

What do the Tories really really want?

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David Cameron's plans for a first term remain largely a mystery—to the public and his own party. But his inner team of true believers think they can transform the British state



“If you believe,” Peter Pan cries, towards the end of JM Barrie’s novel, “clap your hands; don’t let Tink die.” Barrie observes: “Many clapped. Some didn’t. A few beasts hissed.”

David Cameron is no Peter Pan, but he too is facing snorts, silence and unexpectedly sparse applause this autumn as he invites Britain to place its trust in him. He wants people to believe—but what he offers seems hardly more solid than fairy dust, carried on the wings of hopes, ambitions and untested confidence. It will take power to make it real, and then the effort may founder amid the hellish tasks of cutting the budget and ending a war.

At the core of the Cameron project stands a small group of people who all say the same thing, believe the same thing and want to achieve the same thing. None of them knows if it will work. All admit to being filled with gloom and optimism.

This bid for power is full of paradoxes: revolutionary and modest; intensely centralised and profoundly devolutionist; traditional yet potentially transformative; open and yet run by a tiny

group of a few dozen true believers. More striking still is that Cameron has become Britain's likely next prime minister without conveying to his fellow citizens, except in the sketchiest of terms, the least idea of what he intends to do. Some say this lack of clarity is an asset. If so, the asset will diminish fast as opposition yields to government.

The Tory leader has been a genius at the mechanics of politics. The well-timed, eye-catching speech and the adroitly handled reshuffle come naturally to him: in early September he dropped Alan Duncan from the shadow cabinet without a murmur of protest one day and beat the chancellor in a race to the headlines on spending cuts the next. To say that Cameron has transformed the way his party is seen has become a truism only because it is true. His reinvention began with apparent trivialities, such as tie-less suits and unabashed stunts involving photos with sled dogs, symbols shrewdly selected not for their intrinsic importance but for their potency as markers of change.

Even the smallest things have been cleverly done. While Labour wallowed in dismay this summer after the parliamentary expenses scandal, the Conservatives turned the embarrassment of one of their own MPs being forced out over expenses into a publicity coup: they engineered a postal ballot for Anthony Steen's successor in Totnes that was open to anyone. Local voters selected a GP who had only joined the party because of Cameron. Pleasant and non-ideological, Sarah Wollaston was representative of both the way the party had changed and its seeming lack of doctrinal roots.

Most people expect Cameron to win the next general election—although a half-century majority is a far tougher target than many understand. Voters can see the obvious: that Gordon Brown is inadequate, Labour is exhausted and the public finances wrecked. Polls show that the public think, on balance, the Tory team could do a better job. It's an election result that anyone can predict. But, on the other side of that victory, they can only guess at what might happen.

In 1997 new Labour boiled its agenda down to simplicities and put them on a pledge card; 12 years on, only some of them have been fulfilled. Cameron does not shy from using gimmicks when it suits, but he likes it to be thought that he is uncomfortable with the idea that a political agenda can be reduced to a slogan on a mug. He has, says one insider, an instinctive distaste for gassy, visionary politics. He believes in things that are small, human and organic. But scepticism about the power of government is a hard thing to sell if you are bidding to run one. The result is a reticence not so much to think it through, as to talk it through in terms the public can grasp. That is why such a good communicator finds himself stuck with clunky phrases such as "the post-bureaucratic age" and questionable ones such as "the broken society."

Talk to some Conservatives, even some in the shadow cabinet, and you sense horror at this reluctance to commit to specifics. There's a vacuum of leadership, they say: a disconnected clique at the top. They complain this has turned a party that should be excited about government, fizzing with plans and itching to discuss them, into a morally dispirited force, waiting to win by default. These critics do not, for the most part, criticise Cameron because they disagree with what he stands for. Instead they question whether he has ideas at all. "There is no Cameron philosophy," says one long-time party observer. "I have no idea what is driving Tory plans."

Another dismisses the party's programme: "They want to cut spending on everything and spend money on everything." Cameron was interesting in the early, progressive, years of his leadership, this complaint goes, but has been poleaxed by the recession. A leader who intended to fix the broken society now needs to fix a broken economy instead, and lacks the tools beyond enacting a brutal budget in 2010.

