
Original Article

The role of small ‘c’ Christianity in the Conservative Party since the 1990s

Martin Monahan

School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.

Abstract Though not dominant, the prominence of Christianity in the forming of Conservative party policy has increased since the 1990s – the touchstone organisation for this rise is the Conservative Christian Fellowship. Using interviews with mid- and elite-level actors, and policy documents, this article traces the activity of small ‘c’ Christianity in the Conservative party under the leaderships of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, in the forming of the Centre for Social Justice and, in Cameron’s early leadership around social justice policy. It is argued that Christianity became a minor but important influence within a party undergoing a period of uncertainty after the election defeat of 1997. Key to this analysis is the understanding that parties cannot be easily changed by leaders alone; rather change in policy emerges, in part, from mid-level actors before filtering up to the leadership.

British Politics advance online publication, 28 September 2015; doi:10.1057/bp.2015.43

Keywords: Christianity; Conservative Party; Conservative Christian Fellowship; Centre for Social Justice

Introduction

Christianity has always played a role in the Conservative party; indeed, there is a long-established saying that the Church of England is the Tory party at prayer. But, as this article attempts to demonstrate, it is only in the last 15 years that a Christian religious belief has become a more explicit influence in the making of party policy. Christianity’s role in British politics is not domineering; rather it is nuanced and intermixed with secular beliefs. Therefore, to emphasise this aspect, this article refers to christianity in the lower case. This can be labelled small ‘c’ Christianity, to temper the notion that the role of Christianity in Conservative party’s policy making has become overbearing. The argument presented here is that the prominence of christianity has increased as a result of Christians within the party becoming more organised during the post-1997 era. On the basis of



interviews with actors at various strategically important levels of the Party, and analysis of documents produced since the 1990s, this article maps the emergence of this new grouping and its influence on the generation of policy. It begins by looking at the origins of the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF), and its transition from a group with a low level of interest in influencing party policy to one with key contacts in the William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith (IDS) leaderships. The article goes on to examine the forming of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), the christian elements of its interests, and its interaction with the Cameron leadership. The progression of this christian grouping highlights how party policy change over time can be influenced by mid-level actors. The material presented here shows that policy is not always changed all of sudden by the leadership, but often filters up from below, especially from groups who have been looking elsewhere, in this case towards the Christian church, for new ideas.

Christianity and the Party in the 1980s and 1990s

Christianity has always played a part in Conservative identity, both for many of its individual members and for the party as a whole. Recent work on Margaret Thatcher (Filby, 2015), highlights a prime minister deeply grounded in issues of faith that directed her work. Filby writes (2015, p. 7): ‘... in 1979, unbeknownst to most of the public at the time, Britain had elected its most religious prime minister since William Gladstone’. Filby provides a detailed account of Thatcher’s religious motivation, rhetorical borrowings and spiritual sustenance. But the operative word from Filby is, of course, ‘unbeknownst’. Christianity here is a source of inner reflection. One sees similar inner Christian belief in many political figures; however, what remains common to most is that these were personal faiths, that drove a personal sense of politics. For example, Major (2010, p. 195) writes in his autobiography: ‘I was mortally embarrassed to be interviewed about my religious faith ... My religion is a private matter. I do not flaunt it ... I found the questions too personal to answer without seeming sanctimonious, and turned my answers to substantive issues’. These personal faiths did not lead to the creation of Christian policy networks in the party at the mid and low levels of the party structure. We do not see think tanks, or desks at Conservative Central Office, or policy reports, or public consultations, occurring with a specific Christian focus. Indeed, as Filby writes (2015, pp. 3–15) what one sees in the 1970s and 1980s more broadly in all political parties and the country as a whole is increasing secularisation of speech and attitudes.

In the mid 1990s, however, there was a general change in attitude towards the role of faith in public life. As Farnell (2009, p. 184) writes:

The policy discourse surrounding community involvement has a long history. However, it was only in the 1990s that this ‘community’ focus extended to the



participation of people identifying by their religion ... [The attitude is] that faith groups have resources and should be networked appropriately.

Farnell identifies moves by central government, particularly advocated by New Labour after 1997, to reach out to faith-based groups of all religions. Christianity had shifted by this point from being a general British cultural habit to a narrower identity. A specific political grouping had emerged that perviously would have been indistinguishable from the general population. As we will see, this new grouping consisted of individuals wanting to influence policy along christian lines. The idea that one's politics should grow out of one's faith-gained traction; and once a critical amount of individuals began to adopt this view, networks began to form. So it is no surprise that Conservatives should have felt the ripples of this broader change; at first informally and then formally, utilising the established organisational roots of the party.

The Emergence of the CCF

The touchstone organisation for the rise of christianity in the Party is the CCF, formed in December 1990 (CCF, 2000) by two students at Exeter University, Tim Montgomerie (who went on to be IDS's chief-of-staff) and David Burrowes (who became chairman of the CCF, an MP, and PPS to Francis Maude, Oliver Letwin and Owen Paterson). A former CCF Chairman, Gary Streeter MP (Interview, 2011) suggests that the emergence of the CCF was something quite new at the time:

It was a combination of people wishing to express their Christian faith in a political arena ... in a way that hadn't been done for 200 years, working it out as we were going; and 20 years ago people were saying: how could you possibly be a Christian and involved in politics, it doesn't quite fit. Now there is a much better understanding of faith and the public sphere.

