

# Comparison of political ideologies in the uk



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**‘ Despite their different roots, the three main parties in Britain are now in broad ideological agreement’**

## **Introduction**

Since the 1997 election victory of Labour commentators and academics have repeatedly said that there is now little ideological difference between the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives. This is based on the belief that although there are policy differences between the three, there is now a broad consensus in issues such as the economy and public services where previously there were clear ideological divides. <sup>[1]</sup> Recently however as a result of the global financial crisis, the parties have presented very different policies for economic recovery which reflect their ideological roots. Is this an indication that all three parties have reverted back to their ideological foundations, or does their still remain a broad ideological agreement between the three parties of Government?

This essay will first briefly examine the party's historical and ideological roots, looking at the central principles which have defined the parties. We will look at the main ideological differences between the three up to 1997. In our second Chapter we will examine the evidence indicating that the three parties are in broad ideological agreement, firstly looking at how the three came to be in such agreement, as well as pointing out the similarities and common points of the three parties since 1997. In our final Chapter we will advance the argument that the recent economic crises has brought an end to the ideological agreement of the three parties, and that by putting forward three very different economic policies the parties have to some extent returned to their ideological roots.

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## Chapter One

The Labour party roots go back to the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, made up primarily of union members and left wing groups like the Fabians Society. [2] It was and remained, certainly until 1994, a party that represented the interests of the trade unions, its main financial backers to this day, and the working classes. Although it formed several Governments in the 1920s, it was the Labour Government of 1945 which best represents Labour's ideology in practice. [3] The commitment to nationalisation, the creation of the NHS and the extension of the welfare State defined Labour ideology till the early 1990s. The idea that the State could and should intervene in and play a part in Society for the good of the nation, and regulate the excesses of Capitalism contrasted sharply with the traditional Tory ideology of free market, laissez faire policies where the State played a much smaller role. Labour ideology and policies gradually became part of the mainstream political world, as today the NHS and other " Socialist" institutions are accepted as necessary and successful by even the most right wing politicians.

The Conservative Party has its roots in the late seventeenth Century, traditionally the party of the Aristocracy and the Business Elite of Britain, the Conservatives have adapted their ideology and policies over the years to adapt to changing times and circumstances, however in the Twentieth Century they can be said to have several core principles despite the various factions and different types of Tories that have existed within the party. [4] Traditional Conservative ideology believes in law and order, a limited Government role in the economy and society, low taxes, continuity and

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family values. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 radically changed Conservative ideology, leading it to promote monetarism and a free market program of privatisation, leading to rapid growth but increasing the gap between rich and poor and shifting the landscape of what was accepted as the mainstream to the right in social and economic terms. Conservative ideology can perhaps be encapsulated as giving power to individuals to participate in economy and society, whilst accepting that there will be inequality and claiming that an individuals actions rather than Society determines their opportunities and outcomes. <sup>[5]</sup>

Although the Liberal Democrats have only existed since 1988, they can trace the roots back to the Liberal Party that existed from around 1846. <sup>[6]</sup> The Liberal Democrats do not have as firm an ideology as Labour or the Conservatives, but they can be broadly defined as believing in individual freedom in social issues, such as drugs and sexuality, socialist policies regarding education and welfare, a pro European stance and a general anti war ideology. One of the pillars of Liberal Democrat ideology has always been higher taxes to pay for increased investment in education and health, although the new leader Nick Clegg has recently made lower taxes for lower income groups a central policy in the re-branding of the Liberal Democrats.

## **Chapter Two**

The turning point for the broad ideological agreement of the three parties came with the election of Tony Blair to the Labour party leadership in 1994. In order to make Labour electable Blair set out to change much of the Labour ideology which voters clearly believed was too left wing, specifically its

commitment to nationalisation and its policy of higher taxes and public expenditure. <sup>[7]</sup> He shifted Labour from being a left wing party to being more centre left. The change worked, and New Labour was elected in a landslide victory in 1997. Since this time there has existed the broad ideological agreement of the three parties on the central issues of Government, most notably the promotion of free market policies and a commitment to economic growth over the redistribution of wealth. The Conservatives did shift to the right on issues such immigration, crime and social policies, but remained committed to the free market policies that were now being pursued by the Labour Government. <sup>[8]</sup> This ideological convergence is not a solely British event. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union many left wing parties in the West, and in Eastern Europe, have gradually abandoned their Socialist roots and principles, accepting the free market as the only viable way in which a State can achieve sustainable economic growth and future prosperity.

It is not just the Labour party which has adjusted its policies and ideology to conform to the new global economic consensus. The Liberal Democrats recently abandoned their commitment to higher taxes, stating that if elected they would reduce taxes for those on low incomes, a significant swing to the centre. On many issues the Liberal Democrats have also shifted to the centre ground, although they are certainly left wing on social issues, such as law and order and drug policy, the Liberal Democrats economic policy remains committed to free market policies and a limited role for the State in Society.

