

Equality, croquet, Billy Bragg and me

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There is no policy he is not willing to shed in order to win back voters. But is David Cameron's proclaimed shift to the centre ground genuine? **Martin Bright** and **John Kampfner** put the Conservative leader to the test

David Cameron is taller than one might think. So is Tony Blair. Cameron is comfortable with his carefully crafted image. So is Blair. Or at least he was. Cameron is impressively confident, unless knocked off his stride. So is . . .

The comparisons between 2006 cuddly Conservatism and 1996 new Labour have been made. They annoy the Tory leader, but the truth often does. Cameron's shift to the centre ground of British politics has coincided with a series of Labour scandals that has left the government reeling. Until May's local elections, Cameron failed to get any real traction in the polls, but a recent survey gave him the first ten-point Tory lead since before John Major's election victory of 1992.

To ease him in gently, we talk about Labour's travails. He feigns a lack of interest. "It's difficult enough running one party without working out who should run the other one." He admits, "I prefer mayhem in the Labour Party to organisation, it's true", but quickly denies this influenced his decision to back Blair on schools reform, just to keep the Prime Minister there, adrift, and his party floundering. "I think what the Education Bill process shows is that, of the two major parties, the Conservative Party is united in favour of reform and the Labour Party is divided and incapable of delivering reform without our help." He gives the impression that he is keen to get stuck into Gordon Brown. "I just want to get on with the main contest. We are in the pre-game now and I'd rather we got on with it."

We suggest that someone looking at his list of records for *Desert Island Discs* might mistake him for a 1980s lefty: The Smiths, Bob Dylan, REM. The only artist missing who would make the list complete is Billy Bragg. As it happens, he reveals that Bragg's "A New England" nearly made the list (although he prefers the Kirsty MacColl version). "It was difficult, but you're only allowed eight records: not inappropriate for a desert island disc, don't you think?" Perhaps, but whether the best-known hit of a socialist singer-songwriter is an appropriate choice for a future Tory PM is another matter. "This idea that you can't like the music of people who don't agree with you politically would kind of limit your musical choices a bit."

Has he ever been tempted by socialism itself? "Certainly not," he harrumphs, with the first real sign of old Tory bluster. "When I grew up in the 1980s, there was a big gulf between left and right. You were either for CND or Nato, privatisation or state ownership of industry, cutting taxes and setting people free or high rates of marginal tax, for the trade unions or for trade union reform. It seemed to me we made a choice on those sorts of grounds."

So where is the clear divide now, when Blair could easily lead a Conservative Party defined in those terms? Cameron suggests serious differences on regional assemblies ("profoundly un-Conservative"), passing further powers to Brussels ("Blair's inclination is all in that direction") and tax and public spending, where Blair has failed to do the "sensible centre-right thing" of using the proceeds of growth to reduce tax as well as increase spending in the public services.

Stripped of the rhetoric, that does not seem to add up to much of a gulf in world-views. Cameron insists that the distinction is fundamental: "The Conservative Party is about trusting people, and the Labour Party, or the sort of Brownite Labour Party, is about state responsibility and about not trusting people."

He is most comfortable with generalities such as these. The approach has so far served him well. But the contradictions in Cameron's position are not hard to find. He is an avowed admirer of Blair and yet, when pressed on Labour's legacy, he mentions Bank of England independence and increased investment in public services, both of which are usually viewed as Brown contributions. Cameron insists: "As far as I'm concerned, they've been doing a job share all along. I mean, I don't think you can differentiate like that."

If so, why has he spent so much energy suggesting Brown is ideologically old Labour? Cameron ignores the question and reiterates his intention to drag the Conservative Party into the mainstream of British politics. The inconsistencies are brushed aside with what has been best described as "breeding and confidence". Cameron, like Blair before him, has the natural ease of someone who believes he was born to govern.

On one crucial point of apparent agreement with Blair, Iraq, Cameron is less sure of his ground. He is far more careful than his predecessor, Michael Howard, who first called Blair a liar in the pages of this magazine. It has become axiomatic among Conservative strategists that their poster during the 2005 election campaign, which made the same claim, was a disaster. Insiders have described it as a defining moment for the Cameroons, when they realised that, however deeply the public distrusted the PM, they did not appreciate the Tories - the very same Tories who filed in behind Blair during the crucial Commons vote in March 2003 - telling them as much.

Instead, Cameron chooses his words carefully: "The Prime Minister didn't present an accurate picture to the House of Commons. Where the intelligence said the evidence of WMD was 'sporadic and patchy', he said it was 'compelling and detailed'. Now, you've got to be quite a linguistic philosopher to make 'sporadic and patchy' add up to 'comprehensive and compelling'. But I don't see much merit in going back over this, really." Why not? "I don't think he gave a wholly truthful picture." He stops himself. "There's nothing worth . . . I mean Blair's going now. In what is it, months?" We tell him we're not entirely sure. Maybe he knows something we don't. "Well, I don't know. It could be, I suppose, a lot of months."

Cameron suggests that, like Brown, he would make it a requirement of a future prime minister to provide a full parliamentary vote before committing British forces to war. We ask him to set out his views on the principles of military intervention. He directs us to a new foreign policy third way. "I'm a combination of someone who has that Conservative, practical, slightly sceptical questioning approach to international affairs, but with a good dose of liberal internationalism."

The Tory leader believes that gradually he is countering accusations of a policy vacuum. The six policy groups he set up - on

social justice, economic competitiveness, quality of life, public services, national and international security and globalisation - have provided him with a clever means of developing policy at arm's length from his own, reluctant, party. It allows him to pick and mix the policies he wishes without being pushed into early manifesto commitments. The flow of policy ideas works both ways. In the week of the interview, Cameron suggested he would be in favour, in principle, of legalised "shooting galleries" for heroin addicts, an idea he was keen for his social justice policy group to consider. "Anything that helps get addicts off the streets is worth looking at," he says.

