

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## **British Conservatism: the Politics and Philosophy of Inequality**

**Review Number:**

1095

**Publish date:**

Wednesday, 1 June, 2011

**Author:**

Peter Dorey

**ISBN:**

9781845113520

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

320pp.

**Publisher:**

I. B. Tauris

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Jules Gehrke

Peter Dorey's strengths as an analyst of British politics and policy formulation in the 20th and 21st centuries have here been channeled into a timely historical assessment of the policy principles that have continued to guide and re-shape the Conservative Party since the late 19th century.<sup>(1)</sup> Dorey's focus is on the role that Conservative attitudes toward economic inequality have played in responding to collectivist and socialist impulses. Debates over the degree to which inequality should be ameliorated, tolerated, or even encouraged have engendered an ongoing tug-of-war between 'One Nation' and 'neo-liberal' Conservatives since at least the mid-20th century. For both students and scholars, Dorey provides a comprehensive narrative and analysis that supports an historical understanding of Conservative party ideology and policy, and a platform for understanding the dilemmas of Conservative policy makers in the second decade of the 21st century.

Dorey first examines the philosophical assessments of social and economic inequality among Conservatives, in general. The values of social hierarchy and deference, whether rooted in religious interpretation (certainly less significant for Conservatives today) or in the understood need for some to lead and others to follow to assure stability, have often been among core Conservative concerns. However, perhaps even more important has been the defense of economic inequality. Conservatives have argued that because of differences in mental, physical, or even material circumstances, some within society are likely to acquire more than others. To undo this on contemporary liberal or socialist terms is not only naïve, but would necessitate an

oppressive state, they contend. Conservative arguments have often been bound to a conception of negative freedom in which the lack of restriction on the accumulation or spending of wealth allows for greater freedom for both rich and poor alike. Enacting a 'positive' freedom by redistributing wealth would inevitably doom the overall wealth-creating capacity of the nation; and interfering with wages to exact a measure of equality would undermine the freedom (and incentive) of those with greater abilities or skills and politicize debates over wages. In policy and decision making, Conservatives prefer to let experience and tested institutions lead rather than abstract theoretical principles, Dorey writes. Human beings rarely fit the stereotype of the rational actor set forth by liberals and socialists, and thus any effort to force them into the roles determined by a society with logically deduced roles and programs engenders oppression by the heavy hand of the state.

The emergence of 'One Nation' Conservatism in the 20th century is the subject of Dorey's first analytical chapter. While 'One Nation' Conservatives have recognized that some will likely be better off than others, they have also argued that the plight of the poor may not be of their own making and that attenuating the gap between rich and poor might well preclude a future revolution. Dorey recognizes the degree to which Benjamin Disraeli's Tory democracy was woven into the fabric of 'One Nation' Conservatism in the 19th century, and gives significant coverage to the Unionist Social Reform Committee (USRC) which offered a substantive response to the collectivist era. Yet, it is with his discussion of Harold Macmillan's attempt at a 'Middle Way' in the volatile 1930s that Dorey's research strengths come into their own. Macmillan offered the first substantive consideration of a government's role in the economy, a consideration that would become important after the Labour victory of 1945 made it clear Conservatives would need to retool their responses to a new electoral and industrial era. Dorey's expertise in this period has already been well-established in his recent *British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945-1964* (2) which emphasizes the degree to which the philosophy of 'One Nation' Conservatism was able to prevail in a period of conciliation with labour organizations. In his work here assessing the waxing and waning fortunes of 'One Nation' and 'neo-liberal' Conservatism, Dorey highlights the importance of *The Industrial Charter* of 1947 which set the course for Conservative policies of the 1950s and the 1960s and advocated cooperation between government, industrial management and labour. By the late 1970s, 'One Nation' conservatives were on the defensive. Although they by no means disappeared during Thatcher's reign, they found it difficult to maneuver in an environment in which they were too closely associated with the tumultuous days of the late 1970s. Dorey offers a critical assessment of 'One Nation' fortunes in the 1980s, identifying the degree to which they were not only associated with the crisis of the late 1970s, but restrained by Thatcher and eclipsed by the intense ideological approach of the 'neo-liberals.' Dorey's own sympathies seem to lie with the 'One Nation' Conservatives in their political struggles. As he argues with an analysis of income data (and suggests even more forcefully in a critique of 'neo-liberal' policies at the end of his book) Conservative governments under the influence of 'One Nation' Conservatives did rule over a Britain in which the top tiers of British society saw their percentage of the nation's income significantly reduced and the lowest tiers saw theirs expanded.

