

The coming of age of progressive neo-liberal conservative 'welfarism' under the Coalition government of 2010-15

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Introduction

The election of David Cameron as the new Conservative leader in 2005 signalled the emergence of the 'progressive' neo-liberal Conservative approach to the welfare state (Clark and Hunt, 2007; Osborne, 2009; Cameron, 2010). Labour's success in rebranding itself as New Labour convinced Cameron and his associates that the Conservatives could gain electoral traction from a similar make over. This repositioning was not deemed to require any modifications to the party's neo-liberal approach to economic policy not least because of New Labour's conversion to the merits of this doctrine. In contrast, the construction of a progressive social narrative was deemed necessary to 'detoxify' the Conservative 'brand' and to highlight how the party's agenda in this sphere differed from the overly statist strategy of New Labour. Cameron wanted to develop a bolder, more enterprising doctrine that involved the recalibration, rather than the rejection, of neo-liberal conservatism. Although Conservatives have traditionally been sceptical about the notion of progress because of its association with the abstract, improving doctrines of socialism and liberalism as opposed to pragmatic forms of organic change favoured by party traditionalists, Cameron was keen to embrace this concept so that he could challenge Labour's claim to be the exclusive promoters of a forward looking agenda.

Mapping out the 'progressive' neo-liberal conservative agenda

It was in the broad area of social policy that Cameron sought to mark out the progressive elements of his neo-liberal Conservative doctrine. This involved, firstly, the adoption of a more sympathetic and less judgmental approach towards those who opted for alternative lifestyles of a 'non-harmful' kind. While the party

remained resolute in its support for marriage and the 'two-parent' family, this was to be combined with a more inclusive approach to alternative family arrangements such as lone parenthood, provided that such parents 'played by the rules' and strove for economic independence. In addition, the condemnatory attitudes towards gay people that had come to the surface in Conservative circles as a result of the introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 were rejected. Henceforth the party would adopt more positive forms of support for civil partnerships and gay marriage (McManus, 2010).

Secondly, the party's approach to state welfare, social justice and poverty was to be refashioned (see Hickson, 2008; Page, 2015, forthcoming). In the case of state intervention, Cameron wanted to lead a party which was not ideologically anti-collectivist but, rather, as was the case with Disraeli and Baldwin, supportive of those forms of interventionism were deemed conducive to the common good. For Cameron, the task of the Conservative progressive was not to oppose all forms of state intervention but rather to identify and support those measures that would enhance well-being and jettison those deemed harmful. Significantly, however, Cameron was keen to distinguish his progressive approach to state intervention from what he saw as the ineffective, outmoded, ideologically motivated, egalitarian statist strategy that New Labour had been pursuing in government. Cameron also sought to distinguish his progressive form of neo-liberal Conservatism from the 'reactionary' variant that had come to prominence during the Thatcher era by embracing a form of social justice that was not based on egalitarianism. Rejecting the earlier critiques of Hayek and Powell, Cameron believed that the pursuit of social justice was an appropriate goal for the right not least because of the painful social consequences that had resulted from the 'regenerative' neo-liberal eco-

conomic reforms of the Thatcher era. Accordingly, a future Conservative government would seek to break down opportunity barriers and promote social mobility. In terms of poverty, it was now accepted that the concept should be regarded as a relative not absolute concept and that New Labour's allegedly narrow, mechanistic approach to poverty, which had focussed on halving the number of children living in households below 60% of median incomes, needed to be replaced by a broader, more holistic anti-poverty strategy based on non-financial as well as financial factors.

The promotion of a 'Big Society' was the third component of what can be described as Cameron's Progressive Neo-Liberal Conservative (PNLC) social agenda (see Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012). This emphasis on society was intended to distinguish Cameron's vision of Conservatism from the highly individualistic form of neo-liberalism that had characterised the Thatcher years in which active forms of civil engagement were treated with suspicion on the grounds that they were too often underpinned by a desire to move society in a social democratic direction. The emphasis on society rather than the state was intended to signify that it was possible to move in a progressive direction without resorting to the 'unwieldy' and 'inflexible' state initiatives favoured by New Labour. By invoking the notion of a Big Society, the PNLCs hoped that citizens would be inspired to take greater responsibility for tackling pressing issues in their local community rather than always looking to the state for support. Government would assist such activity by liberalising planning laws and providing practical support so that local communities could, for example, take control of facilities such as parks, libraries and other services.

