



## The new 'progressive' Conservatism in Europe

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**The recent development of 'progressive' Conservatism presents a distinct and potent challenge to traditional modes of social democratic thought. Most apparent in the governing strategies of centre-right parties in Germany, Sweden and the UK, it seeks control of the centre-ground through a reputation for economic competence, scepticism about the efficacy of the state, and a belief in the role of traditional values in the context of contemporary society. It is vital that social democrats are able to grasp the nature of this agenda.**

There is a new 'progressive' Conservative agenda, and it is remaking centre-right politics throughout much of Europe. Progressive Conservatism eschews the liberal individualism of the 1980s and early 1990s, but betrays renewed scepticism about the role of the state and the efficiency of the public sector. It has enabled centre-right parties, notably Cameron's Conservatives in the UK, Merkel's CDU in Germany, and Reinfeld's Moderates in Sweden, to wrestle the political centre-ground from their opponents espousing a new conception of 'compassionate' Conservatism.

This dramatic shift in political strategy is still poorly understood among social democratic parties despite a spate of election defeats in recent years. The natural instinct of social democrats is to contest the new-found pragmatic and compassionate posture of their Conservative opponents, insisting that centre-right politicians are merely a wolf in sheep's clothing. The apparently moderate rhetoric of Cameron, Merkel, and Reinfeld conceals a determination to impose neo-liberal policies that shrink the size of the state, while defending traditional Conservative vested interests among the financial sector and the wealthy.

The Conservatives espouse a brand of post-crisis austerity economics that is highly neo-liberal and monetarist in orientation, particularly in Britain and the United States. Making swift and large-scale public expenditure cuts in the name of budgetary consolidation is a risky step in the face of an ongoing contraction in global demand, as Danny Blanchflower and other leading economists have observed.

Nonetheless, social democrats need to be wary of simply dismissing this new model of centre-right politics as 1980s-style Thatcherite individualism. After the Conservative Party's historic victory in 1979, the British left largely failed to appreciate the radical potential of Thatcherism: both the capacity of Thatcherism to project itself as being on the side of major changes that were sweeping through the world economy, and the support for a new settlement between labour and capital in order to halt Britain's relative economic decline.

History may be repeating itself. The Swedish Prime Minister was the trailblazer among European Conservative politicians. After a disastrous election result in 2002, Reinfeld won the leadership and effectively transformed his party in Sweden. The Moderates quickly de-emphasised core liberal policies such as tax cuts and pro-business regulations, adopting programmes that accepted the Swedish welfare model and a new 'work-first policy' that combined tax cuts for low and middle income workers with cuts in unemployment and sickness benefits. Reinfeld's Moderate Party shifted radically to the centre-ground of Swedish politics: securing two consecutive election victories in 2006 and 2010, they now challenge the hegemonic tradition of social democracy in Swedish society.

In his incisive book on the British Conservatives, *'The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron'* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), the political scientist Tim Bale shows how the Tories similarly rediscovered their winning ways by reaching back into the centre-ground. And the German CDU has long been willing to lean towards the left, not least because until recently they governed in coalition with the SPD. The financial crisis has reinforced the determination of Germany's politicians across the political divide to demarcate the German model from the worst excesses of Anglo-American capitalism and neo-liberal globalisation.

This indicates that there are at least three distinctive models of 'progressive' Conservatism in Europe, each dictated by divergent political traditions, electoral imperatives, and structural circumstances and constraints. Their unifying ideological rationale, nonetheless, is the willingness to modify the commitment to liberal individualism which became the dominant strand of Conservative thought in the 1970s and 1980s; and to combine that posture with renewed scepticism about the role of the centralised state and the efficiency and efficacy of the public sector. The purpose is the creation of, "a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control" (UK Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010), implying that public services ought to be delivered by a multiplicity of public, private and third sector providers. While the state itself should be smaller and leaner, the communitarian ties that bind citizens together, nonetheless, remain fundamentally important.

This 'progressive' Conservative agenda has four distinctive strategic and programmatic strands:

**The first is to establish dominance on the economy:** Conservatives have fought hard to seize the mantle of economic competence, portraying social democrats as 'deficit deniers' who are incapable of remedying the economic fall-out of the global financial crash. By defending the arguments for a Keynesian stimulus driven by large-scale public intervention in the national and global economy, centre-left parties have appeared complacent about the scale of public debt, apparently unwilling to make tough choices about the balance of tax rises and spending cuts required to steer a sustainable fiscal path. The centre-right has succeeded in redefining the narrative of the crisis as one of public indebtedness, rather than market fallibility. No party in the industrialised world will remain a serious contender for office unless it is a trusted economic manager.

**Second, redefine the political centre-ground:** 'progressive' Conservatives combine scepticism about the public sector with a renewed commitment to the values of community and the public good. David Cameron's 'Big Society' agenda is perhaps the most forceful articulation of their determination to seize the mantle of progressive reform from the centre-left. It espouses a concern for the inclusion of the poorest and most vulnerable by creating a new role for charities and the third sector in the welfare state and the public realm. At the same time, centre-right politicians tread carefully in reforming collective entitlements such as healthcare, pensions and social insurance. They must appeal directly to middle income voters unwilling to rely on privatised provision.

**Third, renew traditional values in a modern society:** another characteristic of the 'progressive' Conservative appeal is a desire to stand up for values such as custom, belonging, morality and tradition without falling into the trap of social conservatism which alienates younger, more prosperous university-educated voters. The Conservative appeal rests on standing up for ways of life that are expressed and embodied within national identity, and ought to be protected from the forces of modernity and marketisation. The centre-right has learnt to do so in a way that assiduously avoids cultural conflicts relating to the role of women in society, recognising individual rights to non-discrimination and equal treatment among minority groups. This has weakened the loyalty of key

electoral constituencies from their traditional affiliation with social democratic parties.

**Finally, strike a pragmatic posture in international affairs:** Conservative parties have discarded their traditionally nationalist and protectionist instincts in favour of selective international co-operation in the European Union and within global institutions. The British Conservative Party in the late 1990s was widely regarded as unelectable because of its hostility to Britain's participation in the European Union. Similarly, the Swedish Moderates developed a reputation as bitterly antagonistic to Europe, as well as the United States. In government, Reinfeld, Merkel and Cameron have each secured a reputation as pragmatic moderates seeking credible and workable solutions on the international stage. The recent UK defence and security review advocated an explicit role for Anglo-French co-operation, a position that would have been unthinkable among Conservatives a decade or so ago.

As a result, centre-right Conservative parties in Europe are more electable than in the past. This conception of 'progressive' Conservatism strikes a new balance between the politics of support and the politics of power. It reaches out to lower and middle-income groups in order to build an enduring electoral coalition, while it governs primarily through espousing competence and fitness to rule, rather than ideology. This represents a partial recovery of the core Conservative tradition which influenced centre-right parties in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, embodied in the Christian Democracy of Adenauer, and the One Nation Conservatism of MacMillan and Butler.

Nonetheless, it would be quite wrong to conclude that the 'progressive' Conservative agenda has few contradictions. Immigration, for example, remains a major fault-line within the centre-right, which is increasingly forced to choose between appealing to traditional working-class voters who are defecting to far right parties, and liberal metropolitan voters who have largely embraced cosmopolitanism and globalisation. There is little doubt, nonetheless, that the new politics of 'progressive' Conservatism represents a potent challenge to centre-left parties and ideologies.

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