Dorey finds the roots of 'neo-liberal' philosophy in a 19th century in which philosophers such as Herbert Spencer argued against the prospect of support for the poor which many Conservatives eventually believed would only sustain society's weakest elements and set in train demands for escalating degrees of social reform. In abeyance in much of the early 20th century, (Dorey devotes space only to the activities of the individualist Ernest Benn), 'neo-liberal' fortunes revived in the 1960s as new Conservative worries about the welfare state and the effects of state intervention in the economy emerged. Dorey examines the role of Enoch Powell, who in the 1960s became one of the key voices decrying the rise of the social welfare state. Powell was soon superseded by a generation of 'neo-liberal' politicians whose social and demographic background represented the changing nature of the Conservative Party. Dorey offers an in-depth assessment this rising generation, noting their relative distance from the experiences of the two world wars, education outside of the public school and Oxbridge systems, understanding of themselves as products of a meritocratic society, and reduced willingness to embrace the philosophy of *noblesse oblige*. They were sustained by new ideological think tanks on the political right and influenced by the frustration many were feeling with a Britain in which the welfare state and government involvement in industry seemed to support an increasingly inefficient society. The decision of the Heath government of 1970 to 1974 to turn back

toward reconciliation with industry after having been apparently elected on the 'Selsdon' program prompted the solidification of a 'neo-liberal' identity among many younger Conservative MPs.

Dorey argues that in the 1970s, 'neo-liberals' worked to convince the population that efforts aimed at eliminating inequality were not necessarily the same as those that aimed at the elimination of poverty. Moreover, allowing those in the upper ranks of society to earn more did not necessarily mean the growth of poverty for those at the bottom, but rather were reflective of new opportunities created as the welfare state was rolled back and individuals were allowed to rise based upon merit. Conservative 'neo-liberals' worked to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor and, while arguing that the latter would be aided by a cut in the very things that fostered their dependency, also argued that the former would be aided as the costs for the latter were reduced. Dorey outlines the policies of 'neo-liberals' in the 1980s and 1990s as they reduced taxes, restricted pay increases in the public sector, limited the power of unions, abolished Wages Councils, and supported tough managers. While the number of manufacturing jobs was dramatically reduced, the number of those in the service sector was increased (many of these were often temporary or lower-paying). Overall, the expenditures of the government in social welfare did increase. These overall increases masked the limits or reductions that were put on individual payouts and reflected instead the growing numbers on poor relief. The ideological and policy-oriented focus of Dorey's narrative leaves out much of the political struggle in which 'neo-liberal' initiatives were fashioned and introduced, and thus limits complete understanding of the contentious politics of the period. Yet, by remaining focused on assessing the evolution of 'One Nation' and 'neo-liberal' political thought and policy, Dorey's work provides both a substantive and accessible understanding of the transfer of political and economic philosophy to policy in the 20th century.

Dorey's assessment of Conservative struggles in the post-Thatcher era of the 1990s and early 21st century not only provides a valuable introduction to the issues likely to continue to face the party under Cameron, but includes a number of sharp critiques of the world fashioned by proponents of 'neo-liberalism.' Though party leaders initially argued for a return to the centre to challenge Labour on its own ground, they far too easily swung back to right-wing populism with disastrous consequences in the 1990s. Dorey argues that the opinion of those who believed the party's loss of 4 million votes between 1992 and 1997 was due to it not staying far enough to the right was 'palpable nonsense' (p. 171). In assessing the move toward 'civic Conservatism' in the 21st century, Dorey gives pride of place to David Willetts who began arguing in the 1990s that support must be given to civic institutions as the bedrock of society, rather than the state, itself. Dorey's work will no doubt be read by those wishing to gain added perspective on Conservative efforts of the past year, and he offers it, though leavened with a number of candid observations. In his discussion, he reveals his frustrations regarding the results of a Britain governed for over a decade with 'neo-liberal' principles at its heart. 'Celebrity imitation, not social mobility, has seemingly become the goal of many poorer people, and the criterion by which they judge themselves (and each other)' (p. 170). 'Arguably, too, three decades of untrammelled neo-liberalism and individualism have transformed many people first and foremost into economic consumers instead of social citizens, more interested in another visit to a shopping centre than being active in their neighbourhood' (p. 175).

