

# TOO 'NICE' TO BE TORIES?



*How the Modernisers  
have damaged the  
Conservative Party*

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New edition with a Preface discussing how serious  
the problems are for the Tory leadership

## Preface to New Edition

This short book was published in November 2011. It was clear to us at that time that, even judged by its own criteria, the Tory modernisation programme had failed dismally and, still more seriously, that it had crippled the Party's ability to respond to the most urgent political problems of the day: the economy, the issue of EU membership and energy scarcity. It was also clear that the formation of the Coalition, with its leftwards drag on policy, was bound to influence voting behaviour as the Conservative Party leadership sought desperately to occupy an over-populated political middle ground, opening up space for new parties on the right.

The political writing was on the wall, but it was not heeded. For the first two years of the Coalition natural conservatives gave their support to the administration, although there were unambiguous signs that this was given with growing reluctance. In the wake of UKIP's spectacular – though wholly predictable – performance in the Eastleigh by-election, following impressive performances at Corby and Rotherham, it is hard to overstate UKIP's threat to the Conservative Party. Since the early days of the modernising programme, the Conservative Party has not succeeded in winning more than 36 per cent of the vote. It has also failed in its purpose of eating into LibDem support and has similarly failed to win over key target voters, notably women and members of ethnic communities. By way of contrast, in taking votes, not only from Conservatives but from the two other main parties, UKIP has demonstrated something which should shock Tories to the core: namely that, in present circumstances, UKIP's *potential* vote is larger than their own.



The auguries now strongly suggest that UKIP will win the European Parliamentary election in 2014 and is set to cause massive damage to the Tory Party in the General Election of the following year. In a sense, that damage has been self-inflicted. The extraordinarily rushed promotion of gay marriage produced exactly the image of anger and protest among traditional Conservative supporters which the image-makers wished to banish by means of their brand detoxification programme. To seek to redefine something so fundamental as marriage, without making a serious intellectual case for doing so, was bound to anger the Tory traditionalists. Extraordinarily, this may even have been the intention but, in any event, the damage had already been done: the Party's pledge to permit same-sex marriage is likely to prove the Modernisers' last gasp.

Three developments underline how serious are the problems facing the Tory leadership. The first of these is the growing public awareness of the linkages between EU membership and the prospect of a flood of Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants of unknown proportions. Rising concern about this issue has increased understanding of the economic cost of the arrival of unskilled labour during a period of sharply falling real wages. There is also a greater public understanding of the capital costs of immigration on schools, housing, and roads.

The ongoing crisis in the eurozone has been devastating to the EU's image of inevitable success, while, at the same time, there has been growing awareness of damage being caused by EU authority over the affairs of the City of London, through the creation of supervisory bodies, and EU activism over bankers' bonuses. The City has long provided substantial contributions to the Party's coffers and has assisted it in other significant ways. To turn it into an enemy is not smart politics any more than it is smart economics. How long before City bankers line up to join Rupert Murdoch in extending 'secret' dinner invitations to Nigel Farage?

The third factor is the projected increase in the over-65 vote – which will grow by 1.35 million between 2010 and 2015, as compared to a rise of 638,000 between 2001 and 2005. UKIP policy is highly congenial to this group, which records a high turn-out at elections, which is likely to have been unimpressed by the idea of gay marriage, and which is profoundly unhappy with low savings and annuity rates. This group includes a steady stream of Conservative councillors and activists in their fifties, sixties and seventies, who are now defecting to a party which, in their view, better reflects their core beliefs in patriotism, free enterprise, low taxes, strong national defences and social order, than the present-day Conservative Party.

Über-modernisers believe that this does not matter because of the greater number of votes that might be taken from the LibDems. As the pages in this volume show, this has not occurred and is most unlikely to do so. Despite a loss of support, the Eastleigh vote demonstrates how well the LibDems are dug in at a local level, especially in constituencies represented by a LibDem MP. The LibDems are, quite rationally, positioning themselves as a swing party which may peel off to form a LibDem-Labour Coalition when circumstances are propitious.

The Coalition's reputation for economic competence might just have staunched the flow of support from the Tories, but this is visibly crumbling: with other factors, the modernisation agenda has discouraged the harsh measures necessary to rebalance the economy by reducing the size of the State. Therefore, the Tories have got the worst of all possible worlds. They have talked tough in warning of the need for austerity, partly to impress the markets, but have failed to deliver what they promised as public debt has reached frightening levels and, consequently, not achieved the economic gains which would have followed from more incisive action. The proportion of GDP consumed by the State has actually risen during the life of the Coalition.

The irony is that, while conservatism would seem to have a distinctly mediocre future in the Conservative Party under its current leadership, the market for conservative ideas is growing stronger in Britain, as in most western countries. Conservative politicians may still be a long way from bringing a distinctive approach to bear on the analysis of such issues as public debt, the future of the welfare state, immigration, EU membership, and the problems arising from the embrace of ill-thought-out measures to protect the environment. But events have now forcefully pushed these issues off the taboo list and into the public arena; they can no longer be ignored. There is now a great opportunity to bring a distinctive Conservative perspective in formulating policies about such matters. The only question is whether this will take place within the Conservative Party, or outside it. If it is to happen within the Party, its leadership will first need to understand why the modernising agenda has proved to be catastrophic, and why presentational considerations can no longer take priority over policy, which is the message contained in the pages that follow.