Crucially, the CCF did not begin as a political organisation operating within the Party to further a policy agenda. For most of the 1990s, as it gained relative popularity within the parliamentary party and the party at large, it went largely unnoticed by the leadership; seen as a somewhat inert extra-parliamentary concern. According to Hordern (Interview, 2011), a former director of Renewing One Nation and a current Trustee of the CCF:

The CCF up to then [1997] had really existed for the encouragement of Christians within the party; it was more to do really with meeting together to pray, to share the faith. It was less focused on policy and ideas, and more focused on encouraging fellowship between Christians.

By the late 1990s, however, with the Party newly in opposition, the CCF, under the influential leadership of Tim Montgomerie, began to become more active in the arena of policy debate.

By the end of the 1990s, there began emerging within the CCF a sense of a particularly christian approach to policy that was increasingly at odds with the *status quo*. Examination of the pamphlet output of the CCF, or their quarterly magazine *Conservatism*, reveals a growing interest in specific policy recommendations in both editorials and articles, and an increased attempt to influence the terms of debate during this moment of institutional uncertainty following the landslide defeat of 1997 (see for example, Burkinshaw, 1999, 2000). According to Streeter (Interview, 2011) ‘Partly it was about wanting to bring an edge of compassion into the Conservative Party ... The 80s were very much about pounds, shillings and pence: it was possibly a little harsh’. In the first interim report of the CCF’s (1998) *Listening to Britain’s Churches* consultation (p. 3), the recommendation is made that ‘special help should be given to churches and other community-based initiatives that are either preventing or healing the effects of family tension’. The emphasis here is put on the need to restore local peculiarity and loyalty to local institutions (CCF, 1998, p. 13); and ‘how local, voluntary compassion ... can be strengthened and developed’ (CCF, 1998, p. 21), in particular when working with lower income groups. In a further report from the exercise, the CCF (2000, p. 4) list:

The ten principles of compassionate communities: 1. The existing social safety-net must be protected. 2. We must rise to the challenge of helping those that welfare is failing ... 10. Public policy must protect beneficiaries’ rights to a choice of welfare models but soft alternatives should be avoided in order to protect the independent sector’s efforts to rebuild sustainable behaviour.

These principles, and the report as a whole, would not have looked out of place in the Party’s 2010 manifesto: but at the time they presented a new area of policy emphasis that began to be mooted around mid-level policymakers.

However, it is important here to also note that ‘modernising’ changes in policy emphasis, moving towards a more beneficent form of Conservatism, were not the whole story of the CCF at the time. Notably, in regard to Labour’s plan to give age-of-consent parity to gay and straight sex, an anonymous editorial in the *Wilberforce Review* (1998, p. 9), the Fellowship’s in-house monthly magazine launched in 1992, calmly notes that ‘it is worth remembering ... American research suggests that paedophilia is three times more common amongst homosexuals [and] in the year to June 1997, 871 men died of AIDS in the UK because of homosexual intercourse’. One of the publicity successes of Cameron’s leadership of the party has been that this type of homophobic tone has almost wholly disappeared from Conservative *public* discourse.



The CCF Under Hague

The project known as *Listening to Britain's Churches*, 'took [the CFF] in a new direction' (Hordern, Interview 2011). This was the initiative that the CCF linked to William Hague's and Peter Lilley's more highly publicised *Listening to Britain* policy research exercise launched to renew policy after 1997. Over the coming years, *Listening to Britain's Churches* would prove to be influential on party policy. Franklin (Interview, 2011), a CCF member and part of the 2004 Howard Policy Unit, remarked that 'in the event that [Listening to Britain's Churches] turned out to be a rather better, rather more substantial piece of work than the main consultation'.

Bale (2010, p. 83) writes of the *Listening to Britain* research exercise that: '[Pollster] ICM's private research likewise suggested that ... [it] had "made absolutely no impact whatsoever" and was rapidly running out of steam'. This observation is certainly true of its immediate impact; however, its long-term impact was more significant, though largely hidden from general sight.

This early exercise, now somewhat faded in the memory of the Party, meant that mid- and low-level christian operators gained experience of organising, forming policy ideas from outside the Party hierarchy – or in some cases partially outside – and crucially it showed that small 'c' Christianity could be an organising factor, ideologically but also materially; that is to say, numerous social connections were made. The exercise looked at over a 100 charities (Hordern, 2011), people were introduced to others who were of a like mind on a more socially orientated Conservatism and networks began to emerge; networks that would have been unlikely to have emerged if directly administered by the leadership. As Hordern (2011) remarks, 'many of the people we went to see [for *Listening to Britain's Churches*], I knew them, because I had built up that knowledge over many years'. Thus, although a number of CCF members already possessed a font of previously untapped social capital, the exercise helped to release such agency – despite operating at lower levels of the institution – to generate policy and research that was new to the leadership of William Hague.

Under Hague, the CCF were, geographically at least, at the centre of Party power – Montgomerie and Hordern had a desk at the Conservative Central Office in Smith Square (Hordern, 2011), as directors of the *Renewing One Nation* team, launched in October 2000, which grew out of the *Listening* exercises and continued to advocate many of the same ideas (see *Renewing One Nation*, 2000, 2001). Notably, the team was initially funded by Lord Kalms outside of the Party's usual funding channels, and so they had a degree of autonomy from the need to produce immediate media-ready sound bites and policy lines, and were able to begin to think more broadly (Franklin, 2011). They had some influence under Hague, especially around family policy; a number of policy ideas appeared in the 2001 manifesto that were in keeping with CCF priorities around families, such as upwards of a £1000 married couple's tax allowance and increasing tax credits for those with a child under 5 years of age (see

Conservative Party, 2001). Ultimately their research and proposals, especially around localism, volunteering and charities, did not become a central part of policy emphasis, and did not feature prominently in the 2001 manifesto. Hillman (2011), Special Advisor to Willetts MP, revealed in an interview:

a big row about what the 2001 manifesto should look like. There was a big William Hague speech [in 1999]: *Come with me and I'll give you back your country*; so there was a discussion about how much it should be based on *that line* of argument ... Certainly, Tim Montgomerie had done a lot of good work by 2001 but it hadn't seeped upwards ... There was a conflict with the sort of views taken by the old more Thatcherite think-tanks, the Centre for Policy Studies, the IEA, the Adam Smith Institute, who were still quite influential, more influential than they are now; during the William Hague period they were still listened to.

