

## Political Ideas – Conservatism (core ideas)

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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- (1) The origins of conservatism.
- (2) The different types of conservatism.
- (3) Core ideas and principles.
- (4) Differing views and tensions.

#### (1) The origins of conservatism

Conservatives seek to **conserve society** by applying a pragmatist orientation rather than ideological package of intertwined beliefs.

Traditional conservatism emerged as part of the reaction to the Enlightenment and the principle of rationality. Based on Hobbes, it supported the traditional feudal and hierarchic system of governing.

Thus, the roots of conservatism can be traced back to the resistance to changes taking place.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, conservative ideas developed further with one-nation conservatism during prime minister Benjamin Disraeli: a strong state led by an elite, making some adjustments to adapt to circumstances.

Neo-conservatism developed during the 1960s as a reaction to the increasing widespread of permissiveness that erodes traditional institutions and values.

The New Right emerged during the 1970s as a philosophical combination between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism.

#### Key values

**Human nature** = imperfect, vulnerable, needy, seeking security.

**Society** = organic and naturally hierarchical. Traditional structures and institutions are the glue to maintain stability and safety.

**State** = strong.

**Economy** = importance of private property.

### 1. Pragmatism

Refusing to adopt a package of ideology and leaning towards practical solutions to socioeconomic and political issues. Focus on what 'works', practical applications. Based on empiricism as well = the epistemological idea that knowledge and evidence derive from experiences/observations (induction) rather than abstract ideas to be tried and tested (deduction).

Advocating practicality instead of political theory.

Acknowledge that a degree of change is inevitable (stability is not synonymous with stagnation) but it needs to be slow and gradual.

### 2. Tradition

Strong support for upholding various long-standing institutions and structures (Monarchy, the Church of England etc) to foster consensus, legitimacy and stability.

Therefore, they would reject ideas such as devolution, republicanism or House of Lords reforms.

Past wisdom needs to be preserved and passed on, socialisation.

Tradition provides a necessary sense of belonging and continuity.

### 3. Human imperfection

Conservative ideas are often rooted in a pessimistic view of human nature in contrast to utopian ideas of the potential for perfect societies and political systems.

Most types of conservatism were influenced by Hobbes: that human beings are flawed one way or another and seeking power.

### 4. Organic society

Support for gradual changes (to avoid anomie that fills in the void, isolation and normlessness that result in crime and deviance); to maintain stability as opposed to rapid changes that are dangerous for the way society functions.

Society is like a living organism that requires all organs to operate in harmony. Thus, society needs the education system and the family structure to function properly they underpin life. A breakdown of such structures is likely to lead to crime, deviance and instability.

Hierarchy and authority; a strong society is not equal.

The idea of 'change to conserve' rather than change for its own sake.

## 5. Paternalism

*Noblesse oblige*, accepting that the elite needs to govern yet in an amicable way over others.

While society is strong and hierarchical the elite has a duty of care.

## 6. Libertarianism

Applied especially to the New Right with its emphasis on a small yet 'clever' state, free market, etc.

In the libertarian view, there has to be minimal state intervention in society and the economy, so as to preserve freedoms and liberties of individuals. It is in fact, in opposition to paternalism and it is mainly supported by neo-liberals rather than traditional or one-nation conservatism. Neo-liberals argue that the welfare state creates dependency and led to the emergence of the underclass = people who live on benefits alone as a way of life, and are excluded from employment.

## (2) The different types of conservatism

**2.1:** Traditional conservatism.

**2.2:** One-nation conservatism.

**2.3:** The New Right (including neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism).

### 2.1: Traditional conservatism

A reaction to the decline and threat to feudalism and aristocratic rule.

- An ideology of the aristocracy.
- A reaction to liberalism and political changes in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- A reaction to the **Enlightenment** = a European intellectual movement, late 17<sup>th</sup> century, supporting reason, science, rationality and individualism over religion and tradition.
- Belief in **organic and gradual change**.
- **Pessimistic** view of human nature.
- **Tradition**.
- The importance of **national institutions**; monarchy, church, military, parliament, etc.
- Patriotism.
- **Hierarchy** and 'natural aristocracy'.
- **Paternalism** = *noblesse oblige* = the idea that the wealthy and privileged elite have a duty of care for those less fortunate in society.