Cameron has always been a progressive on drugs. He was one of the most open-minded MPs on the home affairs select committee, on which he served before becoming shadow education secretary in 2005, and he clearly feels a deep personal commitment to developing a more liberal approach to addiction than is traditional within his party. He hopes the Tories are coming round to his view on the issue: "People in the Conservative Party are very realistic about the problem of drugs. They know we have had a succession of very tough-sounding measures that haven't really delivered, and I think they know that drug-related crime is a huge percentage of crime, and treatment seems to me to be step one of the whole process."

He has been challenged on his own drug use, and has refused to talk about it. But we were curious to know his thoughts on why the press had been so gentle on him during the leadership campaign after the London *Evening Standard* claimed that a close relative had been affected by drugs. Was it deference or common decency, we wondered? It was the one moment in the interview when Cameron looked most uncertain. Clearly upset, he asked to take the discussion off the record, which we agreed to do as he seemed so affected by the reference to the relative. After trying to answer the question a second time, for the record, he eventually said discussing the matter made him "jam up". An aide later explained that it was the one area of his life that he considered off-limits.

Whatever the personal reasons, Cameron has been principled in arguing for a real debate over classification, treatment and criminalisation. Despite pressure to distance himself from the 2002 Home Affairs report which recommended, among other things, downgrading the classification of ecstasy, he has stuck to his line. At the time, he issued a statement saying: "We need to get away from entrenched positions and try to reduce the harm that drugs do both to users and society at large." This has remained his view.

It is not so easy to be convinced by the U-turn he plans for his party over public sector workers. After two decades of open hostility from Conservative and Labour governments, vying to outdo each other in the demonisation of social workers, probation officers and teachers, Cameron declares: "The war is over."

We ask him to elaborate. "There have been two wars. There's been a war of words about waste and bureaucracy from the right, which sometimes has given an impression that we don't value public service, when we do. And there has been a real war of initiatives and a blizzard of instructions over the past nine years [from Labour] which in so many ways hasn't delivered the sort of improvements that people want to see. What is required is neither of those two things, but actually trusting the professionals . . . and localising and devolving public services. The good thing about it is it's profoundly Conservative." Really? "There's a great ethos of public service in this country and that is something to be celebrated and nurtured and learned from."

And then it happens, he uses the word Blair rarely allows to pass his lips: equality. "The Conservative Party under my leadership is going to be genuinely committed to trusting public servants . . . so we can deliver what we really want, which is a quality of service for everyone and equality of service for everyone."

He uses the example of his son, Ivan, who was born with cerebral palsy, to illustrate his point (this is an area of his family life he has never been shy about discussing). "I've got a disabled son and in London we get several nights a week of care; you move to another part of the country, you get several hours of care a week. What there ought to be for families with disabled children is a sense of what your entitlement is if you're helping to look after a disabled child."

But he goes further still. Not content with showing his credentials as an egalitarian, Cameron commits himself to redistribution, a word even Brown finds difficult to utter. He says he fully backed Oliver Letwin's comments to the *Daily Telegraph* last December saying that redistribution should be the Conservative Party's goal. "I thought Oliver got an unfair press," he says. "He was saying something that was blindingly obvious: any party that accepts some sort of progressive tax system is in favour of redistribution. That's a very sensible thing to say."

Is he relaxed about the wealth gap that has widened in most of the Labour years in power? Cameron - unwittingly, it seems - uses another Blairism. "My view is that the greatest concern we should have is not the gap between David Beckham's wages on the one hand, and someone on benefits on the other." So he is just as relaxed as Labour is about the top 1 per cent paying no more than 40 per cent in income tax? "I don't think making the top 1 per cent richest poorer makes the 10 per cent poorest richer."

It says something when a Tory leader goes out of his way to embrace equality, redistribution and Billy Bragg. To conclude, we pose a series of rapid-fire questions. We begin by asking for his opinion on this magazine's founders, Beatrice and Sidney Webb. "When they went to Russia under Stalin, they produced a book called *Soviet Communism: a new civilisation?* When they produced the second edition, they removed the question mark, which I think must be the worst punctuation mistake in history." Not bad for an off-the-cuff response. Next, Keats versus Dylan. "I think Bob Dylan is a fantastic poet and I spend more time with his poetry than Keats's."

Then comes the Prescott question. Does Cameron like croquet? "I have played croquet a lot because my parents liked it. I'm sure there are probably pictures I can find you." Glyndebourne? "I've been once. I went to see *The Magic Flute*. But I'm not a great opera fan. It's very beautiful and all that, but there's a long performance to get around." His favourite piece of Cockney rhyming slang? Awkward, very long, silence. We sit there. We do not interrupt or help him out. "I'm trying to think of one that still makes me laugh, ummm." He whispers, "Apples and pears", and promises to get back to us on that.

And finally, is posh back in fashion? "I have never tried to hide that my parents gave me a wonderful start and I'm very grateful for that." But he is convinced that his family money and Eton and Oxford background are no bars to his ambition to lead the country. "One of the great things about Britain is that it matters more where you are going than where you come from."

In fact, nothing could be less true, even after nine years of a Labour government.

How the Tories could win

Despite gaining 38 seats at the last election, the Conservatives trail Labour by 198 to 356 seats. They require an estimated 7 per cent swing to secure an overall Commons majority. A swing of 1.5 per cent could produce a hung parliament. A recent YouGov poll of Tory members shows that only 15 per cent would support a Conservative/ Lib Dem coalition, while 3 per cent would back a Conservative/ Labour coalition.

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