But the importance here is not the immediate influence of Montgomerie and others on the Party leadership; it is their long-term influence on both the party leadership and the party membership – by this point they had gained a foothold within the party organisation and this is by far the most important factor in achieving long-term change. However, because they did not impact the Party at an elite media level, but rather initiated long-term mid-level processes, their importance has been downplayed (see for example, Bale, 2010; Dorey, 2011, who argue that little modernising of social justice policy began under Hague).

The CCF and the Leadership of IDS

After the 2001 election these CCF mid-level players remained when other more senior backroom figures exited (though Nick Wood, notably, stayed as press officer under IDS). The Renewing One Nation team kept their desk at CCO and were ready to advise the new leader IDS. It survived the change in leadership and provided continuity. At the mid-level of a party, the clock is rarely reset when a new leadership arrives. In many ways, and somewhat unintended at the time, one of Hague's significant contributions to change in the Party was the approval of the setting up of this small research group, a policy offshoot, in all but name, of the CCF. As Franklin (Interview, 2011) remarked: 'It [Renewing One Nation] is quite a foundational body, it was an incubator for lots of what would later come out of the CSJ [Centre for Social Justice]'. And it was the CSJ that would prove to be the most enduring achievement of this low-key movement that started in the late 1990s.

But first IDS had to take a famous journey to the Easterhouse estate in Glasgow, in January 2002. As a consequence of this visit, 'Helping the Vulnerable' became the title of the Party spring forum in March. As Smith (2003), a devout Catholic, said in his speech at the forum in Harrogate: 'Our agenda is so vital for people in vulnerable



communities like Easterhouse, Glasgow. I will never forget my visits to them'. The authenticity of IDS's Easterhouse conversion has remained moot – Bale (2010, p. 154) writes that 'some in the Party found it hard ... to believe that Duncan Smith's damascene discovery of poverty ... was anything but opportunistic'. However, we do not need to understand the event in primarily instrumental terms; and we should not label it as a spontaneous action by the leader, which was then imposed on the Party. Rather, it should be read as the next in a series of mid-level movements that had begun back with the CCF in the late 1990s. Read as such, it becomes more credible that the ever-building focus on issues of 'compassionate Conservatism' and social justice, which have been traced as beginning in the 1990s, should continue in this way.

IDS *may* have been moved by the poverty of Easterhouse; and simultaneously, he *may* have been tactically aware of electoral exigencies. Indeed, the constant negotiation between *beliefs* and *tactics* in the language of the leadership means that it is often difficult to unpick one from the other. Consequently, leaders are not always the clearest indicators of what an institution believes, if examined in isolation. Especially, when we consider that IDS was also preoccupied with more traditional right-wing policy around immigration and law and order. What is of greater interest than IDS's individual journey is that the means by which he expressed his new sympathy towards social justice, whereas still utilising policy and language that adhered to Tory sensibilities, did not appear suddenly in a great light. Rather, they appeared after a number of years of incremental change, which became emergent at the leadership level (if, ultimately, only temporarily) at this moment. We see that what enacts a change in policy is not only the leadership but, moreover, the lower levels of the party filtering up new ideas that make sense of the electoral environment *for* the leadership – and IDS at Easterhouse is a prime example of this filtering process.

There is Such a Thing as Society ...

In retrospect, the most significant policy text of this period – though in many ways it reads as much as a broad mission statement – was a collection of essays under the title *There is such a thing as society* – edited by Streeter (2002). It is, indeed, remarkable how many subsequently high profile ideas, and well-known phrases initially appear or at least collocate for the first time, in this text. It contains essays by prominent members of CCF, who articulate their social justice focus on policy alongside the traditional neo-liberal priorities. Streeter (2002, p. 5) writes that: 'Everyone knows that the party is for the aspirational, the high-fliers, and the entrepreneurs. That must remain true whilst shifting our focus, our resources and our language behind those less fortunate. Everyone matters'. Hordern (2002, pp. 151–152) writes of how; 'the solution [to promoting responsible fatherhood] lies in looking away from Whitehall and towards local communities. The last ten years have seen a flowering of family support services provided at a local level by a wide

range of statutory and voluntary organisations'. And Franklin and Malluk Bately (2002, p. 225) write, in a notable presaging of the language of the later 'Big Society', that 'public funding *per se* is not the problem', but that government must create 'funding mechanisms that empower donors, volunteers, providers and recipients'.

