

## David Cameron Gives Conservatives Hope in Britain

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Early next year, British Prime Minister Tony Blair will have to convince his ruling Labour Party to vote to replace Trident, Britain's aging submarine-based nuclear deterrent. The very fact that a Labour prime minister would even consider putting such a question to his party reflects just how much British politics has changed.

As recently as 1987, the Labour Party supported unilateral nuclear disarmament and advocated the removal of U.S. nuclear bases from European soil. Yet under Blair, today's Labour government has introduced tuition fees for higher education, a voucher system (albeit under a different name) into the National Health Service, and is currently championing a bill that would greatly reduce state interference in schools.

It has been said that Margaret Thatcher's greatest achievement was New Labour -- in fundamentally changing the terms of British politics, she forced the Labour left to forgo all its old socialist shibboleths and reconcile itself to market economics.

In the early 1990s, it did so, and the dual turning points in its fortune were the election of the energetic Tony Blair as party leader in 1994, and his decision to remove Clause 4 -- which pledged a commitment to the re-nationalisation of all industry -- from the party's constitution, thus returning Labour to the economic (and therefore electoral) mainstream. In 1997, Labour duly won a landslide election against a tired, 18-year-old Conservative government. Now, following the election of David Cameron to the leadership of the Conservative Party, many hope that after eight years out of power, the party has taken its own first step back towards government.

Educated at Eton and Oxford University, and married to the daughter of a Baronet, David Cameron may not, at first glance, appear to represent a break with the *ancien regime*. But his 2-to-1 margin of victory over his more traditionalist rival David Davis in the recent leadership election reveals the deep impression he has already made on the party's 300,000 voting members.

Cameron argued throughout his campaign that the Conservative Party needed to adapt itself to modern Britain, and its politics. As he stated at this party conference speech, "We need to change the way we feel. No more grumbling about modern Britain. I live in a world as it is, not how it was. Our best days lie ahead. We need to change the way we think."

But what does this mean in practice? Cameron has remained consciously vague on policy, arguing that it would be foolish to lay out detailed policy proposals four years before the next election. Such an approach is sensible, but it has left the British public with only his statements of principle from which to ascertain his views. His vision, "to make Britain the best place in the world to do business," is a fairly typical Conservative ambition until you consider the caveat, "but we are mistaken if we believe that this in itself constitutes an adequate economic policy for a modern, compassionate Conservatism. Poverty is an economic waste and a moral outrage. The

elimination of poverty must therefore be a central component of the Conservative governing mission.” This is Cameron’s ‘Compassionate Conservatism’.

Sound familiar? Cameron faces a very similar challenge to that which then-Gov. George W. Bush faced in 2000. Bill Clinton greatly benefited from the fortuitous timing of the 1990s economic boom -- largely the result of Ronald Reagan’s earlier reforms. Similarly, Blair’s government has enjoyed all the long-term economic benefits of Thatcher’s work.

The Conservatives, therefore, have to reconcile themselves to the political reality that Labour appears, to the public at large, as able stewards of the economy. (Most people do not realise, for example, that Britain has dropped from the worlds’ 4th to its 13th most competitive economy under this government). This prosperity has dampened popular enthusiasm for radical reform, and many still remember the previous Conservative government, which focused so heavily on economic reform, without concern for its social ramifications, that people came to believe they cared about nothing but money.

Cameron, the party’s fourth leader since 1997, represents a break with that legacy -- he is only 39, married with three children, and cycles to work. And he wants to see the reforms of Britain’s health service, our education system, and our broader economy, that Labour can promise but never deliver because of their regulatory, Market-Leninist approach.

As Conservative columnist Ferdinand Mount recently argued, “regulation [is] the modern substitute for nationalisation.” Over-regulation now costs 10-12% of GDP -- more than the total revenue from income tax -- according to the head of the government’s own Better Regulation Task Force. The very fact that they have a Better Regulation Task Force --recently re-named, to some fanfare, the Better Regulation Commission, reveals the essence of Labour’s failings.

But in order for the Tories to return to office, many argue that Cameron needs a ‘Clause 4’ moment, wherein he faces down his party on an issue of principle -- as Blair did on the re-nationalization of industry -- to convince the public that they have fundamentally changed. But such a view fails to understand the nature of British Conservatism, which, like its sunnier and more religious American cousin, is an inclination, not a doctrine. Cameron’s leadership embodies this understanding. He is a conservative, first and last, because he believes that conservative means provide the best ends for individuals and society. And as such, he represents the Conservatives’ best hope of real electoral success for quite some time.

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