

The British Conservatives: May in the middle

Blog post by Senior Associate Jade Rickman, 19 May 2017

The election manifesto of the governing UK Conservative party published yesterday was the most ambitious attempt to redefine British conservatism since the 1980s. It did this not by calling for radical policy change - it recommitted to radical policies like Brexit and set out a wide range of aims and ideas but little that is new - but by ambitious repositioning and some big rhetorical departures. Gone is Margaret Thatcher's minimal State; Gone is David Cameron's 'Big Society' of self-helpers.

By contrast, the Theresa May manifesto is ideology light. This is government happy to get in the way in some areas; on workers' rights, holding the feet of business to the fire, scrapping a previous commitment not to raise personal taxes, standing up for consumers and intervening in markets for energy prices. But it is also a government committed to the core conservative aims of taking the UK out of the EU with no strings attached and a balanced budget, while being happy to irritate metropolitan liberals by repealing the Labour government's ban on fox hunting and promoting 'selective' schools.

This is more than just trying to win over floating centrist voters to a centre-right programme. It is a positioning of the Tories firmly on centre left territory. It is a pitch to Labour voters who do not feel represented by the harder left policies of the Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, or the anti-Brexit leanings of centre left alternatives like the Liberal Democrats. May has been careful to do just enough on the left, and just enough on the right, to make sure her centre is a broad-church.

The approach in the manifesto is reminiscent of Angela Merkel's playbook in Germany. Deliberately slippery on underpinning political ideology; economically and socially conservative by instinct, but open minded and empathetic on 'everyday issues' and happy to borrow from the other side's policy toolbox when it suits - a strategy that has boxed in the German centre left for almost a decade.

For May, this manifesto and indeed the election, is not about policy so much as persuading the British public that whatever the problem, she is the leader to tackle it. May is aiming firmly to be the Prime Minister of the middle, calculating that she has the absolute power to take her party with her, and will win a new majority big enough to keep her - and her party - there.