

Chapter 4

UK political parties: how do they differ on policy?

Context

For a moment, late in 2008, it appeared that the deepening economic crisis might bring an end to the post-Thatcherite consensus and herald a return to a more adversarial style of party politics in the UK. For the Conservatives, David Cameron and George Osborne were urging massive spending cuts and cautioning against taking the nation further into deficit — while the prime minister, Gordon Brown, and his chancellor, Alistair Darling, were stressing the need to maintain levels of public expenditure at this key point in the economic cycle. However, in 2009, with the general election drawing closer, the gap between the two main parties appeared to narrow once more with differences again being measured more in terms of tone and emphasis as opposed to fundamental differences.

This chapter considers just how far the main UK political parties differ on policy ahead of the 2010 general election. In so doing it will address questions such as:

- How different were the policies being offered by the two main parties at the end of 2009?
- Have recent months witnessed a return to the adversarial politics of an earlier age, or are we seeing something entirely new?
- Where do the Liberal Democrats fit into the equation?
- How free will any government be to pursue its own policy agenda after the next general election?

How different were the policies being offered by the two main parties at the end of 2009?

The main battlefield in UK party politics in recent years has centred first on the core social policy issues of education and healthcare, and second on approaches to managing the UK economy. Party leaders who have sought to focus their party's campaigns on other policy areas — most recently the euro (William Hague, 2001) and immigration (Michael Howard, 2005) — have generally not fared well.

Social policy

The differences between the Labour and Conservative positions in most areas of social policy are still to be found more in tone and emphasis, than in principle. Indeed, the various policy priorities highlighted on the Conservative Party's website at the end of 2009 (see Box 4.1) could in most cases appear almost unedited on Labour's own site.



Box 4.1 Conservative policy, some headlines**1 Raising the bar, closing the gap**

Our action plan to raise school standards

2 Power to the people

The decentralised energy revolution

3 Work for welfare

Real reform to help make British poverty history

4 Prisons with a purpose

Our sentencing and rehabilitation revolution to break the cycle of crime

5 A stronger society

Voluntary action in the twenty-first century

6 Delivering some of the best health in Europe

Outcomes not targets

7 Building skills

A training and apprenticeships revolution

8 The low carbon economy

Security, stability and green growth

9 Control shift

Returning power to local communities

10 Strong foundations

Building homes and communities

11 One world conservatism

A conservative agenda for international development

Source: www.conservatives.com

Education

The Labour Party has long since abandoned any plans to abolish the remaining state grammar schools, yet alone address the issue of private education. The Conservatives, for their part, appear equally happy with the status quo, focusing on ‘shifting the balance of power away from government and towards parents’ and ‘encouraging smaller and more varied schools’ as opposed to imposing a nationwide formula for secondary education. Both parties support the right of parents to establish new schools, both support the creation of new academies, and both agree on the need to improve school discipline and the quality of classroom teaching. The Conservatives’ call to reduce bureaucracy and put power back into the hands of teachers is precisely what New Labour was calling for when in opposition back in 1996.

Healthcare

In the area of healthcare the gap between the main parties is also far less apparent than it used to be. The Labour Party is no longer committed to relying entirely on state provision, favouring public-private partnerships and the pooling of healthcare resources. The Conservatives also appear committed to the National Health Service, promising to provide 45,000 more single

rooms in NHS wards and address the issue of drugs-pricing in order to ensure that new treatments are available to all, where they are shown to be clinically effective. Once again, the Conservatives are focusing on the need to remove top-heavy bureaucracy from the service and free-up NHS staff to do ‘what they do best: providing top-quality care to patients’.

Economic policy

Economic policy was the area in which the two main parties were traditionally most clearly divided in their approach: with Labour said to support a more interventionist, ‘big-government’, tax-and-spend approach and the Conservatives favouring deregulation and a larger role for the market. New Labour’s great achievement under Blair was to distance itself from these traditional positions by promising to stick to the Conservative’s plans for taxation and spending. It was this commitment, alongside growing doubts over the Conservatives’ ability to manage the economy following Black Wednesday in 1992, that allowed New Labour to develop a reputation for economic competence. It is no coincidence that in his efforts to restore public confidence in his own party’s ability to manage the economy, David Cameron opted to do as Blair had done back in 1996 and commit his party to the plans established by the incumbent government.

