

The TRG 2005 Macmillan Lecture

Why Aren't We Thinking What They're Thinking?

By Damian Green MP



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The Tory Reform Group



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The TRG advocates the benefits of a society founded on freedom, individual responsibility and community. We see a mutually beneficial relationship between market efficiency and a better society.

The TRG brings together members and supporters of the Conservative Party who share this approach to Conservative politics. Our members include parliamentarians, councillors, association officers and private individuals from all parts of the United Kingdom.

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Foreword

I am delighted that the Tory Reform Group is able to offer this contribution to the debate about the future of the Conservative Party. This debate is vital if the Party is to make itself fit for Government, and it is equally vital that the Party looks again at its One Nation tradition as a source of strength.

Damian Green has argued for many years that the Conservative Party needs to have a clearly One Nation message to flourish. In this Macmillan Lecture, delivered at Westminster on 7th June 2005, he modernises the One Nation Agenda, pointing out that many policies traditionally associated with the free-market right-wing of the Conservative Party can be the best way to help those who most need it— a traditional One Nation Conservative goal.

This is a timely and stimulating contribution to Conservative thinking, and I hope it has a great influence on the future course of Party thinking.

Alastair King, Chairman, Tory Reform Group

Damian Green MP

Damian was born in 1956. He was educated at Reading School and Balliol College, Oxford. He was President of the Oxford Union in 1977. He is married with two daughters.

He is a former financial journalist and worked in the Prime Minister's Policy Unit from 1992-94. He has been both a School Governor and the Governor of a Further Education College.

Damian contested Brent East in the 1992 General Election. In May 1997, he was elected Member of Parliament for Ashford. From 1997 to 1998, Damian was a member of the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.

In June 1998, he was appointed Shadow Front Bench Spokesman for Education and Employment. The following June he was appointed Shadow Environment Minister. In September 2001, he was appointed Shadow Secretary of State for Education & Skills. From November 2003 to September 2004, Damian was Shadow Secretary of State for Transport. Since 2004, he has been a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Damian is a Vice-President of the Tory Reform Group and Chairman of Parliamentary Mainstream. He is a Vice-Chairman of the John Smith Memorial Trust

Why Aren't We Thinking What They're Thinking?

I am grateful to the Tory Reform Group for the invitation to deliver the annual Macmillan Lecture. I last gave the Macmillan Lecture in 2000, arguing that the Conservative Party needed to rediscover its One Nation instincts if it was to prosper. Since then we have lost two elections and are about to elect our third new leader. We still have fewer than 200 seats in the House of Commons. We have wasted much of the last five years.

We can, though, look to Macmillan's own history for inspiration in our Party's plight. When he became Leader in 1957 the Party seemed divided and struggling. Two years later he led it to a convincing election victory, delivering what, in those less hyperbolic times, almost no-one called an "historic third term." We must not despair, but we must be prepared to think boldly.

The first step towards such boldness is to recognise how badly we did. The euphoria of having a group of talented new colleagues joining us at Westminster should not delude us about the scale of the task ahead. At the recent General Election we saw a fall in our share of the vote in the North West of England, the East Midlands, the North East, and in Wales. In the six regions where the Conservative vote share increased, the Liberal Democrat share increased by more than ours in all except the South East. London and the South East are hugely important areas, and in those areas we did better this time, although not sensationally better. Outside the South East corner though, there is almost no progress to record. Indeed it may be even more difficult than that. In 2001 we came first or second in 522 seats—79% of them. In 2005 we were first or second in only 467—that's 72%. These figures assume that we soon have Sir Patrick Cormack back with us for Staffordshire South.

Looking ahead is also instructive. Let us assume that we are unlikely to win any seats in which we are currently third. In that case we need to look for our potential gains at the seats in which we are currently second. Throughout the UK there are 269 seats in which we are second. To win an overall majority of one we need 126 of these. That means we need to win nearly half of all the seats in which we are currently second to have the barest majority. For a working majority, we need well over half the seats in which we are second. I am taking it as read that we hold all our current seats.

If we dig a little deeper it can become even more daunting. Assume, I hope wrongly, that we do not make much further progress in Scotland or Wales. If that happens we need to win 60% of all the seats in England to have a majority of one. That is three quarters of the seats in which we came first or second in 2005.

