

To what extent are British Political Parties Ideological?

Political parties are influenced by more than one ideology. Key liberal ideas, for example the free market and minimal state have been upheld by the conservative government 1979-1997 and have continued through Tony Blair's premiership 1997-today.

Since its first beginnings in the late eighteenth century the distinction between left and right has remained ambiguous and difficult to pin down. Left and right have also changed their meanings over time. A glance at the development of political thought shows that the same ideas that have been regarded as political left in certain periods and contexts have also been regarded as political right in others. In this way the major parties cross over the political spectrum sharing similar ideas in places, weakening the divides between them. For example, advocates of free-market philosophies were seen in the nineteenth century as left-wing but thanks to Margaret Thatcher are now regarded as right-wing. During her premiership Margaret Thatcher claimed that "there is no alternative" to conservatism, but since its ethos has become unpopular, the weaker side usually tries to take over some of the views of its opponents and propagate them as their own opinions.

For example the political right dressed itself up after World War II and the fall of fascism. To survive right-wing parties had to adopt some of the values of the left and accept the basic framework of the welfare state. Similarly since the early 1980's due to the collapse of communism and the political ascendancy of neo-liberalism, Labour is now selling itself as a post socialist party having repackaged Thatcherism in red. The ideological battle between socialism and capitalism has now reached a practical compromise with social democrats now accepting that privatisation of main industries is essential for economic growth in the UK. With the ever increasing desire of power and the capturing of the political "middle ground" being the answer, all three parties adapt their opinions to appeal to the electorate and follow public opinion. It was the labour party's flirt with far left socialism in the 1980's that helped hold the conservatives in power. The return of the labour party was by acknowledging that conservative policies were what the country wanted.

We feel that the largest difference between the two major parties principle ideologies is that the left value and fight for equality whereas the right accepts hierarchy in society. However with "New Labour" embracing stake holding, and the rewarding of those that work hard we feel that this shows Labours move to the right, and exposes Tony Blair as a conservative. The Italian thinker Norberto Bobbio in 1994 published a book that included the statement "...No left-winger can deny that the left today is not what it used to be". Drawn from the idea that "some of the assumptions that the left founded their strength and their transformation of society never materialised".

When thinking of the Conservative Party Margaret Thatcher appears immediately in the minds of many people. We would like to argue that some of her policies and opinions were basic neo-liberalist ideas, such as free market and rights of the individual. In the same way we would like to suggest that Tony Blair's "New Labour" and his "Third Way" combine to form a watered down version of Thatcherism with a modern more glamorised media friendly image. His presidential style of governing the country is similar to Margaret Thatcher's and his position on privatisation of companies is a fundamental conservative belief, and far right from the "old labour" socialists.

We would like to conclude by suggesting that with the blurring of the left and right political stances, and the narrowing of the political spectrum, that all major parties have adopted liberal ideas responding to what the electorate want (well at least the 59% registered voters that bother to vote).

Globalisation along with the disintegration of communism has resulted in industrialised countries having no far left to speak of. Left and right alike have come to accept the double-edged nature of science and technology, which generate benefits but also create new risks and uncertainties. With the demise of socialism as a theory of economic management the three parties are being forced closer together across the centre line, causing overlaps on policy. The political centre can only ever be regarded as a compromise, the middle between two more clear-cut alternatives. As this changing Britain becomes decreasingly just black and white all parties seem to occupy the central grey area which can be interpreted as "centre-left" or "centre-right" depending on your perspective.

