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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 Tim Bale's latest analysis of the trials and tribulations of the Conservative Party constitutes a highly entertaining read, full of plots and intrigue, betrayal and backstabbing. Yet, as can be expected from this highly-respected Professor of British Politics at Queen Mary University of London, it also provides astute political analysis of the period of turmoil that the party has undergone since the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, and of its long-term impact. The book focuses less on ideology and more on the efforts of Conservatives – as individuals and as a party – to hold onto power. Of course, considering itself as 'the natural party of government', the Conservatives have often sacrificed ideology for power, but this book reveals the extent to which they are prepared to go to new lengths to ensure re-election, signalling what

Bale considers as its transformation from a mainstream party to ‘an ersatz radical right-wing populist outfit’ (p. 291).

- 2 Despite the apparent novelty of the contemporary period, characterised by numerous crises in the form of Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, war at Europe’s borders, and climate change, the book underlines some enduring themes, not least the fragility of Conservative Party leaders who find themselves constantly challenged by rival leadership hopefuls, the party in Parliament, the ‘party in the media’, rank and file members and Tory voters. Bale notes the power ambitions of individual MPs which reflect a decline in deference towards senior party members, a trend which is fuelled by social media, ‘giving a chance to shine even to those who in earlier times would have struggled to make a splash in the local newspaper’ (p. 73). He also highlights the ‘bewildering array of internal groups’ that have emerged within the party – from the ‘hardcore Eurosceptics’ and hyperliberals of the European Research Group to the state interventionists of the Northern Research Group – who are constantly vying to make their voices heard and shape the direction of policy. Bale gives much space to the role of the Tory-supporting media which he depicts as an integral part of the Conservative Party, helping to shape policy and determine the fate of party leaders. He focusses particularly on *The Telegraph* – Boris Johnson’s ‘real boss’ and ‘the house journal of the parliamentary party’ – but also on *The Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Express*, *The Spectator*, and on-line blogs such as *Conservative Home* and *Guido Fawkes*. He notably shows the important role they have played in stoking the so-called ‘culture wars’, leading the ‘war on woke’ against the BBC, universities and senior judges. Bale also discusses the role played by think tanks such as *Policy Exchange* in urging the government to focus on cultural issues in order to retain big and small ‘c’ conservative voters, including those from the ‘Red Wall’. Of course, Tory leaders must also endeavour to keep the rank and file of party members on board, a task that can prove especially difficult when their priorities clash with those of the general public and Tory voters in particular. Such divisions were clear during the COVID-19 crisis, with the general public supportive of extensive lockdowns and financial assistance to help individuals and businesses through the pandemic, whilst rank and file members, aided and abetted by the party in the media, tended to oppose these measures. Conservative leaders have also been pulled in different directions over the Levelling Up agenda and higher public spending on health, education and policing, which have been widely supported by the general public but opposed by hyperliberal conservative ministers, the Tory grassroots, and chancellors such as Philip Hammond and Rishi Sunak who acted as ‘fiscal hawks’.
- 3 In an attempt to overcome division (and address the turmoil within the party and in the country more generally), Conservative leaders have increasingly resorted to populist measures, thus leading what Bale describes as a transformation from the mainstream to the extreme right. Theresa May already embraced populism in her first conference speech as party leader in 2016, pitting ‘the people’ against the ‘liberal elite’ who found their ‘patriotism distasteful’, their ‘concerns about immigration parochial’, their ‘views about crime illiberal’ and their ‘attachment to job security inconvenient’ (p. 22). As Prime Minister, Boris Johnson went further, advancing the conspiratorial idea that ‘the British Establishment’ was seeking to overturn the referendum result and to ‘acquiesce to foreign rule’. Populism was not just rhetorical and was clearly demonstrated by Johnson’s lack of respect for parliamentary procedure in order to ensure that a hard Brexit was delivered and ‘the proverbial will of the people’ respected

(p. 108). Once the Withdrawal Deal was delivered, the culture wars became 'the continuation of Brexit by other means' (p. 235). Despite a radical change in style and demeanor, Bale suggests that anyone who believes that Rishi Sunak will resist the temptation to pursue the 'war on woke' is delusional, particularly in a context of economic crisis and ideological opposition which will make it difficult for him to introduce popular 'bread and butter' policies that necessitate increased public spending.

- 4 The extremist populist direction of travel in the Conservative Party is thus clear. But we might question the idea that this really represents a 'transformation', as the title of Bale's book suggests. Bale argues that the Conservatives 'have slipped their moorings as a mainstream centre-right party' (p. 29). Indeed, it is often considered that extremism is somehow 'unconservative'. Yet, as the American political scientist Corey Robin reminds us, conservatism, regardless of its national color, has not always been 'moderate'¹. Leaders like Reagan, Trump (or Johnson) do not represent a distortion of 'true' conservatism: on the contrary, they draw on an old tradition that can be dated back to Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre². It is a tradition that recognises the need to appeal to the masses and harness their power in order to strengthen or restore the power of the elites³. It is what Stuart Hall, in his analysis of Margaret Thatcher's political strategy, called 'authoritarian populism': an attempt to impose elite priorities whilst introducing policy distractions rooted in the real fears and anxieties of 'the people'⁴. Not for nothing did Thatcher describe herself as a 'revolutionary conservative'⁵: she was willing to use populism to anchor her radical project of restoring elite power in a popular movement. Similarly, we can see that ideology has not been altogether abandoned by today's Conservative Party. It is no coincidence that those who are most committed to a hard Brexit (notably Truss and Sunak), hoping it will enable them to realise a low-tax, low-regulation neoliberal real utopia⁶, are also those most prepared to resort to populist culture war strategies to win support for what is clearly a rather unattractive project for the masses. Perhaps, rather than a transformation, we might instead speak of an intensification of earlier trends. This leads us to question the extent to which Brexit really was a watershed moment. Without doubt, it led to a resurgence of the right wing of the Conservative Party, but the mainstreaming of hardline ideas was already underway long before Brexit, exemplified most starkly by the adoption of anti-immigration discourse and policy most usually associated with the far right, from Margaret Thatcher's articulation of people's fears that they might be 'rather swamped by people of a different culture'⁷ to Theresa May's 'hostile environment policies'⁸. Perhaps Brexit – and its clarion call to 'take back control' of Britain's borders – should be regarded more as symptom rather than a cause of the Conservative Party's most recent shift to the Right.

NOTES

1. Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: From Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
 4. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988.
 5. Margaret Thatcher, 'The principles of Thatcherism', speech in Seoul, South Korea, 3 September 1992, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108302>
 6. Emma Bell, "Brexit : towards a neoliberal real utopia ?", *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 24 | 2019, 45-66.
 7. Margaret Thatcher, TV Interview for Granada Television's *World in Action*, 27 January 1978, TV Interview for Granada World in Action ("rather swamped") | Margaret Thatcher Foundation
 8. Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*, London, Verso, 2020.
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