

Let Freedom Prevail!

Liam Fox

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Dr Liam Fox has been the Member of Parliament for Woodspring since April 1992 and in the last Conservative Government he was Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1996 until the 1997 election.

Since 1997 he has been a member of the Shadow Cabinet and served as Opposition Front Bench Spokesman on Constitutional Affairs and Shadow Secretary of State for Health. In the last Parliament he was Co-Chairman of the Conservative Party and is now Shadow Foreign Secretary. Amongst his Politeia publications are *Holding Our Judges to Account* (September 1999) and *Conservatism for the Future* (March 2004).

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As the country looks ahead to the new Parliament, the lessons of the past – and the general election – will, with time and objective analysis, become clear. But one point is evident: no opposition can easily fight an election against the backdrop of an economy perceived – rightly or wrongly – to be in a benevolent state. The Conservative party should therefore avoid an instant judgement, and one lacking the perspective of time, as it prepares for the next Parliament and the future.

There is, however, one general point to be made. Looking back over recent weeks and months it seems that although the Conservative party succeeded in selling its message, winning 32 per cent of votes cast to Labour's 35 per cent, it did not succeed itself. To use the terms familiar to marketing, while it succeeded in selling the product, that success did not extend to the brand. In other words, people supported our policy agenda and often used our own language to describe their views when we spoke to them. But they were not yet willing to support us as a party. The young families who were turning away from the Government could not yet clearly see how the Conservatives would offer a brighter future for their children. We now need to establish the Conservative brand - not just what we would do, but why we would do it.

As we consider the way forward, one thought should carry considerable weight. We have successfully avoided coalition politics in this country for decades, because we have been successful in maintaining broad internal coalitions within the two major parties. In the Conservative party we have seen just how powerful that coalition can be. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher, Leon Brittan, Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson could not be described as political soulmates. Yet working in tandem, they created a synergy which, in turn, led

to bold and strong government. In too many of the following years, we saw the opposite trend. Anything which damages this internal coalition, be it factionalism or an obsession with single issues, will not only weaken the party and diminish our chances of returning to office, but is also likely to spawn minority or single - issue parties which will make it more difficult for us to obtain an outright majority.

The coalition that is the Conservative party is drawn from different political traditions, reflecting the many strands of political thought in this country, where liberty with freedom under the law have been paramount. In the words of a previous Conservative leader, we have stood up against the tyrant throughout the ages. These strands have fitted and been fitted into the contemporary framework of the day. The party is at its strongest when it is best able to match the different traditions to the contemporary political landscape. It is this skill which has enabled the Conservative party to adapt and survive better than any other party in widely changing social circumstances. So it is a prerequisite that we understand the nature of the society in which we live: a largely urban society, more *EastEnders* than *Archers*, spread across town and country from Islington to Inverness. Unless we take account of these influences, we will find ourselves politically becalmed. I take considerable pleasure in the greater diversity of our candidates at the General Election, doubly so because they got there on their own merits, not as a result of an artificial positive discrimination.

What is it that makes the Conservative party different to the other political parties, given that politicians tend to begin their political life with the

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same aims – a sincere desire to make the world better? To begin with, the similarity ends there. Labour politicians believe, instinctively and philosophically, that the best way to make the world a better place is through active government. They believe that every social problem has a government solution. They believe that through government action, they can create the perfect society in which everyone is wealthy, healthy and happy. This means that, in theory and in practice, they need a bigger state and higher public spending to provide their ideal society. How far such a view is an idealistic one, and how far it is a vain aspiration, remains a matter of political debate. For me, it is vain and utopian, and the vanity comes at a price. The price is more taxes and less personal responsibility. This might be acceptable if it worked. But we know that it doesn't. We know that the less responsibility people have, often the worse they behave, for they have little encouragement to behave altruistically or to take initiatives to help themselves and others. And we know that the opposite is also true.

There is much talk about whether the Conservative party should be more libertarian or more authoritarian. An artificial and superficial debate between “modernisers” and “traditionalists” has been played out in the media. What is in fact required is a balance between the different strands of the Conservative tradition. We need to begin with a clear definition of the role of the state and the role of the individual. Freedom is the key. Never let us underestimate the importance of individuals exercising to the maximum degree possible their personal liberty. The tradition of individual liberty has been one of the most important tenets of British political history, and has been one of the defining

characteristics of Conservative political thought in the past century.

