

Conservatism and the Conservative Party

Key conservative thinkers and their influence on the development of the Conservative Party

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ACTIVITIES

- As a class, research and discuss the following:
- 1 What factors unite the key conservative thinkers?
 - 2 How do they disagree? Why?
 - 3 What ideas of the key thinkers can be identified in current Conservative Party policy?

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Hobbes responded mainly to the anarchy associated with the English Civil War (1642–51), as discussed in his key work *Leviathan*. He argued that humans are imperfect and selfish, and a natural 'state of nature' existence would be a world of violent anarchy. To avoid such a fate, people should establish a social contract, giving up freedoms (which are meaningless in a chaotic 'state of nature') to an all-powerful sovereign who would provide order by granting legal and physical protection to his subjects.

Hobbes's two key contributions to conservative thinking are that society cannot exist before the creation of the state, and the state must provide legal and physical protection to citizens if society is to flourish.

Edmund Burke (1729–97)

Burke focused on the preservation of society. His key work was *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). He argued that an organic society is not static and that sometimes it must 'change to conserve' itself, guided by history, pragmatism and, above all, empiricism.

Burke's ideas have been particularly influential to one-nation conservatives (e.g. Benjamin Disraeli, Harold Macmillan, Edward Heath, David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson) who see the most important job of government as being the preservation of society.

Michael Oakeshott (1901–90)

Oakeshott explored 'the politics of scepticism' in his essay, 'On Being Conservative' (1956). Oakeshott argued that because rationalism and its doctrines are flawed, humans should put their faith in trusted tradition.

Modern society is unpredictable and multifaceted, and rational theories often simplify complex situations. Oakeshott was therefore critical of the state management present in both aspects of modern conservatism: the one-nation conservatism of Macmillan and Heath, which embraced the rationalism of John Maynard Keynes' economics; and the neoconservatism of Thatcher, which was similarly devoted to the rationalism inherent in Milton Friedman's monetarist economics.

Ayn Rand (1905–82)

Rand was critical of both statism and collectivism, and advocated individualism and atomistic society over the traditional conservative belief of an organic society. Her ideas are found in both her novels (e.g. *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957) and her philosophical works, chiefly *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964).

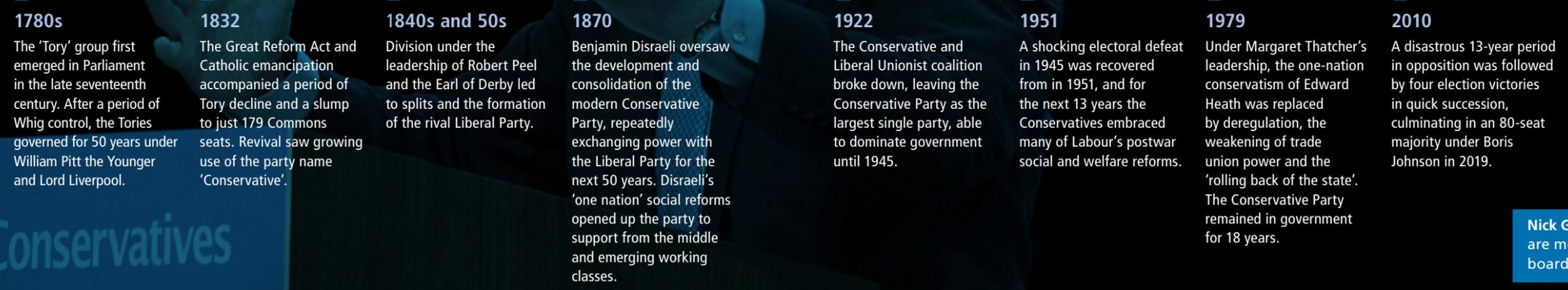
For Rand, the only moral purpose of society is to protect individual rights. In an atomistic society, individuals have the right to maintain property and income without being taxed for welfare spending. No conservative leader has gone as far as Rand, but Thatcher shared Rand's antipathy to socialism and collectivism, and agreed on the importance of individualism.

Robert Nozick (1938–2002)

Nozick was critical of the interventionary state, which he felt smacked of socialism. His *Ideas in Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) was partly a rebuttal to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which had argued for an enabling state that would provide a just society.

Like Rand, Nozick preferred atomistic society rather than organic government. He thought that the role of the state should be limited to protecting human rights.

Many of his ideas resonated with neoconservatives in both the UK and the USA. Thatcher felt that the one-nation conservatism of the postwar period had extended the role of the welfare state and intervened in the economy far more than was desirable.



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