But this book is also notable for marking the early coming together of CCF originated thinking with other individuals who were not of the same grouping. As Franklin (Interview, 2011) remarked: 'A lot of the people involved in this *were* religiously inspired, though by no means all. Oliver Letwin is a self-described atheist; David Willetts an agonistic: but yes there is that Christian democratic element, that whole sort of Wilberforce legacy'. The christian element is crucial; but it also, ultimately, had to be transcended if the ideas being promulgated were to appeal widely in the Party and beyond, and not just be seen as the interests of a single group. Consequently, also included in *There is such a thing as society* is an essay by Letwin (2002, pp. 48–49) who, in a somewhat theoretical piece, links compassionate Conservatism and social justice policy to the core neo-liberal ideology of reducing the state and decentralisation: 'Interventions by the state often undermine multidimensional relationships', he writes. 'Only the renewal of community institutions offers vulnerable people a sustainable possibility of escaping from cycles of deprivation'. And Willetts (2002, p. 55), who is somewhat less severe on state reduction, continues to develop his ideas of civic Conservatism and public private co-operation, writing that: 'we have a responsibility to our fellow citizens and it includes a responsibility that can only be discharged *through effective public policy* as well as through personal and private action' (emphasis added). Finally, the book is given the imprimatur of the current leader at the time, IDS.

CCF Ideas are Presented to the Party

Soon after the publication of *There is such a thing as society*, IDS gave the CCF's 2002 annual keynote speech, known as 'the Wilberforce Address'. In his speech, IDS continued with the new policy emphasis of helping the vulnerable, while tying his agenda to more established Tory and Christian concerns around the preservation of the family unit. 'The most fundamental institution', said Duncan Smith (2010, p. 81), 'of any free and sustainable society is the family'. At the 2002 conference, International Development Shadow Caroline Spelman, a committed Christian and closely loyal to IDS, introduced the theme of 'There is such a thing as society ...' to the Party at large, a significant minority of whom, says Horder (2011), through the previous 5 year's work by the CCF and its offshoots, were familiar with her tone and receptive to it; but many others had yet to be convinced (see Bale, 2010, p. 164). One of the failures here was that the dominant message from the conference came from Theresa May's now famous 'Nasty party' speech, which was somewhat well-received by the public but met with a degree of resistance from the Party grassroots at a conference that was riven with disagreement on policy emphasis (see for an



account, White and Perkins, 2002). Interestingly, though the 'nasty' epithet is attributed to May, its use can be traced back to Cooper (2001, p. 18), who writes of the need to avoid policy, such as opposing the repeal of section 28, that perpetuated 'the common caricature of Conservatives as nasty and intolerant'. Cooper, former Head of Strategy at CCO under Hague, later became Cameron's Director of Political Strategy. The etymology of the 'nasty' label is only of small consequence: but it is indicative of how events attributed by the media and some academics to elite level actors can be traced to activity at a lower level.

IDS and Social Justice Policy

So, as can be seen, it was not the case (as has become the dominant narrative) that IDS was *emancipated* from the leadership, and embarked upon his interest in social justice policy largely after his removal, when he was out of the limelight. Dorey (2011, p. 177) typifies this conventional view when he writes:

The other key progenitor of a new mode of Conservatism prior to Cameron's election as Party Leader was Iain Duncan Smith, who, once he was freed from the constraints and responsibilities of being party leader, devoted himself to addressing poverty and social disadvantage.

This assessment underplays the importance of mid- and low-level christian actors, who were the real drivers of change around social justice policy in this period, in favour of work that is overly focused on IDS's failures. But his leadership was not characterised by a failure to champion new ideas; to view it that way is to wrongly imply that these 'modernising' ideas suddenly emerged with Cameron, which is empirically not the case. Once we recognise this, we are better able to identify the role of christian mid-level policymakers in this period. As Hillman (Interview, 2011) remarked:

People have this view of IDS that he was a terrible leader but now he's rehabilitated himself. But he did one very important thing as leader: he basically said that nothing we announce or do should ignore vulnerable people, and pretty much the edict of every press release, every speech was meant to talk about how our policies were meant to help vulnerable people.

Hayton and Heppell (2010, p. 8), who give IDS a fairer and more accurate assessment, evidence that one of the key examples of IDS's failure was his inability to join the competing modernising groups of the CCF and the metropolitans (based around the think tank Policy Exchange) that would form a key part of Cameronism:

The Hague era ... had witnessed the gradual embedding of a divide over social, sexual and morality-based politics. How this should be managed was an issue



when Duncan Smith faced a parliamentary division on the adoption of children by unmarried and same-sex couples in November 2002 ... Duncan Smith imposed a three-line whip and demanded the PCP endorse a strongly socially conservative position.

Eight MPs defied the whip, including Clarke and Portillo, and 35 abstained, whereas John Bercow resigned from the front bench. Bercow at the time was closely allied with the small progressive policy group 'C-change' – and produced, with Hillman (Interview, 2011), the group's only pamphlet, which was ultimately pulped before it was ever distributed. In a similar vein, in March 2003, IDS, along with seventy other Tory MPs, voted for an amendment that opposed the repeal of Section 28. Thirty Tory MPs voted against the amendment (and by implication *for* the repeal). Cameron sagaciously abstained. O'Hara (2007, p. 317) writes that it was IDS's 'support of this amendment that was taken as marking the Tories' decisive, and ultimately disastrous move back to the right'. IDS's actions indicated to the wider party that he could not be trusted on *certain* 'modernising' objectives which were important to them; and, in consequence they manoeuvred against him. As Deane (Interview, 2011), who was Chief of Staff 2004–May 2005 to Tim Collins MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, remarked:

When IDS fell, I was a research fellow at Policy Exchange, so I was in and out of the Party a lot ... it needed something to happen, and no-one likes to put the knife in, but it had to be done, a plane chunk of that was being operated out of Policy Exchange, actually.