The geographical legacy of the 2005 campaign is clearly that we need to expand our appeal beyond London and the South East. The ideological lesson is equally clear. A very useful YouGov poll in the Daily Telegraph has tracked where the public sees themselves and each of the parties on a spectrum, in which minus 100 is very left-wing and plus 100 is very right-wing. The public is minus two—very slightly left of centre. Tony Blair is plus seven—a little to the right of the public, but very close to bulls-eye. Michael Howard is plus 53—well to the right of the public. Gordon Brown is minus 20, so he is significantly to the left of where the public sees its own centre of gravity. This gives our next leader an opportunity.

The third lesson we need to learn from the recent Election is sociological. Any right of centre party is going to find it difficult to win if the successful groups in society turn away from it. They are not called “opinion-formers” for nothing; they help form other people’s opinions. According to MORI, ABs are now a bigger

group in society than C2s, and a significantly bigger part of the electorate, since they are markedly more likely to vote. Among ABs, Conservative support fell by 2% between 2001 and 2005, while Liberal Democrat support increased by 4%. Without the support of around half the ABs it is hard to see us winning. At present we command the support of only 37%.

The logical next question is why? Indeed it is the title of this lecture. Anecdotally, I thought the problem was illustrated by a journey I took daily during the Election around the Ashford ring road. There were two big political posters in prime sites. One showed a picture of Michael Howard, and the other a picture of Tony Blair. Of course it was the Labour poster that featured Michael Howard and our poster that showed Tony Blair. I know about the evidence that negative campaigning works. But my contention is that negative campaigning only works if the Party using it has a solid base of positive messages, images and policies which the public has already absorbed. We have been too negative. The first step towards success for the Conservative Party is to be more positive, not just at elections but between elections.

The second step is to be more receptive to new ideas than we have been since the 1970s. One of the many criticisms of our image is that we appear too old and stuck in our ways. I have commissioned some research in tandem with Wave Network and I am afraid it shows more bad news. 69 per cent of the population thinks the Conservative Party appeals mainly to those over 50. Only 8% think we appeal to the under-thirties. Even more alarmingly, those over 50 but under 60 still think we appeal to an age group older than them—most of them think we appeal to the over-60s. I think the response to this has nothing to do with the age of the leader and everything to do with the ability of the Party to embrace changing circumstances and new ideas.

The third step is to accept that many of the problems of modern Britain are the consequences of the changes that we, as

Conservatives, have demanded. For example, when we praise the social and economic mobility of Anglo-Saxon economies, we have to accept that this mobility entails the disappearance of the traditional extended family all living in the same area. This mobility removes a support net which used to be available for the elderly, and the very young. We need to address these problems, but we must do so in a tone which does not suggest that modern Britain is populated by moral delinquents. If the Conservative Party does not like modern Britain, it is unlikely that modern Britain will warm to the Conservative Party.

The fourth step is to accept that our obsessions have not been the obsessions of the British people. Policy issues such as long-term care for the elderly, childcare, the work-life balance and the environment have too often been dismissed as “soft” or “Labour” issues. If the Conservative Party continues to do this, it will be ignoring the main political concerns of millions of people, especially women. This would not be the approach of a prospective Government, nor is it sensible electoral politics. I have a personal measure for this necessary change. When as many Conservative MPs turn up for education questions as defence questions, I will know that we are beginning to get the point.

These are the reasons why the Conservative Party has been missing the point for too many voters. There is a huge and tragic irony in this for all of us who are proud to be called One Nation Conservatives even when that label is not fashionable. The irony lies in Tony Blair’s electoral success, which has been based on doing as much as the Labour Party would allow to steal our clothes. At the same time the Conservative Party has too often voluntarily vacated the One Nation territory. Mr Blair’s era is coming to a close, so now is the time for the Conservative Party to fight back onto that One Nation ground.