<sup>[9]</sup> This is not a recent development for the Liberal Democrats, who have long

presented themselves as a moderate, centrist party often in stark contrast to the ideological inflexibility of Labour and the Conservatives. <sup>[10]</sup>

Although Labour has certainly moved to the right, abandoning its foundational principles regarding nationalisation and the redistribution of wealth, the Conservative Party itself has also been forced to adjust its policies, moving into the centre ground from its increasingly right wing position under the leadership of Michael Howard. <sup>[11]</sup> Following several election defeats the Conservative Party decided to match Labour spending plans, stating that if elected they would not cut taxes, and would continue to invest heavily in health and education. Does this commitment indicate that the parties share an increasingly Socialist ideology in regards to public services? No, as the ideological commitment to free market economy remains, as does the commitment to economic growth over equality, however this is matched by higher spending in institutions like the NHS and schools, which are seen as assisting economic growth by training the future workforce and providing for its medical needs.

On all the major ideological issues then it would appear that there is a broad consensus. On Law and Order, all parties compete to sound the toughest, promising harsher sentences, more prisons and more police. On the welfare State all three parties have policies to decrease those on unemployment benefit, reform welfare and cut payments to the long term unemployed. Before the economic crisis, privatisation was accepted as necessary, the free market was sacred and any party suggesting a return to the days of the State planning the economy or controlling prices would have been

committing political suicide. In summing up then, whilst all three parties had different policies, styles and approaches, there existed a broad ideological agreement between the three that any future Government should minimise its direct role in the economy, should not intervene in the free market or over-regulate but at the same time should be committed to public services. As we will demonstrate in the next chapter however, the recent economic crisis has led to many predicting that the era of ideological agreement has now passed.

### **Chapter Three**

In 2008 an economic crisis which started in the United States quickly spread throughout the world. Several large British banks, such as Northern Rock and HBOS, risked going bankrupt, so an unprecedented nationalisation of the banks by the British Government went ahead, similar nationalisations also went ahead in the USA and other European Countries. <sup>[12]</sup> The Government, in a move which many would have thought impossible months before, gave billions in taxpayer's money to the banks in order to keep the economy moving. The Government now plans to borrow heavily and play a more direct role in the economy, although this is to support Capitalist institutions the Labour Party is seemingly moving back towards its Socialist roots, propping up failing industries to save jobs, putting taxpayer's money into the economy and even considering joining the Euro. <sup>[13]</sup> The Conservatives however have opposed this move, and have drawn up radically different, ideologically opposed economic plans which favour a cut in public spending, and a continued commitment to Government not directly putting cash into the economy to prop up failing businesses. <sup>[14]</sup>

Both parties have been returning to their ideological roots since the crisis began. The Conservatives have claimed that Government spending and high taxes are the problem; although they have condemned banker's greed they continue to support de-regulation, the free market and the creation of wealth over policies of regulation and equality. Their recent welfare policies reflect their ideological beginnings, promoting individualism, responsibility and the family and marriage as the primary means to tackle poverty. Labour has found a renewed self confidence in traditional left wing policies, Ministers talk of a renewed effort to tackle social inequality, of distributing wealth and tackling the huge gap between rich and poor that exists in British Society today. The era of Labour tax and spend seems to be re-appearing, and although the old left and the trade unions have not taken over the party, there has been a definite ideological break from the centre ground and a renewed belief in the power of the State to intervene positively in the economy and society. The Liberal Democrats look set to take their traditional role as the moderate centre party, positioning themselves between the ideologically separated dominant parties.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has demonstrated that as far back as 1994 there has existed a broad ideological consensus between the three main UK parties. Although there were differences in policy, with the Conservatives venturing to the right in issues of immigration and Europe, there has been agreement about the role that Government should play in the economy and the role of the free market in generating wealth. The recent economic crisis has for the first time in over a decade, threatened the long term future of that agreement, as the



two main parties return to their ideological roots and the Liberal Democrats position themselves as the party of moderation and social reform.

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### Footnotes

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[4] McCormick, John " Contemporary Britain" (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007, p. 134)

[5] Jones, Bill " Politics UK" (Harlow, Pearson, Longman, London, 2006, pp. 21-33)

[6] Bentley, Roy " British Politics in Focus" (Causeway Press, Ormskirk, 2006) p. 163

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[10] Liberal Democrats - UK Politics - accessed 01/12/2008 [http://www.solarnavigator.net/embassies/liberal\\_democrat\\_party\\_politics.htm](http://www.solarnavigator.net/embassies/liberal_democrat_party_politics.htm)

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