And it was, after all, Francis Maude (one of the founders of Policy Exchange) who wrote to Michael Spicer, chairman of the 1922 Committee, asking for a confidence vote on IDS's leadership. However, the primary take-away from the IDS period is that his downfall was because of a lack of managerial competence and charisma, not of 'modernising' ideas or a failure to attempt change. Overall, it should be a matter of note that in the area of modernising ideas on social justice policy, as Franklin (Interview, 2011) conveyed: 'strangely enough (because IDS's departure was precipitated by the modernisers) the Howard leadership was a good deal less modernising than the IDS leadership'. This is important to note because it means that we can emphasise the importance of the CCF under IDS. It can be shown that new policy was being put forward. The very fact that he experienced trouble from the metropolitan modernisers was indication that he was having to manage the competing interests of two influential tendencies.

The Founding of the CSJ

IDS had gradually begun to rely on CCF founder Montgomerie more and more during his short leadership; in the summer of 2003 he appointed him as his political



secretary and Chief of Staff. According to Franklin (Interview, 2011), 'the idea was that the CCF ideas would become incorporated increasingly into what the party was doing anyway, but by the time Tim was really sort of beginning to sort out some of the problems with the leadership, it was sadly too late'. Because the CCF / Renewing One Nation initiative had become so close to IDS by 2003, it was unceremoniously rejected alongside him. As Deane (Interview, 2011) remarked: 'The Conservative Party has a certain level of institutional personnel, which goes relatively unchanged, but lots of individuals who are in key areas, Tim Montgomerie being a classic example, they went, and I think that is probably healthy'. But when we understand ideational change as happening *through institutions and actors*, and operating on many levels, we are also sensitive to the fact that people and ideas do not necessarily vanish when actors lose elite power; if, that is, they have ideational momentum and networks within the institution, especially networks which are ideationally connected to, but not materially consumed by, the institution. And this is what happened, quite unsurprisingly, to compassionate Conservatism when IDS lost power. Indeed, Franklin (Interview, 2011) talks of the 'direct *refoundation* of Renewing One Nation in the CSJ'.

The CSJ was created in 2004. Though IDS was a necessary public face of CSJ, and quickly became deeply involved, the initial nuts and bolts of setting up the think tank were largely done by Montgomerie and its first director Philippa Stroud, who was a prominent member of the Conservative and Christian community in Birmingham (Hordern, 2011). The CSJ allowed small 'c' Christianity and compassionate Conservatism to develop a rich range of social justice policies without the need to negotiate the tandem interests of other party modernisers, which had been the weak heel of IDS's leadership.

The first major decision Cameron made as leader was to launch a policy review into six policy areas: national and international security; public service reform; social justice; quality of life; overseas aid, globalisation and global poverty and economic competitiveness. Most of these reviews were exercises that had little impact. However, the social justice policy review, given to Duncan Smith and the CSJ, was more impactful. By the launch of this policy review in 2005, the CCF and then the CSJ had managed to create a foundational network of contacts with actors in the third sector, as Franklin (2011) recalls: 'through Renewing One Nation we found a lot of people to come up and support [the review]'. This network of contacts was way beyond what the Party proper had achieved; and the CSJ was able to further build upon the network during the review to produce a report and policy proposals, and eventual roll-out strategies, more advanced than any of the other review reports – all of which had little lasting impact. The CSJ, however, was put in charge of a policy review precisely *because* of a perceived lack of influence. As Boles (2011) remarks: 'Obviously CSJ do their stuff and they do it very well, but they were so directly set up by IDS, and IDS himself was outside at that point, so that he could do one [a review]'. Indeed, there was no intention by the leadership that the CSJ should

produce a high impact report. Its later impact was not orchestrated by the party leadership, as far as the leadership was concerned the significance of the report was an unintended consequence.

The social justice policy review involved more researchers, more interviews, and more sub-reports than any of the other reviews. It was a moment that was tactically seized on by the CSJ – led by the energy of IDS – and was to prove a key moment in the increase of their influence. The already established strong links of the CSJ to the third sector were exemplified by the appointment as deputy chair of Stedman-Scott (2011), who first met IDS on his visit to the Easterhouse estate, where the unemployment charity she heads has an operation. They remained in contact – and she was on hand to be asked to join the review a few years later. ‘This was an absolute in-depth look’, Stedman-Scott (Interview, 2011) later confirmed of the review; moreover, ‘Never once did someone say “this is the answer we want”’. The CSJ appointed a secretariat to oversee the Social Justice Policy Review, and also divided the project into separate working groups. Each conducted their own research and wrote their own reports, which were collected, for the diagnosis report, under the title *Breakdown Britain* (Callan, 2006; Clark, 2006; Fraser, 2006; Fforestfach, 2006; Gyngell, 2006; Stancliffe, 2006) and for the policy report *Breakthrough Britain* (Callan, 2007; Fforestfach, 2007; Fraser, 2007; Gyngell, 2007; Robson, 2007; [Stedman-] Scott and Brien, 2007). The CSJ based their research around what they labelled as five key ‘paths to poverty’: addictions; family breakdown; worklessness and economic dependence; educational failure; and indebtedness.