## Key thinkers

### **Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679)**

**Key work:** *Leviathan* (1651)

### **Key concepts and ideas**

“Thomas Hobbes used the term "Leviathan" to describe his theory of the ideal commonwealth. The Leviathan represents a powerful, unified state that prevents civil war and maintains peace. In this metaphor, the state is imagined as a person, with sovereignty as its soul and the sovereign as its head.”

- **Order** = an ordered society should balance the need of individuals to be free.
- **Human nature** = humans are needy, vulnerable and need to be guided, because they are motivated by self-interest rather than by communal considerations.
- In the absence of government and order, human beings are destined to live in a violent state of nature.
- **State of nature** = life in a state of nature is lonely, brutal, and it is short-lived. A state of nature is a state of war, wherein humans just strive to survive by preserving their existence. The solution is creating order by forming the social contract.
- **Social contract** = is established between the individuals in society and the monarch as the head of state. The sovereign thus is being given legitimacy to pass legislation. In return, citizens would be given legal and physical protection because the rule of law will ensure that order reigns supreme.
- **A strong authoritative government** can balance the need for order with preserving the human need to live a free life.
- **Power struggles** = society is characterised by hierarchy and inequality.
- Consequently, there is a need for **order and law** to prevent the human predicament; hence, a strong sovereign state that is based on the social contract.
- **The elite** is qualified to govern combined with commitment to *noblesse oblige*.
- **Pessimistic view on human nature:** humans are vulnerable and needy, governed primarily by their passions rather than being rational thinkers.
- The social contract/covenant allows human beings to trade off freedoms for the benefit of enjoying the protection of the state.

### **Key quotations**

“The condition of man... is a condition of war of everyone against everyone.”

“The passions of men are more commonly more potent than their reason.”

- Burke's ideas developed to adopt Hobbes's ideas to the changing world, especially the industrial revolution and changes in the relationship between state and society.

Burke agreed with Hobbes that humans are indeed imperfect but disagreed about the extent and the nature of this innate imperfection.

### **Edmund Burke (1729-1797)**

**Key work:** *Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)*

#### **Key concepts and ideas**

- Argued that the French Revolution failed because it failed to recognise the importance of **social bonds and cohesion** that are necessary for organic change that is required for stability. He regarded the revolution to be a violent overthrow of a legitimate government.
- **Organic change** = gradual and cautious.
- **Tradition and empiricism**. Society sometimes needs to **change to conserve**.
- **Human nature is imperfect** = human beings are imperfect, and not necessarily rational.
- **Eternal society** = the importance of wisdom passed on through the generations, and stability.
- **Pragmatism** = the rule of experience over abstract ideas.
- Rationalism is worthless compared with traditional institutions and customs: changes should occur based on **empiricism** rather than rational reasoning; that is why he advocated pragmatism. Knowledge and evidence derive from direct experience rather than abstract ideas and theories.
- **Natural hierarchy**.
- Proposed the **trustee model of representation** over the delegate model: he argued that his behaviour in parliament should be guided by his knowledge and experience so he can serve the public in the best possible way.

#### **Key quotations**

"Society is but a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born."

"All men have equal rights but not to equal things."

"The man of conservative temperament believes that a known good is not lightly to be surrendered for an unknown better."

## Traditional conservatism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

### Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990)

**Key work:** *On Being Conservative* (1962)

#### Key concepts and ideas

Oakeshott's ideas were developed in response to the violent fascist and communist regimes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Nazi Germany, Fascism in Italy and the Stalinism in communist Soviet Union.

- **Human imperfection** = human beings cannot understand reality, and **society is unpredictable**, given modern circumstances.
- **Pragmatism** = what actually works in the real world rather than abstract ideas of how it needs to work.
- The conservative disposition; preferring the familiar on the unknown.
- A leader should operate based on experience of what works rather than its own rational reasoning that is theoretical.

#### Key quotation

"The man of conservative temperament believes that a known good is not lightly to be surrendered for an unknown better."

