
Britain's Neoconservative Moment

Daniel Johnson

THESE ARE dark days for Britain's Tories. After three successive election defeats and its longest period out of office since the mid-19th century, the oldest political party in the world has been forced to rethink its entire *raison d'être*. Last December, the Conservatives pinned their hopes for revival on yet another leader, their fifth in eight years. The latest heir to Margaret Thatcher's mantle—and, it is hoped, some of her electoral success—is David Cameron, and his elevation created a small sensation on both sides of the Atlantic.

Much of the attention was owed to Cameron's youth. A thirty-nine-year-old party loyalist who has been in Parliament for only four years, he is the most inexperienced Tory leader since William Pitt the Younger took over in 1783. More intriguing has been Cameron's insistence on the need for a "real intellectual revival of conservatism," an aim that has caused some consternation in Britain's liberal establishment. Though the precise contours of Cameron's ideas are unclear, the hints he has offered suggest that leftist bastions like the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman* may not be too far wrong in accusing him of being that most sinister of contemporary political animals—a neoconservative.

In the topsy-turvy ideological world of today's

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British politics, what the "neocon" label primarily denotes is support for the foreign policy of Tony Blair. Cameron has offered the Labor prime minister wholehearted support in the war on terror, including the campaign in Iraq. In this, he presents a marked contrast to his predecessor Michael Howard, whose equivocations and trimming to exploit anti-war sentiment earned him the dubious distinction of becoming the first Tory leader in two centuries to be *persona non grata* at the White House.

The most strenuous opposition to Blair's policies has come not from the Right, however, but from the British Left, a fact that, more than any other, has placed his hold on power in jeopardy. For many in the Labor party, to say nothing of their supporters in the media and the universities, the prime minister's enthusiastic alliance with George W. Bush since 2001 can be seen only as the mysterious working-out of an ideological conspiracy. For all his success in restoring Labor's political fortunes, Blair has, in their view, betrayed the fundamental international commitments of the Left.

But has he? Not according to Oliver Kamm, one of Blair's more eloquent defenders and a self-described neoconservative. In his column for the *London Times* and on his valuable political blog,* Kamm has argued that prosecuting the war on terror is precisely what a broad-minded liberal internationalism demands. A lifelong Labor supporter,

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Kamm voted Conservative for the first time in 2005 because the local Labor candidate was firmly opposed to her own government's strategy in Iraq and elsewhere. "Tony Blair's interventionism is not 'right-wing,'" Kamm writes. "It is the reassertion of an earlier left-wing tradition of anti-totalitarianism."

That this divergence from elements in his own party places him in distinctive trans-Atlantic company is not lost on Kamm. His recently published book, *Anti-Totalitarianism: The Left-Wing Case for a Neoconservative Foreign Policy* provides a brief, lucid history of the Left's response to Nazism and Communism while classifying Islamism as a similar horror. Like Bush and Blair, he is not afraid to compare Saddam's Iraq with Hitler's Germany, and he saw a moral imperative in overthrowing the Baathist regime in Baghdad before it became a direct threat. By tradition and principle alike, liberals are honor-bound, by his lights, to be full participants in the fight against totalitarianism.

Kamm is one of the founding patrons of the Henry Jackson Society, a group started by students at Cambridge University but now an umbrella organization for British Atlanticists and hawkish idealists of the Left and the Right. The choice of an American Democrat, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, as the group's figurehead was intended to send a signal: as Kamm sees it, you do not have to be a Tory or a Republican in order to join the neocon conspiracy. Indeed, Kamm is acute in his critique of the "cynicism" of American Democrats and British Laborites who opposed regime change in Iraq, ostensibly on principle, but actually for political advantage. Their failure to back up interventionism, he writes, risks "the resurgence of a conservative realpolitik in informal alliance with an isolationist and reactionary Left."

But Kamm's embrace of neoconservatism extends only so far. He fundamentally rejects the domestic agenda of his American counterparts, with their "reactionary social views." A British variant would be more open-minded. "No longer would neoconservatism necessarily denote rage at the cultural changes of the 1960's," he writes. "It would encompass those of us who believe the cultural changes of the 1960's have had a civilizing effect and ought to go further." For Kamm, the critique of cultural relativism and its nihilistic consequences, which has given American neoconservatism so much of its intellectual heft, can be separated from the imperative of resisting terrorism and rogue states abroad.

