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Conference Report / Tagungsbericht

THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATISM

DIE ZUKUNFT DES KONSERVATISMUS

Deutsch-Britisches Symposium – German-British Symposium

Wildbad Kreuth, Bavaria, Germany: 19 – 21 April 2002

Conference Report – Alister Miskimmon

Summary

Recent years have thrown up a number of new challenges facing the United Kingdom Conservative Party and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). This has led in part to the need for a fundamental reassessment of the strategic and political direction of both parties as they seek to re-establish themselves as parties of national government. While the domestic situation of both parties differs, the Conservative Party and the CSU share many similarities, mainly concerning how they can counteract the electoral success of centre-left parties in the United Kingdom and Germany. The domestic and international pressures affecting both parties also overlap, making an exchange of views on the solutions to these problems a valuable exercise. Key to the deliberations were four central themes: Assessing what lessons could be learned from being in a period of national opposition; How does Conservatism address the needs of the individual within a society; What kind of Europe do Conservatives want?; Future strategies for the CSU and the UK Conservative Party. While there were many areas of similarity, the conference showed up the need for Conservatism to be adapted to local circumstances, due to the unique social, economic and cultural heritages of Germany and the UK.

Is Conservatism in Crisis?

Wake up, my fellow countrymen. Wake up now before it is too late. (John Major, Wembley Party Rally, 5th April 1992)

The conference began with an assessment of whether Conservatism in Germany and the UK was confronted with a crisis since the UK Conservative Party and the CSU left national office. The views expressed by the participants reflected the contrasting political fortunes of the CSU and the Conservative Party. The federal system within Germany and the unique position of Bavaria has meant that the CSU has a solid electoral base that the Conservative Party does not possess. This was a reality that affected the positions of both CSU and Conservative Party participants. In addition, the first-past-the-post electoral system in the UK ran the risk of condemning political parties to long periods in opposition, which has placed greater urgency on the Conservative Party to prove itself electable in the short-term.

From a *British* perspective, the record defeats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections, which witnessed massive gains for the Labour Party, did suggest that the Conservative Party was under real pressure to recapture the electoral success of the Thatcher and Major governments. Conference participants pointed to various factors for these stunning defeats. Firstly, a change in the political *milieu* had resulted in dramatically decreasing membership figures, with the majority of the existing members being predominantly older members of society. This was accentuated by the decrease in the numbers of *Stammwähler* (core voters) and the increase in floating voters. This had resulted in greater competition for votes and pressures on party programmes to appeal to the voting instincts of these groups. Secondly, Conservatism in the UK is less markedly linked with the traditional bastions of conservatism in British society – the established Church, army etc. – sections of society that the Conservatives could rely on for votes in the past. In addition to this, the gulf between politicians and the voting public has dramatically decreased with the onset of the information age, which has caused less confidence in central government and resulted in massive public disengagement and voter apathy.

It was suggested that the Conservative Party was not in crisis but in confusion. Ironically, the end of the Cold War and the movement of the Left towards the political centre had also had a disorientating effect on the centre-right. The traditional areas on which the Left and Right had diverged had decreased resulting in the growth of consensus politics. In order to react to these changes within the political system, it was suggested that the Conservative Party followed a four-pronged strategy. Firstly, to follow a policy of *groupism*, leaving behind the impression that Conservatism was only concerned with selfish individualism. Secondly, the Conservatives need to be serious about confronting poverty and establishing *social justice*. Thirdly, Conservatives should favour the *decentralisation of authority* to make local units more accountable. Finally, Conservatism must be framed within an *internationalist framework* to avoid being portrayed as xenophobic. Added to this, the Conservatives ability to recapture the political ‘centre ground’ should be based not on the traditional confrontational political culture, but on finding common ground on policy issues. Realising these four goals would, it was suggested, reflect a more ‘modern conservatism’.

The CSU perspective on the challenges facing conservatism within Germany reflected different cultural conditions and the unique political circumstances of Bavaria where the CSU has been the party of government for so long. It was suggested that rather than facing a crisis, the CSU had come up against new challenges which needed to be addressed. The CSU’s success was based on continual regeneration. Being voted out of national office alongside the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in September 1998 was down to voter dissatisfaction with established political personalities, rather than with party programmes.