But is this fair? It's almost the standard view, but in trying to test it another picture swims into focus. Get closer to Cameron, to the inner circle that has shaped his leadership (many of whom have spoken off the record for this essay) and you hear a clear and consistent story. Among these few there is no confusion, no vagueness and no lack of ambition. They aim to be every bit as radical as Margaret Thatcher, moulding the state into new forms, and they want to see a revolution in the way people relate to government and to each other. But these thinkers, although confident that they're

right, seem stumped for the popular language to get across their proposals, which are sometimes simplistic. Bank bonuses should be smaller, schools better, hospitals cleaner and the state more efficient—as if no one had tried to do such things before. When asked about how these proposals will be implemented, the party can be found wanting. The problem, says one, is that Cameronism “is not easily reducible to ringing statements and requires a lot of sensitive handling.” Insiders freely admit they have gone about explaining their plans badly. The recession and the opposition’s (and media’s) brutal dismantling of Brown is what will win the election. The liberal progressive agenda of the early Cameron years has been overshadowed—although these insiders stress not replaced—by tough talk of cuts.

To realise why this absence of detail may not prevent Cameron from leading a radical government—indeed may be a strength—requires a leap of faith. He set out his ideology before becoming leader, and has not deviated much from it since. In July 2005, reviewing Kieron O’Hara’s book on modern Conservatism, *After Blair*, he made clear his opposition to grand political designs, but added “scepticism is not enough.” The party, he said, needed to combine a message about aspiration with compassion for the weak; it should be “nothing if not practical.” “We need a relentless focus on the things that people care about in their daily lives: the public services they use, the taxes they pay and their hopes and fears for the future.”

Those aims sound modest. They can be dismissed as trite. But as one listens to him and those around him, the impression grows that they will bear some weight. Implicit here is the dismantling of the centralised, powerful state. This is the starting and ending point for Cameron’s politics. The most important soundbite of his leadership was his first: “There is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same as the state.”

What follows is not intended either to recommend or dismiss, but to report—in the forceful terms in which they have been described to me—the picture of policy that Cameron’s band of brothers believe they see. Led by Steve Hilton, his friend and most influential and radical policy adviser, Cameron Conservatism is committed to the task of overturning Britain’s addiction to centralised social democracy, without withdrawing help from people who depend on it. The Tory intention is not to tinker with state programmes but to reshape government.

Some say this is just a disguise for a traditional instinct to cut spending and taxes, to help the rich and let the poor go hang—and of course among some Tories this is true. But Cameron’s people say they are different. Trusting people, the dispersal of power, is the central idea for government. If it doesn’t happen, or doesn’t work, Cameron will have failed.

There is a striking unity and energy to the group around the leadership. Most come from traditional Tory backgrounds; the jibe about too many Etonians is true but they are friendly, funny and relaxed. The party is being reclaimed by the sort of people who once made it strong: clever, undogmatic, moderately sceptical and compassionate. Cameron is their natural leader. He does not want to create a fragmented, individualist, market-driven society. To this extent he is no Thatcherite. His commitment to elements of the welfare state, especially the NHS, is real. His philosophical underpinnings are traditionally Tory: a respect for Burke’s famous small battalions and a one-nation sense of a duty to bind society together rather than pull it apart. He recognises that the rich have obligations to the poor. He knows that many things can only be achieved collectively. He emphasises the importance of the family and wants to divert resources to support it. His traditional instincts come to the fore in his support for an end to the hunting ban, which he cares about personally.

But above all he is certain that the British state, as it has developed since 1945, obstructs rather than hinders national progress. In this, his thinking is the opposite of the left-wing view of the state as a benign entity, presiding over and improving the lives of individuals and communities. While Brown has made the state’s constant expansion his goal, Cameron believes it is the problem. In his view,

government is too big, too centralised and too stupid, swallowing resources and diminishing responsibility. It is the cause, in his familiar phrase, of the broken society.

That term confuses people because they think Cameron is trying to blame the ill-educated, welfare-dependent poor for their own misfortunes. In fact, he is blaming government. Give people more responsibility, he believes, and they will behave more responsibly. From that, it follows that the closer to the ground that government flies, the better it will be. That is what he means by the woolly phrase “the post-bureaucratic age.” Turning philosophy and ideology into pithy slogans devalues and distorts, but the simple idea is to decentralise power. The talk is of social responsibility, not state control.

This is not new, of course. Which modern politician does not promise people more opportunity and control over their lives? Some of this agenda is shallow, some of it contradictory. Tony Blair and Brown have said similar things. But Cameron (like some Liberal Democrats) thinks Labour’s failure to deliver stems from a belief in the centralised state; he is interested in process, not policy. Where Labour announces what will be done, and then sometimes fails, Conservatives want to talk about how things will be done.

The starting point will be to flood the public sector with information. No budget will be secret or hard to track down. Go to the website of a government agency at the moment, and it is all but impossible to discover what it spends or what its top staff are paid. Cameron’s team place great faith in technology and openness as a substitute for the bodies that control public service provision. They point to price comparison websites such as moneysupermarket.com. Do not underestimate the immediate impact of massive doses of information, they say, pointing to what happened when MPs’ expenses were revealed.