### 2.2: One-nation conservatism

- This type of conservatism was developed from its paternalistic type.
- Followed industrialisation that caused inequality between workers and the upper class and its aim was to make society more stable but **closing the gap between the poor and rich**.
- The name comes from Conservative prime minister, **Disraeli**, who wrote a book about two nations, the rich and the poor, and the need to unite the nation and make it one again.
- Emphasis on **national identity** and **community** alongside some reforms to mitigate the potential for social unrest.
- Strongly influenced by Burke's ideas.
- **Noblesse oblige** = support for traditional institutions and customs alongside support for social reforms to help the less fortunate.
- Aspiring to make society more secure and **stable** by mitigating the gap between rich and poor that was widened by industrialisation.
- Disraeli, introduced **social reforms** to fight against the negative effects created by capitalism and to minimise the potential for social unrest, such as the Second Reform Act 1867 that granted the right to vote for most working men.

- This conservative party line was dominant in the post-war period of consensus with 'centrist' politicians such as Harold Macmillan and R.A. Butler, and later by David Cameron and Boris Johnson; compared with the emergence of New Right party line identified with Thatcher during the 1970s-80s.

### **2.3: The New Right conservatism**

- A combination of **neo-liberalism** and **neo-conservatism**.
- The New Right emerged in the UK (Thatcher) and the US (Reagan) during the 1970s 1980s.
- **Neo-liberalism**, the modern form of classical liberal ideas: regarding the economy, free market, small state and laissez-faire.
  - **Human nature** = rational.
  - **Minimal state** = to protect individual rights and freedom.
  - **Atomistic society** = composed of a loose collection of individuals pursuing their self-interest. Individual rights and freedoms are more important than social obligations and traditions.
  - **Rejection of state intervention** = nationalised industries and services are inefficient and worsen the economic conditions thus they are an impediment to growth.
- **Neo-conservatism**, the modern form of traditional conservative ideas: law and order, morality, family values, traditional values, strong defence and patriotism. Hawkish aggressive inclination on foreign policy.
  - **Anti-permissiveness**: argued against sex before marriage, homosexuality, abortion and recreational drugs.
  - **Authoritarian policing** and support for organic state.
- In the UK = **Margaret Thatcher**, in the US = **Ronald Reagan**.
- **Focus on individualism** rather than the society (traditional and one-nation conservative ideas) and the atomised view of liberalism.
- **Thatcher**: "What is society? There is no such thing!"
- The ideas of Rand and Nozick are not the same as individualistic anarchy that emphasise a complete lack of government, as they both advocated a small state that maintains national borders, the rule of law and to enable the free market to operate.

### **Key thinkers**

#### **Ayn Rand (1905-1982)**

Rand's family fled her native Russia during the revolution.

**Key work**: *The Virtue of Selfishness (1964)*; *Atlas Shrugged*

## Key concepts and ideas

- **Economic freedom** = and against any form of collectivism or state intervention and regulation. Radical.
- **Freedom** = it is an atomistic society with negative freedom, individuals are rational and the highest moral obligation of the individual is to achieve one's happiness. These ideas come also to support a complete form of capitalism.
- **Objectivity**, rationality in the pursue of self-interest.
- Complete laissez-faire and **free market capitalism**.
- **Rational and ethical egoism** = being selfish is not only natural but a moral obligation of the individual. Altruism and self-sacrifice are immoral.
- Rejected the traditional idea of human imperfection and organic society.

## Key quotations

"If any civilisation is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject."

"Man must be the beneficiary of his own moral actions."

## **Robert Nozick (1938-2002)**

A right-wing libertarian.

**Key work:** *Anarchy, State and Utopia (1974)*

## Key concepts and ideas

- **Natural justice** = people should be allowed to make their own decisions; that is what's fair and just. The individual is sovereign.
- **Libertarianism** = based on Kant's idea that human beings cannot be treated as an object or used against their own will as a resource.
- **Self-ownership** = individuals own their own body, abilities, skills and labour.
- The minimal of the minimal form of state.
- Disagreed with Hobbes, Burke and Oakeshott about the legitimacy of the state to interfere in society based on hierarchical social contract because it undermines individual freedom.
- The only legitimate role for the state it to protect property and to ensure contracts are fulfilled.
- **Taxation as legalised theft**.

## Key quotes

"No state more extensive than the minimal state can be justified."

"Taxation of earnings from labour is on a par with forced labour."

### (3) Core ideas and principles

#### 1. Human imperfection

Most conservatives argue that human beings are flawed one way or another, and their ideas about human imperfection shape their political doctrine.

The idea on human imperfection is based on Hobbes; human beings seek power and engage in violence to achieve their goals. Burke agreed with Hobbes but not to the extreme on which Hobbes predicated his ideas.