For the CSU, conservatism is considered to be only one important facet of the party. Conservatism is also viewed almost solely in terms of cultural heritage, based on Christian values and the importance of *Heimat*, which contrasts markedly with British views. According to the CSU, the transmitter of these conservative values is the family and therefore it is a key building block of society. For that reason, the CSU firmly believes that it represents the political expression of Bavaria’s cultural heritage. As well

as claiming to represent the cultural heritage of Bavaria, the CSU stands for the rights of the individual within society, liberalism and social responsibility and security stemming from the maintenance of Bavaria's cultural identity in light of the growing challenges presented by globalisation.

The discussions that followed the initial position papers revolved around issues of heterogeneity within conservative thought across Europe and the nature of the challenges, if any, which were facing the two parties. Despite the limited impact of the Third Way / Neue Mitte project in public debate, the Labour Party and the SPD have been able to occupy the centre ground more easily than the Conservative Party / CSU. Rather than pursue a policy of reaching consensus over key themes, it was suggested that in order to be more attractive to the voting public, the Conservative Party had to assert where it differed on policy in order to provide a viable alternative for floating voters. Participants agreed that the real strength of the Conservative Party has been its 'essential pragmatism' in the face of an ideological Left. Whilst the Labour Party in the UK had shed much of its ideological 'baggage' in its moves towards government, the left wing of the party still exhibited traces of this. A greater stress on the traditional pragmatic nature of the Conservative Party could, it was hoped, prove successful.

Concerns were raised that the CSU while enjoying a very strong position within Bavaria would come up against new challenges, which may result in a future crisis. It was suggested that the overtly Christian character of the CSU could be viewed as exclusionary, especially in light of the politically salient issue of immigration. The UK Conservative Party function in a much more secular environment than the CSU in Bavaria. British society has undergone considerable demographic change that has necessitated a more secular political system.

Conservatism and the Individual

Conservative thought at its best conveys the mutual dependence between the community and the free market. Each is enriched by the other. It is at this point at which modern conservatism comes close to the most sophisticated liberalism.
(David Willetts, Modern Conservatism, 1992)

The second session concentrated on balancing the rights of the individual with that of the importance of society. It was considered that the UK Labour Party had gained much of its success by attempting to reach a compromise between individualism and the necessity of creating a public space and collective goods – exactly what the Conservative Party considered to be its core objectives. The public’s perception of the Conservative Party standing for freedom had perhaps blurred the party’s responsibility to stress its belief in the importance of society. It was firmly held that the fresh new packaging of this belief in society would demonstrate the Conservative Party’s core values, whilst at the same time, deal with the issues that the voting public viewed to be most salient. The dynamic for change within the Conservative Party was, it was claimed, in many ways due to this realisation – “Tories are changing, because the Tories believe in the importance of society.” It was claimed that the Tories were most able to stimulate aspiration and self-responsibility, whilst simultaneously fostering the belief in community. Perhaps the defining characteristic of the current political debate within the UK was the fight between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party over who represents society most effectively. In this case, it is clear that both parties are fighting over the same political ground.

The family was also considered to be an important institution for British Conservatism. However, the definition of the family proved contentious. In addition, greater diversity and informed individual choice had resulted in the UK moving towards becoming a multi-racial society. This was accompanied by the realisation that groups defined outwardly by gender, race or sexuality could not be considered block votes. These social changes had to be represented in the Conservative Party’s strategy and policy platform. It

was therefore incumbent on the Conservative Party to define the family as they see it and spell out its role in society.

Conservatism and European Integration

Europa muss sich neu legitimieren bei den Menschen. (Edmund Stoiber, Die Welt, 16.12.2000)

The history of the European integration project was described as one that had been heavily influenced by Conservatives – e.g. Adenauer, Schuman, Kohl and Heath. Today, Conservatism within the European Parliament (European Peoples Party Block) was driven by three key ideas: individualism, subsidiarity as a leading idea and solidarity in terms of forging a community within Europe. One of the key issues which was addressed was that of whether the development of the European Union signalled the death-knell of the modern nation-state. It was agreed that this was overstated, but that as the EU became more complex and sophisticated the EU Member States had to become more sophisticated in how they dealt with these developments. Both the CSU and Conservative Party participants readily agreed that there was an urgent need to decentralise power within in the EU rather than have it concentrated in Brussels.