One might ask how this differs from a boilerplate small-government agenda. But the intention, says one shadow minister, is that scrutiny should be bracing rather than destructive—“not to withdraw the state but make it more effective.” “We should not regard any deficiency in state provision as a reason to overthrow it,” says another. He should perhaps have said “sufficient reason” as there are undoubtedly programmes headed for the chop under a Conservative government; but Cameron’s team do consistently talk about transparency leading to honing and redirecting. They want to pull off a double trick: cutting the cost of the state by making it more efficient, so reducing the budget deficit, while sustaining spending on frontline services. They look to Tory councils as a model—not just Wandsworth but Essex or Barnet, whose leader recently praised easyJet as a model to follow.

The trouble is that while, to support his case, Cameron can point to symptomatic failures of the Labour years—the intense dysfunctionality of many government-spending programmes, the sense that Britain is a rich country but not always a great place to live—he cannot yet prove that his methods are the antidote. The Tories have surprisingly little to say about things such as crime, beyond the ultra-devolutionist plan to elect police chiefs. Cameron is serious about fighting climate change, but giving people more information about energy use through smart meters is only a small part of the answer. He also stands open to the charge, made recently by Nick Clegg, of not understanding the nature of power in a global age; the importance of collective international action and the structures, such as the EU, that support it. Both Clegg and Cameron agree that the nation state is failing, but Cameron wants to look down, not up, for the solutions.

The party says that it want to strengthen councils—talking to me, two of Cameron’s allies made the remarkable claim (given their party’s recent history) that however bad, local government is almost always better-run than central government. But they have no plan to allow councils to raise a greater proportion of their spending locally. And, inevitably, the Labour party will start to rebuild its strength in and through its local government base. Cameron could find himself giving power and money to his opponents, while his government is judged on its record of delivering a range of services it can no longer control.

Most importantly of all, Cameron faces a different world to the one he once thought he would inherit. His agenda was forged before the economic collapse. His intentions are to give people information, break up the big baronies of the quango state, scrap targets, direct money to the people who provide services, free up the way things are done so that they are less predictable, less coercive, more creative and more responsive. But doing these things will not be cheap and the opening weeks of his government will bring a horrendously tight budget and big spending cuts. Devolving power to service providers is one thing; devolving cuts quite another.

So the biggest task that David Cameron faces in the months before the general election is to show that his cherished post-bureaucratic age is not now an unaffordable luxury. Some assume that the party has already drifted from the progressive agenda of the first couple of years to a comfortable, traditional Conservative agenda of tight reins and sound money. Certainly some party spokesmen sound happier with such a script. But the leadership insist that this is not the case: the mission (as they call it) is unchanged. Yet there are hints of anxiety, and even loneliness, in the voices of the team preparing for government; their influence is great but they know many in the party tolerate rather than support them. Cameron has led the opposition for longer than Blair before 1997 but it does not always feel like that.

No one, not even Brown, can now argue that government should go on as before. The reforming challenge to the state has been given impetus and urgency by the budget deficit. Put like that, the fiscal crisis is an opportunity, not an obstacle—and so was the political crisis that followed the expenses scandal. But Cameron claim's to offer an intellectual framework to deliver change asks a lot of a small band of people. However able, they will find it hard to bend something as vast as the British state to their will. Their commitment, however, is real. "Without fundamentally improving the productivity of public services, the quality of those services will deteriorate as budgets are squeezed," George Osborne said in a speech to Demos in August, arguing that fixing the economy, society and politics are all part of the same progressive cause.

Some of this is rationalisation after the fact. Faced with a recession it did not predict, the leadership is hastily trying to construct a coherent economic approach which is both fiscally responsible and progressive. But economic and political failure may strengthen, rather than diminish, the case for radical reform of the way Britain is run.

Some of it, too, highlights an ancient internal tension within the Conservative party. Cameron's crowd display a Burkean optimism about human nature: they really don't believe in the existence of a vast and irredeemable underclass which the state must contain and quarantine. They think that human beings both wish and are able to look after each other as well as themselves, if not disincentivised by a stupid central state. Another kind of Toryism, however, would take a bleaker view. And if thought has been given to the problems of imposing central standards on decentralised provision (or accepting wider variations than indignant headline writers about postcode lotteries will tolerate) then we've yet to hear it. Cameron's circle would retort that the process of making comparisons will eventually bring a ratcheting-up across the board. But between "now" and "eventually" may stretch a rocky road.

The test will be education. It is more than coincidence that this is the area where Tory thinking is most advanced; Cameron himself chose to serve as shadow education minister before he ran for the leadership. But education spending will not be protected from cuts. If the Tory claim that reform can bring both better services and savings is to mean anything, it must be here.