However, it is in the area of economic policy that the parties have moved apart significantly since the end of 2008, a divergence brought about largely by the global credit crunch and the faltering fortunes of the UK economy.

The impact of the recession

The economic downturn prompted a significant divergence in the economic policies offered by the two main parties. The pattern was set early in the crisis, with the Conservatives opposing Brown’s decision to nationalise Northern Rock. Thereafter the parties appeared to revert to more orthodox positions, with Labour opting to spend its way out of recession and the Conservatives urging caution and, crucially, withdrawing their pledge to hold to Labour’s broad approach to running the economy once in office.

The Conservative Party’s new position was clearly spelt out on its website:

Gordon Brown has left Britain’s economy ill-prepared for a downturn: he borrowed in a boom and left us with one of the biggest budget deficits in the advanced world; he stripped the Bank of England of its powers to supervise the City; he actively encouraged the risk-taking culture in our banks; and he claimed to have abolished boom and bust...Brown’s economic mismanagement means that we can’t offer big upfront tax cuts like some other countries.

This was a powerful attack on the prime minister and one that threatened to erode the political capital he had accrued during his decade as chancellor. Although few had expected the former chancellor to become a charismatic premier, most had trusted in his ability to manage the economy.



The Conservatives' prescription for the ailing UK economy was sweeping (see Box 4.2). They promised to restore the regulatory powers of the Bank of England and make significant cuts in government spending as a means of balancing the nation's books. In November 2009, David Cameron promised that an incoming Conservative government would deliver an emergency budget.

Box 4.2 Conservative economic proposals

- We will freeze council tax for 2 years by reducing wasteful spending on advertising and consultancy work in central government.
- We will introduce a £50 billion National Loan Guarantee Scheme and underwrite bank lending to businesses and get credit flowing again.
- We will provide tax cuts for new jobs with a £2.6 billion package of tax breaks to get people into work, funded by the money that would otherwise go on unemployment benefit.
- We will cut the main rate of corporation tax to 25p and the small companies rate to 20p, paid for by scrapping complex reliefs and allowances.
- We will give small- and medium-sized businesses a 6-month VAT holiday, funded by a 7.5% interest rate on delayed payments.
- We will cut National Insurance by 1% for 6 months for firms with fewer than five employees, paid for from the above changes to the company tax regime.
- We will abolish Stamp Duty for nine out of ten first-time buyers and raise the inheritance tax threshold to £1 million. Both of these changes will be funded by a flat-rate charge on non-domiciles.

To repair the broken economy in the long run, we need economic responsibility. That means:

- a responsible fiscal policy, bolstered by independent oversight
- a responsible financial policy, bolstered by a renewed role for the Bank of England
- a responsible attitude to economic development that fosters more balanced economic growth

Source: www.conservatives.com

In this area of policy at least then, clear fault-lines have emerged between the policies of the two main parties, with the Conservatives offering significant cuts in spending and a long-haul out of deficit and Labour promising to maintain public spending in most key areas.

Have recent months witnessed a return to the adversarial politics of an earlier age, or are we seeing something entirely new?

The age of adversarial politics saw the two main parties taking positions that were essentially ideological in nature. However, with the exception of economic policy, where there has been a real divergence in recent months, it is hard to make out such a clear division between the parties on most other key issues today. Certainly, in the major areas of healthcare and education — as

we have seen — both the main parties appear to be offering the same solution, namely a partnership between the public and private sectors.

Moreover, critics have argued that the approach of both parties has become increasingly reactive and piecemeal. New Labour has long been criticised for being overly led by the media and — at least in Blair's first term in office — focus groups. In recent months, the Conservatives also appear to have taken a rather scatter-gun approach to announcing new proposals, with press releases on policy peppering the media with great regularity.

Although many of these proposals may eventually find their way into law, should the party be returned to office, some commentators have suggested that some policies have been put forward more for short-term media impact than as part of some joined-up programme for government. This was certainly a criticism levelled at the party's promise to raise the threshold for inheritance tax to £1 million — the pledge that was said to have contributed to Brown's decision not to call a snap election back in the autumn of 2007. Although such striking announcements have often served to erode Labour's support in the short term, they have also tied the Conservatives to policies that look increasingly untenable (see Box 4.3).