While the CSU has had a history of positive support for the development of the EU, the Conservative Party in the UK suffered from internal divisions over the EU during the latter years of the Thatcher government and during the Major government. The internal struggles within the Conservative Party over Europe had largely addressed with the result that the Conservative Party's policy had become less black and white towards Europe. A minority of Europhobes expressing extreme and often irrational concerns about the EU unfortunately dominated the debate within the UK. Both CSU and Conservative Party participants agreed that the prospect of a United States of Europe was very distant on the horizon.

One participant suggested that there were five areas in which Conservatives across Europe could unite under to shape the EU more in line with their interests. Firstly, a

clarified definition of the EU was needed in order to reduce the ambiguity which many voters felt concerning what the EU could and could not do. It remains to be seen whether the Constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe could address these issues in a satisfactory manner. Secondly, Conservatives should oppose over-regulation. Thirdly, Conservatives should seek to support the enlargement of the EU and end the uncertainty felt by applicant states by clearing the path towards their membership. Fourthly, Conservatives should uphold the importance of open markets. Finally, Conservatives should work towards the greater visibility and effectiveness of the EU in international affairs, particularly in light of the events of September 11th. This was essential in finding a satisfactory redefinition of the EU-USA relationship.

Concerns were raised pertaining to these five points. Firstly, it was important that Conservatives pursued a vision of Europe which was compatible with that of the United States but which also exerted its singularity and differences. It was considered by one CSU participant that the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common European Security and Defence Policy of the EU ran the risk of weakening the transatlantic link. It was felt that this should be avoided at all costs, especially in light of the terrorist attacks on the United States. In order to reassure the Americans and to reinforce the transatlantic link it was considered that an increase in defence budgets across Europe was essential, even at a time of relatively difficult economic conditions.

An issue which neither parties had successfully addressed was that of – the *finalité* of EU integration. This required addressing complex constitutional issues and questions of what the guiding principles and values should be. The difficulty of suggesting a coherent Conservative vision for the EU was that Conservatism within the EU takes on very different forms and guises, making the establishment of effective transnational networks to push this agenda a difficult proposition. Two key differences between the CSU and Conservative Party's views on the EU were detailed by one speaker – the CSU vision of the EU as an expression of Christian values and traditions is not something which British Conservatives stress, and both parties also differed over the extent to which markets should be opened was also a point of contention.

One of the comments concerning the issue of the EU pointed out that there was a danger that elite and public opinion were drifting apart as the EU took on more and more competencies and became more complex. The permissive consensus within Germany concerning the EU was showing signs of cracking in light of continued high unemployment figures and economic adjustment driven by the implications of globalisation. In the UK too, the voting public had become confused by many of the issues dealing with EU integration and Britain's role within the EU. This had to be addressed, especially in light of the Conservative Party's more pragmatic approach to the EU since the late 1990s. One UK Conservative speaker suggested that the EU had indeed moved towards accepting many British views on the workings of EU integration and that this necessitated the UK playing a more self-confident and involved role in debates.

Overall, the discussions over European integration showed up several important points of agreement between the CSU and the UK Conservatives. There was a great need to decentralise authority and power from the Brussels centre to the Member states and their localities. This would have the desired effect of making the EU more transparent, effective and accountable. In addition, there was a greater acceptance of what could be achieved supranationally within the EU and what could still be best achieved on an intergovernmental basis. Whilst issues such as EMU and the extent to which markets should become truly open remained contentious, the areas of agreement between the two parties had been greatly facilitated by the more open and pragmatic approach of the UK Conservative Party in recent years.

Future Strategies of Conservative Parties in the UK and Germany

In a progressive country change is constant; and the question is not whether you should resist change which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, and the traditions of a people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles and arbitrary and general doctrines. (Benjamin Disraeli, Edinburgh, 1867)

The final session of the conference served to further underline the importance of the symposium as a transnational exchange of views and experiences. This exercise highlighted the importance of transferring ideas and strategies from international sister parties and adapting these ideas to fit local conditions. The panel also offered a sober assessment of the future electoral chances of both parties.