Individual freedom makes for diversity. Diversity breeds innovation and innovation breeds excellence. That is why authoritarian states fail. But so do chaotic and anarchic states. In other words, for individual freedom to flourish effectively, it needs to exist within a framework of safety and security. Ideally the state should do only the things that only the state can do. The alternative is what I have described as the Intruder State*. Every generation has its dragon to slay. Previous generations have had communism, inflation and the trade unions. Our dragon is the Intruder State, interfering in every nook and cranny of our lives, driving us towards the “pocket money society” in which individuals keep less and less of their money, while the state makes more and more decisions on their behalf. In our society, the role of the state and the role of the individual have become dangerously confused. Rather than an enabling framework, we have increasingly seen an entrapping web.

Consider our economy. If, as happened last year, average incomes are falling during a time of economic growth, it is self-evident that the government is taking too much money in tax out of people’s pockets. If, as happened last year, the number of jobs in the private sector is shrinking while the number of jobs in the public sector is expanding, then it is self-evident that the natural enterprise of people is being suppressed and supplanted by a dangerously overblown state. If the wealth-producing sector continues to shrink while the wealth-consuming sector expands, the result will be simply incompatible with increasing prosperity.

*Liam Fox, *Conservatism for the Future* (2004)

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So, the first test to apply to any proposal, whether now in opposition or when we come to government, is whether it increases or decreases the size of the state.

We have an even more illiberal state when it comes to providing public services. I didn't come into politics because I believe Conservatives can run public services more efficiently than socialists. I don't believe politicians should be running them at all. The state should guarantee everyone access to good health care, a good education and a system which brings security in retirement. But rather than creating an enabling framework which guarantees these things, the state has become, or seeks to become, a monopoly provider. Of course it is very important to make sure that Conservative policy aims, and is seen to aim, to raise the standard of all services for everyone (not just as a means of helping the better off to escape a flawed system) by greater freedom to provide and greater freedom to choose. By contrast the two Labour leaders, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, appear condescending to the British public, whom they treat as incapable of making the choices about their own public services, choices that are taken for granted in France or Germany. Give the British people more freedom, and more excellence will surely follow.

Conservatives sometimes make the mistake of talking about freedom purely as an abstract concept, a good in itself whose benefits are self-evident and require no further explanation. While freedom should be seen as an end in itself, it is also vital to the daily life of individuals, empowering them to take the important decisions about how their lives are shaped. Freedom therefore makes for empowerment. It offers the best and brightest hope

for all our citizens and it offers particular hope for those in our society who have least freedom today. As Conservatives, we must argue passionately for freedom. But we must also explain, clearly and patiently, why we do so. We should never take it for granted that people understand why freedom works. We must explain why it works. And why the converse fails.

The poorest communities have not been liberated by their dependence on an expanding welfare state. Rather, the welfare state as it has developed has created dependency and poverty traps. Look no further than the benefits or pensions systems. Means-testing continues to drive ever larger proportions of people into poverty and means-tested benefits. The numbers on MIG/Pension Credit, the means-tested benefit, has soared from under 2 million in the early 1990s to an estimate of almost 3 million in 2005. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that already 52 per cent of all pensioners are in households eligible for means-tested Pension Credit. That figure will rise to 73 per cent by 2025 and 82 per cent by 2050*. Public services cannot be improved simply by throwing public money at them. Many of those with the poorest quality of life have lived for decades in one-party Labour fiefdoms. Nobody would choose to live in poverty. Nobody would choose a failing school. Nobody would choose a life of dependence. But it's not a coincidence that many of those who find themselves in this predicament are there because of the failure of socialist policy.

Conservatives believe that freedom, while an end in itself, offers practical, tangible solutions to poverty, to failing public services, and to people trapped in a life of dependence. It also allows the talented to

*Paul Thornton et al, *The Pensions Predicament: Means Testing, the Savings Trap and the Labour Market* (2004)

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excel and prosper. We believe in trusting human nature, and we prefer people to have the freedom to make their own decisions – including the freedom to fail – rather than having the state impose its mistakes on the individual in every area of policy vital to daily life. We understand that people everywhere want the same basic things for themselves and their family – to be healthy, wealthy and happy. They want a good education for their children, the freedom to work hard and reap the rewards of hard work, good healthcare, the opportunity to save without penalty for the rainy day and to have dignity in retirement. And we have sufficient faith in human nature to believe that, by and large, if people are free to pursue these aims, they will achieve them, and behave in ways that benefit themselves and society at the same time.