Box 4.3 **Inheritance tax**

Well, it looked like a clever idea at the time. Indeed it was a clever idea at the time. It was just over 2 years ago and the Tories smelt of panic as they gathered at their annual conference. Gordon Brown is on honeymoon with the voters. Labour has an election-winning advantage in the polls. Some members of the shadow cabinet seriously think David Cameron will no longer be Tory leader by Christmas.

All eyes are on his friend George Osborne. The young shadow chancellor gets to his feet, reaches into his hat and pulls out a pledge that only millionaires will pay inheritance tax under a Tory government. He claims that he can find the money by introducing a new levy on the 'non-doms'. His figures look a bit ropery, but the politics are sharp. A tax cut for British citizens paid for by unpopular wealthy foreigners: it's a great trick.

The cut to inheritance tax doesn't look so smart at all in the utterly changed political atmosphere of recessionary Britain. George Osborne's pledge has gone from being a lifesaver into an albatross around the necks of him and David Cameron.

Source: adapted from A. Rawnsley, 'Gordon Brown's favourite Conservative policy pledge', *Observer*, 29 November 2009.

A glance at the Conservatives' own website, where a total of 61 separate press releases were posted between 8 November and 1 December 2009, illustrates the problem. The party at times appears to be issuing proposals in all areas in the hope that some will appeal to voters and gain it support. A parallel can be drawn here with Cameron's efforts to find a label with which to encapsulate his personal take on conservatism. The media have dubbed Cameron's



supporters ‘New Tories’, or more recently ‘the Cameroons’. Cameron has also used a number of other phrases. Early in his leadership the Tory leader spoke of ‘liberal Conservatism’, later referring to his commitment to ‘progressive Conservatism’. Former party leader Iain Duncan Smith’s work with the Centre for Social Justice led some to use the phrase ‘compassionate Conservatism’, an echo of the kind of language used by the then presidential hopeful George W. Bush back in 2000. As with Conservative policy proposals this process has, at times, appeared to have more to do with finding a ‘brand’ that will fly with voters, than with setting out a coherent vision (see Box 4.4)

Box 4.4 Following rather than leading?

Between social science and politics falls the shadow of public opinion. Politics is often the mediation between fact and public sentiment. Bad politicians follow the focus groups and ignore inconvenient truths. Good politicians persuade the public of the necessary facts. Sensible scientists appreciate that this is a great and difficult skill: politics is an art that also deserves respect.

Source: P. Toynbee, ‘Bad politicians are slave to public opinion. Good ones try to change it’, *Guardian*, 27 November 2009.

What of Labour?

While one must necessarily make allowances for parties in opposition, those in government are expected to present a clearer vision of what they are doing and where policy is headed. In this respect Gordon Brown’s administration has singularly failed to deliver.

In his book *Politics and Governance in the UK*, Michael Moran identifies three main ways in which the government’s policy priorities can be established (see Box 4.5). Far from leading the process from the centre of the core executive, as one might have expected he would, Brown’s premiership has been remarkably reactive in nature, with policy proposals often emerging either in response to events, or as a reaction to the policies proposed by the main opposition parties.

This observation is reflected in Brown’s failure to establish a truly meaningful legislative programme during his time in office. Our verdict on the proposals

Box 4.5 Policy making

- 1 Business comes from within departments (through ministers/civil servants as a result of lobbying/research etc.)
- 2 Business comes from the core executive (cabinet, cabinet office, advisors etc.)
- 3 Business comes from fire-fighting (i.e. reactive as opposed to proactive)

Source: adapted from M. Moran, *Politics and Governance in the UK*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

contained in the 2008 Queen's Speech, delivered in our 2009 survey, was fairly damning:

While some of the bills outlined carried impressive titles, there was little that was truly ground-breaking... In some areas, the proposals simply restated or simplified what was already there, in other areas, proposals appeared to offer changes that would, in all probability, make little difference to most citizens' lives.