The strong emphasis from the *Breakthrough Britain* report was that more use should be made of third sector organisations to carry out work at present done by local authorities – in areas of children’s services and child protection, job seeking, drug abuse and homelessness. Organisations such as *Tomorrow’s People*, for example, whom Baroness Scott also represented, were understood to be more effective at returning people to work, and more importantly, keeping them in work. The move to the third sector was not necessarily framed as a way to cut spending. Organisations such as *Tomorrow’s People* receive the majority of their income from government contracts, rather than foundational trust money or donations (Stedman-Scott, 2011). To think of the entire project as merely a money saving device, therefore, is to miss the different strands that came together in the CSJ report, and went on to be included under the umbrella term ‘Big Society’. Early thinking in the area does not prioritise reducing spending – neither is the method expected to do so, charity organisations do not work for free when they take on local authority contracts. There is a through line of the Christian idea of community altruism and good works done by the individual at a personal level. ‘The Christian roots’, suggests Fraser (2007, p. 68) ‘of most social action and reform in Britain are well known ... [F]aith groups still undertake a vast and disproportionate amount of poverty-fighting’.

There is here a strong push for an increase in donations to charities, and volunteering; however, the most impactful proposals are around the privatising of



government contracts in areas of social justice, disability provision, unemployment initiatives, counselling, drug rehabilitation, housing support and so forth, to the third sector. So what we have is not the advocating of a reduction in state spending *per se*, but a privatising of certain public provisions to the (paid) third sector based on the ideological principle that the state is too unwieldy to deliver such services. Interestingly, though, we see with the CSJ less of an emphasis of the systemic inefficiencies of the state and more an emphasis on the inherent ethical virtues of the third sector, in part with regard to – though by no means exclusively – faith-based groups. As Kettell (2012, p. 283) writes, in one of the few analyses of the religious influence on Conservative social policy: ‘the idea of promoting an expanded role for religious groups in the provision of welfare and social services lies at the very heart of the Big Society plan’.

An Underpinning of Christian Ethics

Even where it is not explicitly stated in the CSJ social justice report, there is reported evidence of a (most often implicit) Christian ethos shaping the work of the CSJ during the policy review. Gyngell (Interview, 2011) remarked that:

there was quite a strong faith based part to it ... quite a lot of people Philippa [Stroud] put me in touch with were from faith based groups, which were absolutely admirable ... Most of the people there, that would have been a common denominator certainly, a shared belief in Christian ethics, other people were more actively Christian, David Burrowes [CCF founder, Deputy Chair of the Addictions Working Group], Samantha Callan [CSJ senior researcher] ...

Following to some degree from this, there is an emphasis on improving quality of life and community cohesion through the family, and government policy to encourage nuclear families – something less seen with other modernisers in the party. As Callan (2007, p. 106) writes in the report: ‘We do however argue against current fiscal policies which disadvantage couples because, financial considerations aside, lone parents rarely choose that status, enjoy raising children on their own, or want their own children to become lone parents themselves’. And by eliding correlation and causality, Callan concludes that: ‘Children raised by two parents tend to do better across a whole range of variables as our earlier volume made clear, so it seems somewhat perverse for policy not to do all it can to support rather than penalise this family model’. The CSJ report holds off on proposing a married couples tax credit (this they did more confidently later, see CSJ, 2010); but they do suggest spending on counselling retreats, writes Callan (2007, p. 55), by ‘stimulating the market for such care and opening up opportunities for the third sector and private providers to meet demand’.

There was a sense of those involved in the CSJ that they had, in a manner, nothing to lose. As Gyngell (2011) comments: ‘IDS was the least popular person on the planet, no one thought on IDS’s back they were going to get preferment’. As a consequence of IDS’s tarnished reputation, there was a disconnection from the usual channels of authority. What replaced these channels, and established policy debates, was a momentum that had been growing for nearly a decade and had begun with CCF. And it was because the party, at the mid-level, had already set up, over a considerable period of time, and through the varied interest (and occasional lack of interest) of previous leaders, a group of people genuinely committed (within their own particular ethical rationalisation and contiguous ideology) to this area of policy that the CCF grouping strongly emerged at this point to take the baton. This was not leader led, a moment created out of thin air by Cameron, it came from the mid-level of the party, which fed up a policy emphasis to the top.

The review was the point at which the CSJ began to make an impact at the leadership level. Since then, its ideas have merged somewhat with other modernisers. Yet the CSJ are at times still seen as a group apart, marked somewhat by small ‘c’ Christianity, and the concomitant policy positions that are implied. Indeed, the modernising strands of the party have not perfectly harmonised to this day, and there are still differences between them. As Hillman (Interview, 2011) remarked:

I think that one of the things avoided by going into coalition, was a bit of a battle between the CSJ type Tories and the Policy Exchange type Tories on something like tax breaks for married couples. So though both Policy Exchange and CSJ were both important in giving us a human face again, there were tensions, there wasn’t a single movement towards change.

However, with IDS’s entry into government as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions the CSJ can rightly claim that they remain an important source of ideas at the elite level. But by tracing, as has been done here, the origins of these ideas before they emerged at the elite level, it has been possible to show the role, often downplayed, of mid-level actors of engendering such change within the party.

