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Cameron and May failed as one-nation Conservatives: we must now build a new consensus

by Alastair Stewart

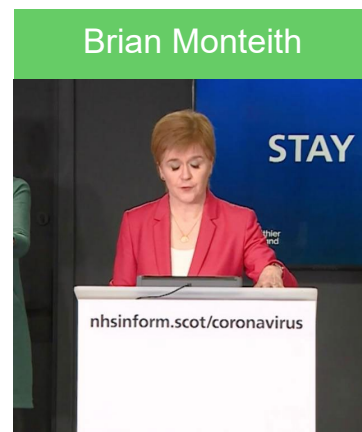
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WHEN THERESA MAY assumed office, she used her first speech to define herself as a “one-nation” Tory. The evidence suggests otherwise. Highlights of May’s Premiership to date include being forced by the Supreme Court to face parliamentary scrutiny, failing to win an outright mandate from the British public and not producing any semblance of a Brexit strategy.

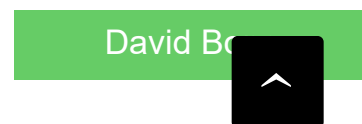
That May has stumbled is chiefly because of the incompatibility between her self-ascribed one-nation label and the behaviour it demands.

‘One-nation conservatism’, ‘Tory democracy’, ‘paternalism’ and ‘progressive conservatism’ are some of many names for politics which place a premium on the duty of citizens, particularly the wealthiest and most powerful, to helping

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people.

The creed is not stringently ideological in the same way as Thatcherism, socialism or liberalism. At its core, like all real conservatism, one-nation conservatism is a philosophical disposition that looks at 'what might be' with a wary eye. There is an acceptance of the limits of knowledge twinned with an acknowledgement that change must occur organically, all while tempered by a commitment to mitigating the risks of that change to citizens.

May, who famously called the Conservatives the "nasty party" might well have been talking about the neoliberal primacy of economic change over social realities.

And this is where Mrs May's credentials fall flat.

The result of the EU referendum was a decision by the citizenry, but the vote was allowed by the so-called small 'c' conservatives who should have recognised the tenets of their creed. The complexity involved in removing the UK from the European Union violates the knowledge principle and, at the very least, should have sparked an unprecedented campaign of elucidation as to what was required and what might happen if Britain left the EU.



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Brexit is merely a flirtation consummated. For over 40 years the European Union has expanded, transformed and centralised with remarkably little democratic input from the populations it represents. It has refused to organically change despite all evidence, particularly from Britain, suggesting a burgeoning resentment against meddling bureaucrats and overzealous diktats.

For all that, the logical position should have been to reform from within. It's been done before, in similar colours and with significant, principled cost. Margaret Thatcher conclusively championed the British national interest while acknowledging the need for Britain in Europe. She battled the idea of a European Parliamentary system, but also signed the Single European Act (which created the single European market). Her rhetoric, however, was a starting gun for her defenestration.

John Major championed Britain at the heart of Europe; negotiated the Social Chapter and Single Currency opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty, and ensured that there was no clear mention of a "Federal Europe." He also ensured that foreign and defence policy were kept as matters of inter-

Allan Smith



*Scottish Conservatives
need a leader to take the
fight to Sturgeon – not
make swipes at
colleagues*

governmental co-operation.

It dogged his premiership, and the internal wrangling over Europe within the Conservative Party produced a leadership crisis and sank his popularity with continued sniping, particularly over joining the Single Currency.

Eurosceptic influence has always cast a shadow over the Conservative Party. Cameron's desperation to counter the surge in UKIP support bleeding away Conservative voters, rather than redress the appeal of his party in 2015, cost him his one-nation credentials in favour of politicking.

The reforms were hashed, and they were lip-service; exempting the UK from closer EU union and limiting access to in-work benefits for new EU immigrants with no comprehensive or radical agreement on how to reform the EU as a whole.

May's commitment to force Brexit without parliamentary scrutiny, and her 2017 general election gamble, is even more grounded in fear of losing power with none of the nearly logical necessity of Cameron.

It's a grubby grab for political success, particularly seeing as she was for remaining in the EU, which has now subsumed whatever pretence of one-nation instincts she might have had.

Brexit itself is a Pyrrhic victory par excellence, and it's first casualty has been the philosophical inclinations of two prime ministers. Thatcher derogatorily referred to one-nation conservatives as 'wets' because they lacked the courage of their convictions and she's been posthumously proven right by both her successors.

A case in point is that the supposedly political kindred likes of Ken Clarke and Michael Heseltine are condemning their own prime minister. It's more telling, still, that the one-nation mantra was borrowed unapologetically by Labour leader Ed Miliband in 2015 and wore the banner with greater accuracy than either Cameron or May.

May has to listen to her better angels. Ruth Davidson and the Scottish Conservatives are an increasingly more principled and more one-nation voice in parallel to the wider UK party.

Their opposition to a hard Brexit and Davidson's objection to cutting tax credits for working families and international aid budgets are a breathing embodiment of one-nation principles as well as pragmatic moderation.

What can we learn from the long-dead political leaders and philosophers who were born in the age of the cavalry charge and died when The Beatles were top of the charts?

From Benjamin Disraeli to Ruth Davidson, conservatives have been Conservatives but seldom the other way around. There's a deficit at the head of the party and, now more

than ever, one-nation thinking is required.

Thatcher smashed the post-war consensus and the toleration that embraced nationalisation, strong labour unions, heavy regulation, high taxes, and a generous welfare state.

Yet, majorities in both Labour and the Conservatives agreed upon these principles for 40 years, too. They had their day, but the language of consensus building shouldn't be conflated with spinelessness.

It's now time for the political class in the UK, particularly at the highest levels of the Conservative Party, to listen and build a new consensus, forged from a spectrum of political opinion and people across the country.

If Theresa May is not careful, she will find herself cast by the wayside of necessary change.

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