Conservatives argue that while human beings are imperfect, they are capable of change and society and the state ought to be the platform for that to materialise.

#### 2. Pragmatism

Pragmatism is superior to ideology and political theories because it is based on experience and the learning from what works and what doesn't.

Mostly associated with Burke and Oakeshott, with traditional and one-nation conservatism.

Pragmatic approach takes into account that some changes and adjustments ought to take place, albeit gradually, while maintaining traditional institutions. All-encompassing political ideology leads to radical changes and creates instability.

Human beings are imperfect and do not understand the complexities of life. Therefore, overarching utopic ideas such as Marxism and a classless society do not offer any solutions to the predicaments and ills of society.

#### 3. Tradition

Tradition refers to values and institutions that developed over time and were passed on from one generation to the next. Conservatives advocate the preservation of such institutions because they safeguard stability and any changes should be gradual and incremental rather than radical and quick, to avoid **anomie** = a state of normlessness; when old values and organisations are overthrown without the ability of others to mature and replace them. Socialisation to norms and values is by definition a long and slow process rather than swift.

Change needs to happen only when circumstances require some adaptation and it must be slow, incremental, without abolishing long-standing values and institutions.

#### 4. Organic society

Humans are dependent on one another and should not be isolated as can happen because of rapid changes that bring about anomie (Durkheim).

Anomie is characterised by a moral vacuum that can lead to increased crime and deviance which undermine the consensus elements of the society and therefore threaten stability. Lack of changes is stagnation and that is also not a positive feature.

Society is like a living organism where all parts of the body are dependent on the healthy functioning of the other parts. This cultivates consensus and morality. Conservatives believed that society is not equal and instead it is predicated on hierarchy and authority which support order and stability.

## 5. Paternalism

Society is unequal and thus naturally arranged in hierarchy. The ruling elite is integrated into the organic society, dominating all other parts and needs to guarantee order and stability and to prevent crime. However, it does have a duty of care to its weaker less fortunate groups in society.

This paternalist doctrine influenced Disraeli heavily, and the development of one-nation conservatism whereby the ruling elite accepted its obligation to the industrial working class by enacting appropriate reforms with limited welfare measures.

Neo-conservative paternalism is similar to the idea of 'tough love' by a father figure. It is not an easy idea for neo-liberals to digest.

Neo-liberals believe that paternalism restricts negative freedom of individuals especially because they are obliged to pay tax to fund paternalistic measures embedded in supporting the disadvantaged groups in society.

## 6. Libertarianism

This refers to the belief in individuals' right to liberty. The libertarian view supports a minimal state intervention to preserve the right to liberty. The value of libertarianism is much in conflict with paternalism and therefore these values are examined with regard to different branches.

### (4) Differing views and tensions

#### Summary of comparison between the strands

##### 1. Human nature

Traditional, one-nation and neo-conservatives:

- Individuals are morally and psychologically imperfect.
- Humans are naturally unequal.
- Society is organic and hierarchical.
- The state protects individuals from the consequences of their imperfection.

- Distrust of rationalism.

### Neo-liberals:

- More positive view.
- Humans are capable of rationality.
- Individualism is more important than society and state.

## 2. Society

### Traditional, one-nation and neo-conservatives:

- Society provides stability and protects us from the consequences of our imperfections and instincts.

### Neo-liberals:

- Society is atomistic.
- Individualism and negative freedoms (from interference and coercion, what you are not prevented from doing, 'freedom from'...) are more important than obligations to traditions and society. (positive freedom = seeking responsibility and making rational choices for oneself, what you can actually do, 'freedom to'...).

## 3. The economy

Traditional = classic liberal view, Burke, free markets to promote economic activity and growth.

One-nation = Keynesian economic model, the state intervenes to stimulate the economy in order to maintain full employment and economic growth.

New Right = ambivalent views.

Neo-liberals = laissez-faire economy, capitalism and free markets that are free of regulation.

Neo-conservatives = tilt towards a pragmatic approach.

## 4. The state

Differing views partly because of the disagreement on the above dimensions.

All conservatives consider private property to be an essential feature of life and the state is obligated to secure and protect it.

The postwar period is linked with shifting attitudes to the role of the state even among conservatives especially by acknowledging the need for a certain degree of intervention, regulation and welfare, thus, some liberal principles. Disagreement centres on social issues and foreign policy, alongside attitudes to key values.