Such criticisms are equally applicable to the measures outlined a year later (see Box 4.6), with the added proviso that with only around 70 days of parliamentary business remaining before a general election must be called, few, if any, of the measures outlined are likely to pass into law. Such obvious limitations on the time available make some of the proposals contained in the 2009 Queen's Speech all the more unfathomable. What purpose could there be in offering a draft bill on Lords reform when New Labour has failed to deliver any real progress on this issue in over a decade? How would putting the government's existing commitment to end child poverty into law make it any more likely that the goal would be achieved? And why did the government feel the need to give legal force to the banning of cluster bombs, when it had already signed up to an international convention banning their future use? Ironically, perhaps, the things that could have been passed into law in the few weeks remaining (e.g. some of Sir Christopher Kelly's recommendations on MPs' expenses) were conspicuously absent from the speech.

Box 4.6 The 2009 Queen's Speech

- Child Poverty Bill
- Bribery Bill
- Cluster Munitions (Prohibition) Bill
- Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill
- Fiscal Responsibility Bill
- Crime and Security Bill
- Digital Economy Bill
- Education and Families Bill
- Energy Bill
- Financial Services Bill
- Flood and Water Management Bill
- House of Lords Reform (Draft) Bill
- International Development (Draft) Bill
- Personal Care at Home Bill
- Equality Bill



The pointlessness of the exercise was reflected in David Cameron's view, reported by the BBC, that the speech was the 'most divisive, short-termist, shamelessly self-serving' one 'in living memory'. It also explained the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg's view that this Queen's Speech of 'fantasy bills' should simply have been delayed until after the general election.

Far from seeing a return to a previous age of ideologically-based, adversarial, conviction politics, therefore, British party politics in 2010 essentially remains an exercise in garnering votes, with the two main, catch-all parties arguing over the detail rather than the substance of policy.

Where do the Liberal Democrats fit into the equation?

The Liberal Democrats and their antecedents have traditionally occupied the centre ground in British party politics, with the Labour Party to the left on the political spectrum and the Tories to the right.

The decision of the Labour Party Conference to adopt its hard-left 1983 general election manifesto, which put the party into opposition for more than a decade, gave a boost to those at the centre. The Liberals, who had averaged only 9 seats in the 11 general elections between 1945 and 1979, had by that stage already benefited from the fresh impetus provided by the emergence of a new force in British politics, the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The union of the Liberals and the SDP, first in an electoral alliance in 1983 and 1987 and later as the Liberal Democrats, following the formal merger of the two parties in 1988, appeared to offer the prospect of genuine three-way party competition in Britain.

This has not proven to be the case, however. The genius of New Labour's electoral strategy was to fuse an acceptance of certain key elements of Thatcherite economic policy with the kind of radical constitutional reform agenda more traditionally associated with the Liberals. David Cameron's repositioning of the Conservatives since 2005 has had a similar effect in eroding support from the Liberal Democrats on the centre-right.

Table 4.1 Liberal Democrat performance at UK general elections

Year	Vote (%)	Seats
1983*	25.4	23
1987*	22.6	22
1992	17.8	20
1997	16.8	46
2001	18.3	52
2005	22.0	62

* SDP-Liberal Alliance

Source: adapted from E. Tetteh, *Election Statistics: UK 1918–2007*, House of Commons Research Paper 08/12.

Although the Liberal Democrats retain a committed core following and benefit from significant levels of protest and tactical voting, the party Nick Clegg assumed control of back in 2007 has not really made significant progress in terms of electoral support since the SDP-Liberal Alliance first contested a general election back in 1983 (Table 4.1).

A change of tack?

It is largely an acceptance of this underlying truth that has resulted in Clegg's decision to adopt more radical policies and move the party away from the political centre, a shift that has led some to suggest that the Liberal Democrats and not Labour are now the most left-leaning mainstream political party in Britain. However, the reality is rather more complex than it might first appear, for while Clegg's approach in some areas appears to see the party adopting orthodox left-wing policies, in other areas it appears to be adopting a more traditional liberal (perhaps even neo-liberal) position. For example, while the Liberal Democrat leader promised over £20 billion in new spending on Liberal Democrat projects, such as support for nursing care, he planned to make an equivalent saving by shaving 3% off existing departmental budgets.

The party also offered the prospect of significant tax-cuts of between 4p and 6p in the pound, funded by efficiency savings and the closing of £5 billion of tax loopholes identified by the party's treasury spokesman Vince Cable. As Clegg himself explained to the *Guardian* back in September 2008, 'aspiring to hand back money to people from central government is impeccably liberal'. Clearly, all talk of tax cuts has had to be moderated in the wake of the economic crisis. However, before the crisis the Liberal Democrats were offering more radical economic policies at a time when others were refusing to commit.