This change culminated in the 2010 manifesto, with its complimentary main sections of ‘Change the Economy’ and ‘Change Society’. In the first section it is stated (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 5) that the priority is to ‘eliminate the bulk of the structural deficit over a Parliament’, alongside, *inter alia*, improving international tax competitiveness and increasing the private sector’s share of the economy. In the second section, it is stated (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 37): ‘Our public service reform programme will enable social enterprise, charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services and tackling deep rooted social problems’. The manifesto goes on to outline how policy will enable: parents to start new schools; an expansion of Academy schools; a Big Society bank to fund local projects; a Big Society Day to celebrate the third sector; to employ measures of well-being rather than just of income; a National Citizen Service, beginning with



16-year-olds, to encourage volunteering; supporting families with tax credits for married couples and civil-partnerships earning up to £50 000; flexible paternity and maternity leave; free nursery care from a diverse number of providers and a commitment to not cut spending in the NHS. The seed of these ideas can be traced back to the CSJ policy review, which in turn can be traced back to the CCF and the influence of christianity in the 1990s. What Cameron has done is successfully merge this tendency to competing neo-liberal interests around the state and the economy. Cameron was the first post-1997 Tory leader to command a relatively united party while in opposition. As Hancock (Interview, 2011), who entered parliament for the first time in the 2010 Tory victory, conveyed:

In David Cameron you have someone who brings all of these strands together [CCF and Policy Exchange], which hark back to an older Conservatism that understands all of these different influences and brings them to the table rather than trying to create some overall high philosophy ... Cameron is a practical politician: he's not an ideologue.

The influence of think tanks and mid-level actors lessens once a party is in government. Their period of greatest influence is during the years of opposition when new ideas are in highest demand and there is no access to a civil service. Inevitably, we see, therefore, that the CCF's most notable direct impact was in this period. However, (mainly through IDS at Work and Pensions) the ideas of the CCF tendency maintain influence in government, in areas of welfare reform, universal credit, the shifting of local services towards third sector providers, and the increased use of faith-based charities, precisely because it is not overly dominant. Rather, it is mixed with other tendencies (which are generally compatible) by a leader who is largely satisfied with such pluralism.

Conclusion: The Overall Role of the CCF

We might ask then, why could the CCF bring new ideas into the party during the opposition period? It is the case that what kept Conservative small 'c' Christianity alive through Thatcher and Major – a sort of self-claimed *Wilberforcean* conservatism – was the external body of the church. With its symbols of fellowship and altruism, the Christian church operated outside of the party and was able to hibernate ideas on social justice. When the CCF acted to bring new ideas into the Party, they came in under a neutral guise and were interpreted as the reactivation of a traditional Conservative religious position.

In times of uncertainty, actors may turn to a source of values that offers guidance to a way forward. As Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 251) note, social institutions, such as the Christian church, are adhered to because 'they provide individuals with vocabularies of motives and with a sense of self'. This ethical vocabulary was held by

the church, then entered the party and became increasingly prevalent. What is the case is that for an increasing grouping in the Party, ethical, Christian-based, language and a concomitant understanding of the world began to inform policy after the uncertainty of the 1997 election defeat. However, we should not assume that Christianity offers a constant type of idea that is non-changing. The Christianity prevalent in the contemporary party is contemporary itself – it is highly motivated, politically engaged, and mixes a sense of community engagement with sexual politics. Therefore, the focus of this piece has not been towards how the Tory Party is informed by Christian ideas *per se*, but rather how Christian ideas have been made to work for the contemporary party. And, indeed, how these ideas can be used by non-Christian actors. We do not see a reversion to pre-neo-liberal Christian ethics, but a use of Christian ethics in a particular way which develops upon, but is also harmonious with, neo-liberalism.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the CCF influence on the party was not merely about ideas. For the material element is crucial for these ideas to succeed. In the case study presented here, we see the drawn out process of filtering new ideas through the organisation of the party, in the forming of contacts and networks, of think tanks and policy documents, and meetings with the leadership. Whereas Christian ethics may have provided some of the language, many of the ideas, and much of the personal drive, it was the Tory Party and its established organisation that gave the CCF grouping the means of political influence. As Franklin (Interview, 2011) reflects on the whole rise of small ‘c’ Christianity in the Party:

Well, it was always there, certainly in some people, but it never had the, well, it was there, but there as a personal, until all of this started, there was never a modern political framework to express it; the key point of all of this, is that it has provided a framework, which engages with the larger framework of politics and policy making, that didn’t exist before, the intellectual framework, the policy framework, and the sort of social capital, the contacts with both like-minded people in the party but also outside of the party, like front line practitioners, if you were to say what changed: it’s that – it went from individual, to collective – before it was trapped within people and not out there, it didn’t have a ‘political’ existence before, and now it does.

We see that disparate ideas, moving from the bottom up, can make a significant impact on areas of party social justice policy because the party already has mechanisms in place to gather those ideas. It is instructive, therefore, to address the relative lack of attention that has been given to the Christian impact on change in the party since the early 2000s, and its role in shaping Cameronism. It is, of course, only one grouping within a wider set of interests, all of whom are jostling for position. Giving it due attention, however, sensitises us against over-privileging leaders as the primary source of change in political parties. With Cameron, he has, in the area of social justice, looked to enact policy ideas



developed over a long period of time by others. Cameron has then sought to negotiate the desires of competing sections of the party. The Christian influence is by no means dominant, but it is now established in the party as an active grouping, particularly around social justice policy.