IF U.S.-STYLE neoconservatism has proved to be an unwelcome guest on the British Left, it has scarcely found a more comfortable political and ideological home on the British Right. The Anglo-American principles that the United States inherited and that neoconservatives so energetically promote—republican self-government, liberty under the law, bourgeois rectitude and industry—are associated, historically, not with the reactionary Tories but with their more liberal opponents, the Whigs. Beginning with John Locke, Whiggism has been the default position of American politics for over two centuries.

The British statesmen who admire, and are admired in, the United States have almost always been Whigs. Though his father was a maverick Tory, Winston Churchill came from a distinguished Whig family, switched parties several times, and was at his best as leader of a wartime unity government. Margaret Thatcher, who was despised by the Tory grandees for reasons as much snobbish as ideological, cordially returned their contempt, preferring free-market Whigs like Friedrich Hayek.

Where this leaves David Cameron, the new leader of the Tories, remains to be seen. On foreign policy, there is the example set by Blair, who has stirred the better angels of not a few Tories. One Conservative politician of my acquaintance, after grilling the prime minister at a committee meeting of the House of Commons, saluted his statesman-like qualities. Blair "almost persuaded me that the Iraq war was justified," he told me. "And as for terrorists and their imams: he just wants to cut them off at the knees. He's so conservative! Blair is our real lost leader."

Nor is this impulse without support in the national traditions so treasured by the Tories. Michael Gove, a London *Times* columnist and Conservative member of Parliament, has argued forcefully that the British need only look back over their own history to find precedents for a neoconservative foreign policy.* Canning, Palmerston, and Churchill, for instance, did not hesitate to mount preemptive attacks, both for national self-preservation (against Napoleon and Hitler) and to spread liberalism across Europe. Gove, who is close to Cameron and wrote much of his one (strongly Atlanticist) foreign-policy speech last year, believes that the dessicated, often fatalistic Tories need a dose of the optimism and self-confidence shared in equal measure by the British statesmen of the past

* Gove's essay, "The Very British Roots of Neoconservatism and Its Lessons for British Conservatives," is included in *The Neocon Reader*, edited by Irwin Stelzer (Grove Press, 2004).

and the American neoconservatives of the present.

But finding support for such ideas is no easy matter in today's Britain. Several prominent intellectuals abandoned the Labor party years ago to endorse Margaret Thatcher—they included the novelist Kingsley Amis, the historian Hugh Thomas, and the playwright Tom Stoppard, among others—and helped her to dominate British politics throughout the 1980's and beyond. But few of these thinkers were neoconservatives in the American sense. The only member of the older British generation to whom the term might properly be applied is my father, the historian and man of letters Paul Johnson. From the mid-1970's onward, all the main themes of neoconservatism have figured large in his work: the defense of Judeo-Christian values against secular and religious totalitarianism; the global projection of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law; the need for active resistance against the internal and external threats to the West.

Still, there are encouraging ideological stirrings in Britain, thanks in large part to the efforts of a small London-based think tank called the Social Affairs Unit. Originally founded as a branch of the strongly pro-market Institute of Economic Affairs, it has developed an independent identity under its new director, Michael Mosbacher, who has turned it into a trans-Atlantic bridgehead for neoconservative ideas. Among the many books and pamphlets published by the Social Affairs Unit are Kamm's *Anti-Totalitarianism* and, with a Conservative rather than a Labor readership in mind, Douglas Murray's *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It*.*

LIKE THE new Tory leader, Murray is something of a prodigy. Only twenty-six, he published his first book, a biography of Lord Alfred Douglas, while still a student at Oxford. As the subtitle of *Neoconservatism* suggests, it is not a work of political philosophy but rather a tract, a call to arms. It is addressed primarily to the Conservative party, which has languished on the sidelines since Labor swept to power in 1997. His argument, trenchantly and entertainingly made, is that only the neoconservative agenda can restore the Tories to their rightful place as the "natural party of government."