But there is a necessary corollary to greater freedom – the encouragement of greater individual responsibility. Allowing people to exercise maximum responsibility within their own natural constraints is not only a noble ideal. It is the bedrock of social stability. Conversely the more intrusive the state, the easier it is for individuals to abdicate their personal responsibility. This is not only detrimental to self-esteem and self-reliance but gradually leads to the erosion of the conventions, traditions and institutions which underpin our liberty. So, the second test we have to apply to any proposal is whether it reinforces or diminishes personal responsibility.

Of course, not everyone is able to exercise the same level of individual responsibility and we must never forget Churchill's safety net. He pioneered the great schemes of the 20th century for cover for income lost through sickness, unemployment, bereavement and retirement, with Lloyd George, Chamberlain and Beveridge. The aim must be a supportive

society, ready to lend a helping hand to the genuinely needy or guidance to the aspirational. We know that it is only in the supportive society that people can grow to their full potential, living up to the responsibilities imposed by freedom.

So we believe, at one and the same time, in free markets, free choice, freedom of lifestyle, freedom of speech, freedom from over-mighty government, the neighbourly society and the encouragement of social cohesion.

Sadly, we live today in a country which is over-endowed with government and under-endowed with social cohesion. We live in a country in which individual liberty is too often, in practice, curtailed by big government. But we also live in a country in which those who could exercise greater personal responsibility are let down by a society that is not supportive enough.

We do not need to invent economic theory. We know that free markets, unencumbered by excessive regulation or taxation, already work. We know that greater freedom and the exercise of personal responsibility are the best defence against an intrusive oppressive nanny state. So we need a Conservative party whose instincts are economically conservative and socially liberal, in tune with the diversity and aspirations of Britain in the 21st century.

We must ensure that the rich traditions of British Conservatism resonate with all those of our countrymen and women who seek something better. Every parent who aspires to something better for their children should see in the Conservatives a future of opportunity, prosperity and freedom. Every young man or woman trying to set up a small

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business, employing their own talents and labour, should see the Conservative party as their natural ally. Every taxpayer should know instinctively that Conservatives will keep the size of government in check and maximise the potential of society by maximising the potential of every individual citizen.

The Conservative Party, says Dr Liam Fox in Politeia's *Spring Address*, is above all, the party of freedom. For the future it must, once again, champion the small state and individual freedom in tune with the instincts of today. The Labour Government has intruded more and more on people's lives, taking an ever greater share of their earnings, and the Conservative Party should reassert itself as the party of the smaller state. In health and education, the state should guarantee everyone access to good healthcare and education and provide the best framework for pensions and security in retirement. But free markets, free choice, freedom of lifestyle, freedom of speech, freedom from over-mighty government, must be balanced by a growing sense of responsibility to others and serve as the watchwords for the future.

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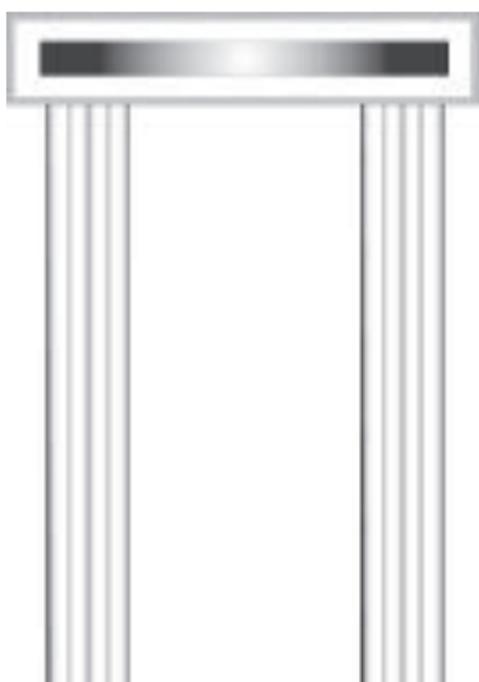
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Liam Fox

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