Progressive neo-liberal conservatism in practice

The prospects for the PNLC cause did not seem particularly bright following the economic downturn of 2007 (Dorey, 2009) and the subsequent failure of the party to secure an outright majority in the 2010 General Election. However Conservative 'success' in linking the economic crisis to New Labour's failure to provide effec-

tive regulation of the banking industry and to its supposedly profligate approach to public spending coupled with the formation of a Coalition Government favourably disposed to PNLC ideas, enabled an 'austere' version of this doctrine to take root. Indeed, it is possible to argue that, despite criticisms from its opponents, PNLCs have set the pace in terms of the social policy agenda.

In the field of education, progressive neo-liberalism has been equated with creating a competitive school system which promotes rather than stifles 'excellence' and social mobility. During his tenure as Education Secretary, for example, Michael Gove ensured that there will be no return to 'anti-aspirational' comprehensive schooling by expanding the number of 'autonomous' Academy schools and establishing Free schools. Gove also endeavoured to embed a more challenging education culture by encouraging pupils to study 'traditional' subjects and to undertake more testing forms of assessment. He also sought to introduce more rigorous forms of school inspections and introduced pupil premiums to encourage high performing schools to offer places to students from low income families as a way of enhancing social mobility.

In social security, neo-liberal progressivism has been equated with providing gateways out of poverty through paid work for those of working age and security for pensioners. In terms of the former, there has been a concerted attempt to 'rescue' working aged adults from the debilitating effects of poverty and 'benefit dependency' which it is contended that state-centric Labour governments have allowed to take hold in British society. Influenced by the work of Lawrence Mead (1986), Iain Duncan Smith has sought to reform the benefit system by introducing a Universal Credit scheme aimed at incentivizing unemployed people to find, and retain, paid work. This anti-poverty strategy has proved to be a testing one given that the social security budget was not protected from the government's deficit reduction plans. Working aged adults have had, to varying extents, to contend with the introduction of a benefit cap, a reduction in the value of their benefits and the imposition of a bedroom tax. Although the coalition

recognizes that these measures have proved 'challenging' they are seen as being socially just measures in an age of austerity. It has also been deemed socially just to introduce a simplified single-tier retirement pension based on a 'triple lock' mechanism which ensures future payments are increased by no less than 2.5% per annum and to withdraw Child tax credits and Child Benefit from higher earners.

The Conservative-led Coalition government has found it more difficult to establish a 'progressive' narrative in relation to the NHS. The party's much vaunted pre-election commitments to defend the NHS were questioned after Andrew Lansley unleashed a major overhaul of the health system ostensibly designed to give professionals, patients and communities greater voice and choice in developing a modern NHS. Although Lansley's plans eventually found their way on to the statute book, the lengthy parliamentary process involved was indicative of deep rooted suspicions that the progressive Conservatives were intent on privatizing rather than modernizing the NHS. While Labour remains committed to stricter regulation of private sector involvement in the NHS if it returns to government the broader changes introduced by Lansley are unlikely to be reversed. As such, the progressive neo-liberal Conservative vision for the NHS is likely to be judged by the electorate not on the reforms *per se* but rather by the quality and availability of local health services.

Conclusion – The future for progressive neo-liberal conservatism

Emerging evidence suggesting that the poorest groups in society have been experiencing disproportionate forms of hardship in the Coalition era (Crawford et al., 2014; Hills, 2015) are likely to give ammunition to those who claim that the compassionate rhetoric of the PNLC serves to hide a desire to shrink the state along the lines set out by their older, non-progressive, neo-liberal conservative sister (Thatcher). However, there has been no sign as yet that the PNLC are willing to jettison their progressive motif. Given that the contemporary Labour party has been reluctant to provide a more compelling 'progressive' welfare vision, it seems that this strand

of Conservatism will prove difficult to oppose despite the vociferous protestations of some of those experiencing the cold winds of 'reform'. While questions remain as to whether Progressive Neo-liberal Conservatism will survive in its current form after the forthcoming General Election, it may yet confound some of its critics and become the dominant welfare narrative of the contemporary era.

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