As Murray acknowledges, Britain's most consistent neoconservative over the past decade has been Tony Blair—a fact that in the late 1990's inclined most Tories to dismiss the Labor government's foreign interventions in places like Kosovo and Sierra Leone as manifestations of a despised liberal internationalism. How was Britain's national interest

served by humanitarian missions to remote regions of the Balkans or central Africa?

The idea that British self-interest might coincide with the seemingly altruistic promotion of freedom and democracy has, in fact, long been alien to the British diplomatic, academic, and political establishments, of the Right as of the Left. On the Right, Blair's readiness to intervene in the name of democracy or to prevent genocide revived a debilitating memory of the last days of the British Empire. If the lesson of the Suez crisis of 1956 was that Britain could not intervene abroad against the wishes of the United States, the lesson of the Iraq war, for many Tories, was that Britain dare not intervene even in alliance with the U.S.

By Murray's lights, however, Blair has regained some of Britain's lost glory. He "has resuscitated . . . the sense that Britain can lead, not follow, global trends in foreign affairs—that, as a global power, Britain's interests are best served not by selfish isolationism or abnegation of responsibility, but by being a world leader with a humanitarian urge." And he quotes Blair on the eve of his election in 1997, declaring that leadership has always been part of Britain's destiny: "We are a leader of nations or nothing."

Yet Blair's ambition to lead is unlikely to outlast his premiership, Murray argues, because Labor's heart is not in it. Therefore, his valuable legacy is safer in the hands of his Conservative opponents. As Murray writes, "Britain deserves and is ripe for its own neoconservative moment." He paints an optimistic portrait of a nation no longer in love with its own decline and ready to respond to an agenda of tax cuts, a smaller state, an assault on welfare dependency, immigration controls, and tough law enforcement. Inspired by academic thinkers like Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom, Murray proposes a restoration of authentically liberal education, with an end to the cultural relativism that he holds responsible for the fact that "a large proportion of the people our educational systems are producing are not very nice."

THOUGH IT is not entirely clear that the rigorous curriculum envisaged by Murray would address the problem of "not very nice" people, to whom college courses in classical philosophy might be of dubious benefit, he is clearly right to demand that British Conservatives start fighting for their

* Both books are available for purchase on the website of the Social Affairs Unit: www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk. The American edition of Murray's *Neoconservatism* will be brought out by Encounter Books in June.

values. The question is how to go about it. Murray once again turns to education. With the exception of a small number of Jewish schools, he writes, “government-funded state schools should . . . be Christian, and of those, the great majority should be Anglican.” Why? “Not only because it is the right thing to do . . . but because it is our duty to continue and further the inherited faith of our country.”

Is it realistic to suggest restoring the Church of England to its Victorian grandeur? Not to anyone the least bit familiar with the divided, depleted, and decrepit state of contemporary Anglicanism and with the leaders whom Murray expects to undertake this task of national re-education. Last October, at a seminar sponsored by the British Academy, a highly distinguished audience heard a paper by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. In addition to being the head of the worldwide Anglican communion and a former professor of theology at Oxford, Dr. Williams is also a notable opponent of the war in Iraq as well as of many other causes associated with neoconservatism.

His paper was about the need to empathize with “the Other,” by which he meant people both in the past and in the present whose attitudes and beliefs are alien to us. Dr. Williams said that he disagreed with other Christians, in particular Pope Benedict XVI, who argue that we live under the “dictatorship of relativism.” Far from living in an age that does not believe in right or wrong, good or evil, truth or falsehood, we Westerners, he asserted, are guilty of the opposite fault: we are absolutists, very sure we are right about everything.

I was on hand for Dr. Williams’s presentation because I had been asked to give a response. I said: “No one is quite so absolutist as a relativist. And no one is less absolutist than an archbishop.” To which the good-natured prelate replied: “I think we really agree.” Afterward I heard somebody exclaim: “Wasn’t the archbishop wonderful! He never mentioned God at all!”