Guided by the former Times journalist Michael Gove, probably the most influential shadow minister after Osborne, schools will be given enhanced independence and non-government groups will be able to set up new ones within the state system. This is the much-vaunted Swedish model: devolving power and stripping away control. Today's academies are a creation of the state; these new schools will, in theory, be a creation of communities. But no more than a handful will open in a

first parliamentary term and this policy, however revolutionary in the long term, will have little immediate impact.

There will be other reforms, too. Gove cites the agency responsible for the school-building programme, Partnership for Schools, as an example of the sort of bureaucratic body the Conservatives have in their sights, its £15bn budget out of control and delivering the wrong things. Hand a smaller amount of money directly to schools, he argues, and nine times out of ten the outcome would be something better.

Quangos like this exist across the public sector. One Conservative pointed me to the national police improvement agency, with close to a £500m budget and no clear purpose. So there are some rapid savings Conservatives are hopeful of making. But Cameron faces a stiffer test than saving money. He has always said that education will be the test of his progressive credentials. Gove's plans are, in principle, much more radical than his party now understands: a pupil premium that should make underachieving and socially disadvantaged students financially much more attractive to good schools than middle-class ones. And it will only work if the premium is set high enough. To do that, the government will have to find large amounts of money from elsewhere. If Tory education plans pass the test of being radical, it is unclear whether they will pass the test of being self-financing.

If things are tough in education, they will be harder in other departments, where plans for reform are less advanced. Some of this is intentional: a new government, it is claimed, can't do everything. But there are gaps. Health policy, with its ring-fenced budget, is widely seen as tame, a surrender to doctors' demands by the informed but unthreatening shadow health minister Andrew Lansley. The reality is a policy that is tougher than people think: market-based competition to push down costs to the lowest charged by any providers. If it works, it will be interesting to see the reaction of Totnes's new Tory GP-MP.

It may seem strange that two departments already given the biggest proportional boost in spending under Labour, health and international development, are the only ones to have their budgets guaranteed by the Tories. But the development budget is likely to be sliced quietly, by bringing some military and foreign office spending within its budget's umbrella. Defence policy is a source of quiet Tory despair, still dependent on huge procurement programmes and a war Cameron knows is being lost. Welfare reform relies on people getting jobs that in a recession may not exist. Transport policy does not run much further than opposition to a third runway and support for a costly north-south high-speed rail link. In such areas, the party hardly looks ready for government.

In pessimistic moments, the small group around the leader wonder if they will be able to make their modern Conservatism a reality. They are trying to ride a party whose instinct, when it hits trouble, will be to buck them off. They know that however great their control in opposition, government will be different. "Progressive Conservatives are small in number but high in status," says Richard Reeves of Demos. "In government will the progressive element turn out to be bolted strongly enough on to good ship Conservative?"

After 12 years in power, Labour's team of advisers and strategists can no longer match the strong Conservative line-up, but that does not mean that all shadow ministers share the Cameron agenda. He inherited a small and exhausted parliamentary party, demoralised further by the expenses crisis. If he wins the election, most Tory MPs will be first-timers. Who will fill ministerial offices while this generation matures? There is anxiety in Cameron circles about the need to evangelise internally: to spread the faith in the party's approach to power while there is still time. Some shadow ministers are trusted to get it right. Others, say one insider, "cannot move without the leader's office sitting on them."

Any opposition party would feel insecure the autumn before a spring election that it is expected to win. In 1996, new Labour betrayed this insecurity through relentless central control of the message. It was they who popularised the terms "on-" and "off-message." But the Tory message is arguably

not yet clear enough to be on or off; and the in-tray awaiting it is daunting. The pressure to deviate from the progressive agenda of opposition will be huge. On 2nd October, three days before the Tory party conference, Ireland votes on the Lisbon treaty. Many Tories retain a deep loathing of the EU and would like nothing better than see Cameron—who is a convinced sceptic—pick a fight with Brussels. The idea provokes groans from progressive Tories, who dread the idea of their government wasting energy on the issue. They hope the impact of a brutal budget and a recession will give the party enough to get its teeth into. But, like malaria, Eurosceptic fever can always come back.

If it does, or if the cuts of the first budget produce a political crisis, and the recession continues, all the bright hopes of opposition will come to nothing. Conservatives need to act fast if education reforms and the dispersal of power are to produce any results at all before a general election. Many fingers are being crossed, and many policies remain to be defined. But the belief at the centre is real, radical and fervent. As Cameron said of his unscripted 2007 conference speech, “It might be a bit messy, but it will be me.”