Dorey finds that the struggle over inequality is being re-fashioned by the emergence of 'civic Conservatism' and David Cameron's stated desire to revisit poverty as a relative measure rather than as the straightforward line of material deprivation identified by 'neo-liberal' Conservatives. After offering a candid critique of the society created by 'neo-liberal' policies, Dorey's look at the efforts Oliver Letwin and Phillip Blond in once again championing the role of the social seems a personal appeal for a return to the traditions of 'One Nation' Conservatism. However, Dorey believes that the lack of a Conservative response to the significant income gap between Britain's wealthiest earners, particularly as it became a major public issue in 2009, argues against its commitment to reducing inequality. He writes of Cameron's Hugo Young speech in November of 2009, 'Nor did he [Cameron] posit any connection between advocacy of greater personal responsibility and the behaviour of the 'super-rich', particularly in routinely demanding or expecting enormous salaries or bonuses. It is as if Bram Stoker had written Dracula without any reference to vampires!' (p. 191). Dorey's critique seems to exaggerate the necessary connection between the principles

of 'civic Conservatism' and the prioritization of reducing salaries among Britain's top earners. Nonetheless, his skepticism regarding the practical results of the Conservatives' faith in intermediary institutions that can overcome the failures of centralized reform under New Labour is better placed. 'Non-state actors might be able to provide services and support to the poor and socially marginalised, but it is not yet clear how this, in itself, will reduce the gulf between the rich and poor, particularly as David Cameron's Conservatives are highly unlikely to make a serious effort at curbing pay at the top, regardless of their occasional denunciation of bankers' bonuses in the autumn of 2009' (p. 191).

Dorey's final analytical chapter returns to the theme of Conservative ideology and policy in the 20th century. He enters into a careful examination of why it is that the Conservatives have been able to count on a relatively consistent 25 per cent to 30 per cent support among the working class. He finds strong indications that the working class's upper ranks have continued to be worried about threats to their status posed by those moving up from below, and that deference to a social, political, and business elite in government and industry has continued to make itself felt. In addition, many in the lower ranks of the middle class in the 1970s felt themselves in a precarious economic position *vis à vis* the power of working-class activism exercised through trade unions, and the Labour Party's efforts to effect equality. 'Indeed, the more precarious the *petit bourgeoisie* adjudges its position to be, the more it seems to commit itself to forms of right-wing Conservatism which promise to restore order and stability, tackle the trade unions, reward hard work and individual endeavour, curb welfare provision and cut taxes' (p. 237). Finally, he notes that many in Britain have 'pathologised' the poor suggesting that their plight is related to individual failings rather than structural factors that can be addressed through efforts to achieve equality. Thus, while many may decry excessive salaries earned in the City, they do not necessarily recognize a connection to the struggles of those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Others, Dorey concludes, even if not blaming the poor, suggest that their presence is unavoidable in modern life and efforts to eradicate inequality may be fruitless.

Overall, Dorey's work effectively ties together emergent ideological themes of the 19th century with policy formulation and debate in the 20th century, providing an effective primer for those wishing to analyze or debate Conservative philosophy or policy in the early 21st century. His work remains focused and of great value to students as well as scholars seeking to conceptualize the currents of Conservative thought and to assess their effects on a Conservative Party once again recalibrating its attitudes toward inequality. His assessments appear underlain by distrust of the 'neo-liberal' impact upon Britain and thus will likely be reluctantly absorbed by some observers and supporters of the party, itself. He suggests that a form of 'cognitive dissonance' has emerged as many in Britain have not recognized a direct connection between high salaries and a concentration of wealth at the top of society and low salaries paid to the poor (p. 248). But this term should perhaps be reconsidered given that many 'neo-liberals' do indeed argue that wealth generated at the top has not undone economic efficiency nor adversely affected the ability of the poor to rise on their own merits. In sum, Dorey's assessments of British Conservatism are likely to be vigorously read and his assiduous research on both Labour and Conservative policy to be of significant interest well into the future.

## Notes

1. Professor Dorey has recently collaborated with other scholars on works which were, unfortunately, not able to be consulted in the preparation of this review. See Peter Dorey, Mark Garnett and Andrew Denham, *From Crisis to Coalition: The Conservative Party, 1997-2010* (Basingstoke, 2011); and Peter Dorey and Alexandra Kelso, *House of Lords Reform Since 1911: Must the Lords Go?* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2011).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945-1964* (London, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)

### Other reviews:

[2]

---

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1095>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5534>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>