In foreign policy also Clegg has offered something to those on the left (e.g. the possibility that the Liberal Democrats might opt not to upgrade Trident) as well as something for those on the right (e.g. the promise of a referendum on continued UK membership of the EU).

The Liberal Democrat approach is understandable. The party is fully aware of the need to maintain its broad appeal in order to attract disaffected voters from both of the two main parties: shift too far to the left and disaffected Tories might feel uncomfortable voting for the Liberal Democrats; lean too far to the right and alienate potential defectors from the Labour rank-and-file.

How free will any government be to pursue its own policy agenda after the next general election?

The ability of any incoming government to pursue its policy agenda from 2010 onwards will be limited first by the political realities of the situation it is likely to find itself in, and second by the economic realities that face the UK as the nation struggles to emerge from recession.



Political realities

It is extremely unlikely that the victorious party in 2010 will have anything more than a small Commons majority. Although the Conservatives have led Labour comfortably in opinion polls over the last 12 months, the electoral system and the existing constituency boundaries mean that they may well have to win by a margin of over 10% of the national popular vote in order to secure a working majority, and perhaps 5% even to be the biggest single party in a 'hung parliament'. Such analysis is far from fanciful; even in 2005 the Conservatives secured an average of 44,368 votes for each seat won (compared to Labour's 26,908).

If the Conservatives were in any doubt as to the scale of the challenge that faces them they need look no further than the kinds of gains in seats made by opposition parties at previous elections (see Table 4.2), with the Conservatives needing a gain of 128 seats in 2010 in order to secure a majority of one seat in the House of Commons.

Table 4.2 Seats won at recent general elections

Year	Labour	Conservative
1979	268 (-51)	339 (+63)
1983	209 (-59)	397 (+58)
1987	229 (+20)	375 (-22)
1992	271 (+42)	336 (-39)
1997	418 (+147)	165 (-171)
2001	412 (-6)	166 (+1)
2005	355 (-57)	198 (+32)

Source: based on data in E. Tetteh, *Election Statistics: UK 1918-2007*, House of Commons Research Paper 08/12.

Labour's chances of securing a sizeable majority also appear fairly small, with the best case scenario for the party appearing to be a repeat of 1992, when the party in government, John Major's Conservatives, clawed back a deficit in the polls to secure victory and a 21-seat Commons majority. A coalition government, often offered as the most likely outcome of a marginal result at a general election, is also unlikely since the most obvious coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats, is unlikely to want to commit to an exclusive relationship with either of the two main parties. It is quite possible, therefore, that the next government will have to work on a largely bipartisan, policy-by-policy basis.

Economic realities

The UK economy is unlikely to have recovered fully by May or June 2010, the likely date of the next general election. That — and the fact that any incoming government will have to pay off the accumulated national debt — means that any party in government will face serious constraints on what it can do.

Conclusions: what is the future of party policy in the UK?

While it is tempting to conclude that 2009 witnessed a return to a more orthodox, partisan, party politics in the UK, the evidence available simply does not support such a verdict. Although the economic downturn saw the two main parties taking a more adversarial approach when addressing issues of economic policy, there was still remarkably little to choose between them in most other areas of public policy. Indeed, what differences there are may ultimately count for very little, as the political and economic realities that will face the government elected in May or June 2010 will leave the victorious party with little or no room to manoeuvre.

Summary

- Recent years have seen a narrowing of the gap between the two main UK parties, a process that has led some to herald the 'end of ideology'.
- Under Tony Blair, New Labour became less committed to public-sector-only solutions and more open to market testing and public-private partnerships.
- Under David Cameron, the Conservatives have shed their image as the 'nasty' party and moderated their faith in 'the market' with renewed support for core public services such as the National Health Service.
- Although the economic downturn brought a return to a more familiar adversarial approach over economic policy, there were few significant differences between the two main parties in most areas of policy.
- It could be argued that the Liberal Democrats have in fact been offering more radical proposals than either of the two main parties, though the party has become increasingly difficult to locate on a traditional 'left-right', linear political spectrum.
- The party that wins the 2010 general election will have little room for manoeuvre on policy as a result of the political and economic context within which it will have to operate.