Harold Macmillan's underlying insight was that if Conservatives seem not to care about the problems of the old, sick and poor, they would be unelectable, and would deserve to be. A One Nation Conservative regards a social conscience as a necessary tool for a decent and effective politician. We also recognise that Tory values have to be adapted to changing external circumstances, and that progressive, idealistic Conservatism is not the oxymoron that many on the left would wish it to be. Rab Butler said he was keen to make it 'perfectly possible to be literate, rational, well-informed and a Tory.' Those ABs who are voting LibDem need once again to be convinced that it is possible.

Let me accept my own injunction and be positive. What will the new Conservative leader need to be successful? The approach should be to move on from the era of triangulation and adapting our own policies to those of other parties. We should be idealistic, do what we think is right, and invite the British people to follow our course. Asking people what they think, and then telling them that you think it as well, is a political method which has outlived its usefulness—and thank God for that.

Within this positive approach, it will be necessary for the Conservative Party once again to re-invent One Nation Conservatism. It is both right and necessary for the Party to emphasise its ability to re-occupy the ground that Tony Blair has made his, but we need to recognise two truths; that this does not mean simply developing what the Blair Government has done, and nor does it mean revisiting the policies of past One Nation Conservative eras.

We need to start with general principles that provide the test against which all policies will be judged. If we have simple, clear principles we will be seen to be following our chosen path, and not simply reacting to events. To show that we have changed,

some of these principles need to surprise people, in the way that New Labour surprised everyone by emphasising economic stability. All our policies must flow from these principles.

As our three principles, I would propose Opportunity, Community, and Internationalism. The latter two may sound strange on Tory lips, but they should not do so. Strong communities are necessary if we are not to accept that if an individual has a problem the only place he or she can turn for help is to the state. The first and most important community is the family. Internationalism was once an attitude of mind that the Conservative Party would have regarded as normal. There is now a chance to regain that instinct. As for opportunity, if we want there to be One Nation we need the kind of social mobility that is clearly not being provided under the Blair Government, where for all the sincere efforts social barriers are getting stronger.

I want to illustrate the practical effect of accepting these three as key principles with some policy proposals. What is significant is that the modern policies which flow from accepting these One Nation ideals are market-oriented, anti-statist, and in many cases traditionally associated with the right rather than the left of the Conservative Party. If we are coolly rational about it, there is a new idealistic consensus available to the Tory Party which will help the disadvantaged by using the power of competition and voluntary association. We can achieve One Nation goals by pursuing liberal free-market methods. Those of us on the moderate wing of the Party need to modernise as well, and by modernisation I mean accepting new ideas which will impact on people's daily lives, rather than agonising over what I wear on TV.

Let me take Opportunity first. I take it as a basic Conservative proposition that anyone should be able to fulfil their ambitions, wherever they start from, if they have the capacity. When I hear Labour politicians talk about our class-ridden society I ponder at

what point I stopped being a boy born in a terraced house in a small town in South Wales, educated in state schools, and became a privileged middle-class Oxford graduate of the sort you expect to become a Tory politician. The fact is it should be an unremarkable journey, and I want a Britain in which it will remain unremarkable.

To achieve this, we need excellent education to be available to as many as possible. Tony Blair has always wanted this, but his education policy has failed to deliver the spread of educational excellence, despite an enormous increase in public spending. Even the flawed current system of test results suggests that educational inequality is increasing in this country. The solution is to empower parents—to give real choice to those who can't afford it out of their own income. In other words, to give the money the state spends on a child's education to the parent, and allow new bodies to set up state schools in which this money can be spent. So if the local school is bad, and does not improve its performance, it will find a new school appearing down the road.

This use of education vouchers has been successful in other European countries, and in some US cities, so it is not a policy wonk's untested dream. The One Nation element I would introduce would be to start the scheme in our inner cities, where the biggest challenges lie, and where, in practical terms, the ability to shift to a new school is greatest. So the first beneficiaries of new ideas would be those who have least choice, and least chance, at present. Is this a scheme aimed at swing voters? No. Is it the right thing to do? Yes.