In terms of the future of both parties, the Conservative Party and the CSU stand before two vastly different outlooks. For the UK Conservatives, the possibility of becoming the party of government once again seems like a distant prospect in light of the Labour Party's large majority in the House of Commons. Another major concern is that the devolution of substantial political power to the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies and to the Scottish Parliament has been associated with a dramatic slump in the electoral performance of the Conservative Party in Scotland and Wales. In many ways, this downturn was caused by years of reluctance on the part of past Conservative governments to devolve power to Wales and Scotland. This presents a major challenge to the Conservative Party's claim to be the party of the United Kingdom and the strategies of both the Welsh and Scottish Conservative Party organisations must be reassessed.

A three pronged strategy for the UK Conservatives was defined by one participant. Conservatives needed to reassess the legacy of Thatcherism that necessitated a 'brutal repudiation' of her legacy and the rediscovery of the importance of society. Secondly, the party organisation, which had been instrumental in the success of the Conservative Party

since the Second World War, had lost its direction and impact. This had come about largely due to the aging party membership. Finally, the Conservatives needed to draw on the strengths of its main opponents, by learning from the successes of the Labour Party. Solutions to real problems needed to be found; solutions which were non-ideological and pragmatic.

In contrast, despite not being in the national governing coalition, the CSU's hold on political power in Bavaria has provided the party with a strong political base in which to pursue national government with its sister party the CDU. The international profile of the party has also been raised in recent months with the announcement of Edmund Stoiber's election as Chancellor Candidate for the upcoming federal elections in September 2002. In light of the recent gains in several state elections, the CDU/CSU's chances of regaining national office appear considerably rosier than the UK Conservatives. As a result, which was reflected throughout the symposium, the CSU has not been put under the same kinds of intense pressure to reform its policies and strategies to regain political power. This strong regional identification with Bavaria is mirrored in the fortunes of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which derives much of its political support from the new German *Länder* in the east.

One concern for the future of both parties was that of the inability to attract bright young graduates to join their respective parties. According to one German participant, the situation in Germany was further hampered due to the failings of the German education system that were outlined in the influential Programme for International Student Assessment report. (PISA) ¹ The apparent failings of the German secondary school system ran the risk of not providing German society with the right calibre of students to meet future challenges. However, both parties are subject to underlying trends within western democracies resulting in the dramatic fall of membership figures of political parties. Political parties no longer represent the only focal point for political mobilisation in western democracies, yet they still claim to be the prime aggregators of societal interests in parliamentary democracies. The decline of voter turnout in Germany and the

¹ <http://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/pisa/>

UK are key issues that need to be addressed by the UK Conservatives and the CSU, in order to claim legitimacy for their political programmes.

Conclusions

It was suggested that the symposium highlighted two parallels, three contrasts and two underlying tensions between the two parties during the discussions outlined above. Firstly, the CSU and the UK Conservative Party both stressed the importance of the family and the importance of the decentralisation of political and administrative power to the localities. This was universally agreed upon, not only on the national level, but also on the EU level at which there was considered to be an unhealthy centralisation of power and authority in Brussels.

The discussions also raised three main contrasts between the party positions. The definition of what constituted a family in today's society proved contentious. While the CSU participants generally viewed the family as encompassing a marriage between a man and a woman for the purpose of rearing offspring, the Tories differed amongst themselves on this definition.

The CSU's stress on the importance of Christianity in their political message was a further contrast between British and German participants. The Tories did not view the UK's increasingly multi-racial and multi-faith culture as a threat to Conservatism in the UK. Rather this was seen from a positive perspective which the Tories needed to represent within their party programme. Conversely, the CSU considered the introduction of different cultures and religions into Bavarian society to represent a threat and a challenge to their political message. Tory participants were clearly of the view that the CSU had to confront this issue and embrace the evolution of German society, rather than marginalise it.

Finally, the Tory Party clearly considered itself to be in the midst of a political crisis which needed to be addressed most urgently. This contrasted markedly with the position

of the CSU, for the reasons outlined above. This heavily influenced the contributions of both sets of participants to the symposium.

The above discussions revolved around the tensions emanating from dealing with the trade-off between social justice and economic liberalism and the tension between political ideology and a more pragmatic approach to the challenges facing German and British society. These needed to be faced head-on by both parties in order to remain political forces in their respective political systems.

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