Still, although Murray underestimates the degree to which institutions like the Church of England have been hollowed out by relativism, he is right to argue that traditional British values still need defending—and that the Conservative party, with its abiding sense of British nationhood, is the best instrument for the job. Indeed, one of his achievements is to demonstrate the relationship between the Tories’ long-standing Euro-skepticism, with its assertion of British distinctiveness, and the threat posed to the West by radical Islam. As he explains, relativism

starts by encouraging the perception that Britain and her allies have no moral authority over terrorists, tyrants, and genocidal dictatorships. It continues by excusing and then supporting the terrorists and tyrants. It finishes by saying why the terrorists and tyrants must win over us, and finally why we, as a nation, do not have the right to conquer evil or even defend ourselves.

HOW WIDELY shared such views are within the Conservative party is difficult to say. A sizable contingent of Tories has stood by Blair since 9/11, despite the wavering of their leadership. Equally important have been second thoughts about the Tory foreign-policy record voiced by a growing cadre of self-identified neoconservative intellectuals. The historian Brendan Simms of Cambridge University, for instance, has written *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (2001), a sustained indictment of Prime Minister John Major for his failures in the Balkans. Not since the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s has a British government been denounced so persuasively for non-intervention. As Margaret Thatcher herself declared in 1993, upbraiding the Conservative Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd for his supine acquiescence in the genocidal massacre in Srebrenica: “Douglas, Douglas, you would make Neville Chamberlain look like a warmonger.”

As for the practical politics of the matter, David Cameron faces an uphill battle. His strategy, apparently, is to encourage Blair to move farther in a neoconservative direction and thereby to detach him still more from the Labor party—since, so long as Blair remains resident in 10 Downing Street, there is no vacancy there for a Tory neoconservative. And indeed, as rebellion in his own ranks has grown bolder, the prime minister has been forced increasingly to rely on Tory support to win votes in the House of Commons. Blair thus risks a Laborite version of the fate that befell Mrs. Thatcher, who was defenestrated by the Tories without ever losing an election. Although he can afford to ignore the clamor on the intellectual Left and the impatience of his putative successor, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, if his own party blocks his proposed reforms of the education and welfare system or further anti-terrorism measures (as it did last November), he may have to throw in the towel well before the next general election, probably in 2009, when he has pledged to retire from politics.

On the other hand, should Islamist terrorism re-

turn to Britain's shores, Tony Blair would once again dominate the political landscape as he did after last summer's London bombings. The emerging confrontation with Iran could also serve to cement his leadership. Indeed, Blair is the only British statesman who has raised the possibility of armed confrontation with the Islamic republic in response to the provocations of its new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He does not believe a deal is possible with a fanatic like Ahmadinejad, he has been especially disgusted by Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks on British soldiers in southern Iraq, and he is fully persuaded of the existential danger posed by a nuclear Iran. Although it would be politically difficult for Britain to support a preemptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities by the United States or Israel, Blair might well dare it.

THE BRITISH are proud of their independence; they follow American fashions, whether from Hollywood or Washington, only if they can make them their own. Fortunately, Tony Blair made foreign-policy neoconservatism his own before most Britons had even heard of it, so both it and the domestic-policy variety may well have a future in Britain beyond the temporal horizon of the Blair

era. From an ideological point of view, certainly, it is the only antidote to the viruses of anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and Islamo-fascism, all of which are now coursing through the bloodstream of the British body politic.

But the necessity of neoconservatism has to be explained and popularized, as David Cameron seems to grasp. For that, many more first-rate intellectuals like Oliver Kamm and Douglas Murray will need to be mobilized. They might well take their cue from their peers on the other side of the Atlantic, where think tanks, sympathetic TV networks and websites, and above all the great American magazines and journals together constitute a permanent symposium on neoconservative thought.

Though it may not be for an Englishman to say, the U.S. itself has an enormous stake in the success of this still-nascent movement. Tony Blair's devotion to the war on terrorism and the campaign in Iraq has made British moral and military support seem like a given. But it is far from that. A half-century ago, Americans tormented themselves with the question, "Who lost China?" Surely the next generation of American leaders and thinkers does not want to have to ask itself who lost Britain.