Another policy which would help provide more opportunity for those struggling to do the right thing involves tax reform. Too many people are paying tax when they are barely earning enough to survive, and higher rate tax cuts in at levels where those paying the higher rate cannot possibly be regarded as the rich. If the next

Conservative Government has any ability to cut taxes, then it should make sure that it helps those who are working hard to stay on their own feet, and give them the opportunity to thrive. Turning to the need to sustain communities as a basic Conservative principle, this may come as a surprise to some. If we believe in a smaller state and larger citizens, to quote Chris Patten, surely we should be the defenders of the individual rather than any wider community. I think this view is untenable in today's world because to be a successful independent individual you need a strong community around you. I want to see many layers between the state and the individual, and it is the multiplicity of communities to which any individual can belong, whether geographically based, interest groups, work-based or leisure oriented, which a good Conservative will encourage.

The most important community is the family, and the family is the most important support network for children. So One Nation Conservatives should be entirely happy to support policies which help children grow up with two parents in a stable relationship, and using the tax system to help married couples with children is one obvious way to achieve that. Politicians should not preach about individual's relationships. We are not paid to do so and in many cases we are not fit to do so. But we are paid to encourage behaviour which helps create a better society. The most effective way of stopping children becoming feral, in the chilling word of a senior policemen about some teenagers in Salford recently, or of reducing the number of young teenage girls having children of their own, is to help the creation of stable homes where mutual respect and responsibility is the norm, and where the hope of a better life through good education can be held out.

The other policy area to mention under the heading of community is the need for more local power—real local power. Elected Mayors and even police chiefs would become big figures in their own right if they were given proper responsibilities. This would

include a large degree of control over their own finances, which would entail a reduction in the grip of the Treasury over every penny spent by the public sector. I know how big a gamble this would be, but if we want genuine local government in this country, which every Conservative should, then we need to take it.

My third principle is Internationalism. We should be generous minded and outward looking. We need to take a realistic view of our place in the world, and use our power to promote our own high ideals. First we should contribute a distinctive Tory voice to the increasingly important debate on debt relief and other anti-poverty measures. In Government, successive Conservative Chancellors, including Nigel Lawson and John Major, made significant progress on debt relief, but because it did not fit in with the prevailing image of the Thatcher Governments, it was barely noticed. We must return to that agenda, and trumpet it more loudly.

Secondly, we should take the current chaos at the heart of the EU as an opportunity. There is a constructive Conservative role to play inside the European Union as the champion of reforming economics in alliance with many of the new members. There is no reason why we should not set out an alternative constitution to the one that is now failing, which British Conservatives could map out with colleagues from centre-right parties across the EU. Above all, we should take the chance to stop using the rhetoric of Britain standing alone against the rest of Europe. We are a hugely important player in a hugely important institution, and Conservatives should feel comfortable about using this power for the good both of our country and the rest of Europe. Indeed, when we look at the problems of the Middle East, and of the fight against terrorism, it is all the more vital that Conservatives use the tool of our EU membership as a way of increasing our influence in the world.

To conclude, if Conservatives are to set themselves up as a plausible alternative Government we need to offer hope. This will surprise some of our supporters, as well as our opponents. George Bush has said, “We will carry a message of hope and renewal to every community in this country.” If the Republicans can, we can. There is no law that says Conservative politicians need to be gloomy about the world and the future.

That hope will come if millions more people find they have control over their children’s schooling and are not weighed down by over-taxation. It will come if policing is genuinely responsive to the local community. It will come if a Conservative Britain can be confident and generous in our relationships with the rest of Europe and the world beyond. We will then be thinking what they are thinking, and they will be thinking that a Conservative Government is just what the country needs. And so it does.





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The Conservative Party has lost three elections in a row and needs to find an attractive re-statement of its principles which will engage the British people. Damian Green argues that Conservatives must fight Tony Blair for the One Nation territory. He says that the three principles of Opportunity, Community and Internationalism should guide Tory policy, but warns One Nation Conservatives that they too need to change. There is a new idealistic consensus available to the Conservative Party if it uses market-oriented anti-statist policies to help the disadvantaged. This would achieve One Nation goals by pursuing liberal free-market methods.

In this context Damian Green discusses school vouchers, tax reform and spreading power to local institutions. He also calls for an end to “Us against them” rhetoric with regard to Britain and Europe, seeing the current constitutional crisis as a chance for a serious debate about the future of the whole EU. Overall he wants the Conservative Party to offer hope, as successful centre-right parties have done around the world.



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