References

- Bale, T. (2010) *The Conservative Party From Thatcher To Cameron*. London: Polity.
- Boles, N. (2011) Interview at Portcullis House, London.
- Burkinshaw, A. (ed.) (1999) *Conservatism Magazine*. Issue one. Autumn.
- Burkinshaw, A. (ed.) (2000) *Conservatism Magazine*. Issue two. January.
- Callan, S. (2006) *Breakdown Britain: Fractured Families*. London: CSJ.
- Callan, S. (2007) *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown. Volume 1: Family Breakdown*. London: CSJ.
- CCF (1998) *Conservatism for Everyone*. '1: Stronger families for everyone'. The first interim report of the *Listening to Britain's Churches* consultation. London.
- CCF (2000) *Compassionate Communities: A Consultation Paper from The Conservative Christian Fellowship*. London: CCF.
- Clark, G. (2006) *Breakdown Britain: Economic Dependency and Worklessness*. London: CSJ.
- Conservative Party (2001) General election manifesto, <http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/>, accessed 5 February 2015.
- Conservative Party (2010) General election manifesto, <http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/>, accessed 5 February 2015.
- Cooper, A. (2001) A party in a foreign land. In: E. Vaizey, N. Boles and M. Gove (eds.) *A Blue Tomorrow: New Vision for Modern Conservatives*. London: Politico's, pp. 9–29.
- CSJ (2010) *Green Paper on the Family*. London: Centre for Social Justice.
- Deane, A. (2011) Interview at Bell Pottinger, London.
- Dorey, P. (2011) *British Conservatism: The Politics and Philosophy of Inequality*. London: Tauris.
- Duncan Smith, I. (2003) A fair deal for everyone. Speech to Conservative Spring Conference. 17 March, <http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/600838>, accessed 7 April 2015.
- Duncan Smith, I. (2010) The wilberforce address: 2002. In: K. Carter (ed.) *From Thatcher to Cameron: The Collected Wilberforce Addresses 1997–2009*. London: Biteback.
- Farnell, R. (2009) Faiths, government and regeneration: A contested discourse. In: A. Dinham, R. Furbey and V. Lowndes (eds.) *Faith in the Public Realm*. London: Policy Press.
- Fforestfach, Lord Griffiths of (2006) *Breakdown Britain: Indebtedness*. London: CSJ.
- Fforestfach, Lord Griffiths of (2007) *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown. Volume 5: Serious Personal Debt*. London: CSJ.
- Filby, E. (2015) *God and Mrs Thatcher: The Battle for Britain's Soul*. London: Biteback.
- Franklin, P. (2011) Interview at Portcullis House, London.
- Franklin, P. and Malluk Bately, M. (2002) Top down is the wrong way up. In: G. Streeter (ed.) *There is Such a Thing as Society*. London: Politico's, pp. 220–235.
- Fraser, O. (2006) *Breakdown Britain: Denying the Vulnerable a Second Chance*. London: CSJ.
- Fraser, O. (2007) *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown. Volume 6: Third Sector*. London: CSJ.
- Friedland, R. and Alford, R. (1991) Bringing society back in: Symbols, practices, and institutional contradictions. In: W. Powell and P. DiMaggio (eds.) *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago, IL: UCP.

- Gyngell, K. (2006) *Breakdown Britain: Addicted Britain*. London: CSJ.
- Gyngell, K. (2007) *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown. Volume 4: Addictions: Towards Recovery*. London: CSJ.
- Gyngell, K. (2011) Interview at Centre for Policy Studies, London.
- Hancock, M. (2011) Interview at Portcullis House, London.
- Hayton, R. and Heppell, T. (2010) The quiet man of British politics: The rise, fall and significance of Iain Duncan Smith. *Parliamentary Affairs* 63(3): 425–445.
- Hillman, N. (2011) Interview at Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, London.
- Hordern, G. (2002) 3D care in a 3D world. In: G. Streeter (ed.) *There is Such a Thing as Society*. London: Politico's, pp. 144–159.
- Hordern, G. (2011) Interview at University of Birmingham.
- Kettell, S. (2012) Thematic review: Religion and the Big Society: A match made in heaven? *Policy and Politics* 40(2): 281–296.
- Letwin, O. (2002) For Labour there is no such thing as society, only the state. In: G. Streeter (ed.) *There is Such a Thing as Society*. London: Politico's, pp. 38–51.
- Major, J. (2010) *John Major: The Autobiography*, Reissue, London: HarperCollins.
- O'Hara, K. (2007) *After Blair: David Cameron and the Conservative Tradition*, 2nd edn. Cambridge, UK: Icon.
- Renewing One Nation (2000) *Growing Up in Britain: The prospectus of the Conservative Party's Renewing One Nation team*. London: Conservative Party.
- Renewing One Nation (2001) *Renewing Civil Society: How Conservatives Will Empower Britain's Good Neighbours: A report by the Conservative Party's Renewing One Nation Team to Britain's Voluntary Sector and Faith Communities*. Northampton, UK: Belmont Press.
- Robson, R. (2007) *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown. Volume 3: Educational failure*. London: CSJ.
- Stancliffe, T. (2006) *Breakdown Britain: Educational Failure*. London: CSJ.
- [Steadman-]Scott, D. and Brien, S. (2007) *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown. Volume 2: Economic Dependency and Worklessness*. London: CSJ.
- Stedman-Scott, D. (2011) Interview at House of Lords, London.
- Streeter, G. (ed.) (2002) Introduction: Conservatives must change In: *There is Such a Thing as Society*. London: Politico's, pp. 1–11.
- Streeter, G. (2011) Interview at Portcullis House, London.
- White, M. and Perkins, A. (2002) 'Nasty party' warning to Tories: Conservatives still seen as too narrow-based, conference told. *The Guardian* 8 October, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/oct/08/uk.conservatives2002>, accessed 5 June 2010.
- Wilberforce Review* (1998) Update on key issues: Homosexual age of consent. April/May, p. 9.
- Willetts, D. (2002) The new contours of British politics. In: G. Streeter (ed.) *There is Such a Thing as Society*. London: Politico's, pp. 52–59.