry right-wing sect. He shrewdly adds, however, that nothing in politics or history is inevitable; and without a powerful and persuasive Labour Party able to rally support behind a compelling alternative politico-economic programme, Britain could yet be condemned to live under Tory governments for years to come. As he says, 'No one got rich betting against the Tories'.¹³

Burton-Cartledge writes with authority. His argument is persuasive and he brings it bang up to date with an excellent Postscript on the Johnson Government's calamitous handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is very clear that he knows his subject inside out. There are, however, a couple of areas where he loses his touch. His analysis of British politics in the 1970s and 1980s is rather rushed and superficial and could do with reinforcement from some of the histories of the era (as opposed to sociological analyses); and he overstates the continuities from Thatcher to Major. Now, there is no doubt that the Major government helped to embed the Thatcherite settlement – for example by administering the *coup de grâce* to the coal miners with its pit closure programme, privatising the railways and sustaining the 'two-nations' scapegoating strategy started under its predecessor. At the same time, under Major the Tories definitely took a more One Nation political trajectory than they are given credit for by Burton-Cartledge. This was partly because Major himself was a more consensual figure than Thatcher and partly because by the time of Thatcher's downfall in 1990, her unpopularity was so great that it threatened to discredit her entire project. Concessions to a more centrist political and economic approach were necessary in order to safeguard Thatcher's legacy. Examples are the unfreezing of child benefits (frozen in 1989 in an effort to extract economies from welfare spending); compensation for haemophiliacs infected with the HIV virus as a result of transfusions with contaminated blood; the abolition of the poll tax; a willingness to allow public borrowing to increase during the recession of 1990-92; an industrial strategy (admittedly a very modest one) which sought to rebalance the economy away from what Major himself considered unhealthy dependence on finance and services;¹⁴ and the start

¹² Burton-Cartledge, *Falling Down*, p. 282.

¹³ Burton-Cartledge, *Falling Down*, p. 283.

¹⁴ See Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain*, ch. 6.

of a dialogue (albeit at one remove) with Sinn Fein.

These are, however, minor criticisms. Overall this is an excellent book. It is lucid, scholarly, enlightening and thought-provoking and deserves to be read by anyone interested in modern British politics.

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