The Conservatives and the Governance of Social Policy

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Introduction

The Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s made major changes not only in the nature of social policies but also in the ways in which such policies were made and implemented, with a more centralist and managerial approach combined with a preference for markets and competition in the delivery of policies. Under the Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 there were further significant changes, including, for example, devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the placing of significant emphasis on attempts to improve the processes of policy making and delivery.

Under David Cameron the Conservatives, when in opposition, put forward a variety of proposals which might impact upon the ways in which social policy is made and delivered, including for changes to the ways in which legislation passes through the House of Commons, some devolution of power to local authorities (although at the same time allowing local residents to veto high council tax rises), reducing the number and power of quangos, replacing the Human Rights Act with a Bill of Rights, and emphasising a significant role for voluntary and community groups, rather than the state, in the provision of social policy. This paper therefore seeks to discuss the likely implications for the governance of social policy of the Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron, including the coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

Why the governance and mechanisms of policy making and implementation matter

From the 1990s there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the processes of formulation, implementation and evaluation in the development and management of policies. Prior to this period ‘government’ and ‘governance’ tended to be seen as synonymous, so that Finer (1970, pp.3-4), defined government as: ‘The activity or process of governing’ or ‘governance”; ‘A condition of ordered rule”; ‘Those people charged with the duty of governing’ or ‘governors”; and ‘The manner, method or system by which a particular society is governed’. Rhodes (1997, p.15) drew attention to differences between the two terms, noting that ‘The term ‘governance’ refers to a change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing’. ‘Governance’ therefore ‘tries to make sense of the changing nature of the state’ (Richards and Smith, 2002, p.14), recognising that we no longer live (if indeed we ever did) in a society where everything is controlled by a government at the centre. Instead there are many different actors, organisations and centres of power at local, regional, national, transnational and global levels all linking a less coherent and more fragmented process of policy and decision making.

The notion of governance is itself complex. Rhodes, for example, notes that ‘There are many uses of governance’, and that ‘It has too many meanings to be useful’ (Rhodes, 1997, p.15). Much has been written on ‘governance’ and it is not the purpose of this paper to explore this further here. For present purposes, Stoker’s observation that ‘Governance recognises the capacity to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority. It sees government as able to use new tools and techniques to steer and guide’ (Stoker, 1998, p.18 cited in Newman, 2001, p.12), is perhaps appropriate (see also Newman, 2001; Richards and Smith, 2002; Pierre and Peters, 2000).

Governance under the Conservatives 1979-1997
Between 1979 and 1997 the Conservatives introduced a wide range of structural changes that affected social policy. These included internal markets in the NHS and education; privatisation, the use of performance measures and standards, the increased use of arms length government, including quangos and Next Steps Agencies, reform and residualisation of local government; and the introduction of mechanisms designed to give consumers a greater say in the operation and delivery of services.

In addition, the general style of governance changed under the Conservatives. Until 1988, their approach arguably reflected an emphasis on ‘managerialism’, based on a belief that private sector performance tools could benefit the public sector in order to make central and local government more efficient and effective. From 1988, however, there was a shift in style towards governance based on ‘the new institutional economics’ with ‘incentive structures’ being introduced into public service provision. ‘Greater competition through contracting out and quasi-markets; and consumer choice’ were central to this (Rhodes, 1997, pp.48-49).

These changes were underpinned by New Right beliefs that bureaucracies lacked central control, were self-interested, inefficient and wasteful of public resources. The Conservatives therefore took a top-down approach in attempt to address the perceived problems of bureaucracy through the transfer of performance measures and initiatives, seen as successful in the private sector, to the public sector, and an emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and economy. However, the issue of control highlights an inherent tension in the governance of social policy which continues to the present day – that of governments seeking decentralisation while simultaneously trying to exert greater central control.

From the late 1980s the influence of the ‘new institutional economics’ (Rhodes, 1997) heralded the introduction of more radical changes, including a greater emphasis upon consumer choice and markets. This led to the removal of functions from local authorities, including through legislation such as the 1988 Education Reform Act, the 1988 Housing Act and the 1988 Local Government Act. Attempts to extend consumer influence over services were also reflected in the introduction of new methods of redress and the introduction of Charters. However, the use of macro-governance structures such as quangos, non-departmental government bodies and Next Steps Agencies to undertake a range of non-essential functions previously undertaken by central and local government again reflected tensions around power and control, with the devolution of power and control over non-essential functions such as policy implementation and service delivery, whilst control over core functions such as policy formulation is retained, described by Rhodes (1997) as indicative of the shift from government to governance.

**Governance under Labour 1997-2010**

When Labour came to power in 1997 they continued the approach of previous Conservative governments in a range of areas including: stressing the role of local authorities as enablers rather than providers of services; an emphasis on ‘partnerships’ and collaborative working across public, voluntary and private sectors; and the use of mechanisms of audit and inspection to try to improve quality and standards in services. However, at the same time they demonstrated a new and more radical approach in some areas. In particular, following referendums in the autumn of 1997 the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly came into being on July 1st 1999 while in Northern Ireland the Assembly came into existence on 2nd December 1999. While there were already significant social policy differences between the constituent elements of the United Kingdom the creation of these bodies arguably served to
raise awareness of these, as well as enabling the possibility of a greater diversity of approaches, particularly as political control of the UK’s legislative bodies changes. The Human Rights Act 1998 incorporated the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) into law, giving individuals who believe that their human rights have been infringed the opportunity to pursue their case in the domestic courts, a cheaper and less time-consuming process than having to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, which was the process before the Act was passed. In addition Labour sought to ‘modernise’ local government in England through encouraging, and later requiring, councils to adopt new decision making structures, mirroring those in Westminster in order to try to improve the transparency and accountability of local government.

As with the Conservatives, in addition to structural change, Labour too sought to bring new approaches to policy making and implementation, including through encouraging ‘joined-up government’ and ‘evidence based’ policy making. In general, particularly from 1997 to 2005, these changes were associated with a more ‘rational’ approach to policy making, with its focus on coordination and cooperation. This was also reflected through a somewhat more open and consultative approach, including attempts to engage with pressure groups and the public, and through the use of reviews, commissions and inquiries. However, like the Conservatives, Labour retained a fondness for top-down approaches and for central control, including through the widespread use of performance measures, league tables, and mechanisms of audit and inspection. Like the Conservatives they also sought to encourage consumer choice in public services, but while few people would disagree with being given more choice, its presentation as a straightforward uncontested concept is far from the reality of actual choice in public services (Clarke and Newman, 2006).

A preference for a rational approach to policy making was arguably also visible in other parts of Labour’s approach, including through the introduction of the Comprehensive Spending Reviews and Public Service Agreements. Comprehensive Spending Reviews were a tool to enable government to assess its spending priorities. These took a longer term approach by setting out public spending plans usually three years rather than annually. Linked to this Labour established Public Service Agreements for government departments setting out targets for each and how these would be measured.

The Conservatives under Cameron

Following their defeat at the 1997 general election the Conservatives clearly found it difficult to respond to the challenge posed by New Labour. Successive Conservative leaders, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, intermittently sought to develop new approaches to social policy, although rarely to the processes of making and implementing social policies, before shifting back towards positions more similar to those held by the party in the 1980s.

However, with David Cameron’s defeat of David Davis in the leadership contest of December 2005 came the opportunity for greater change. Cameron sought to present himself as something of a ‘moderniser’, in contrast to Davis who was widely seen as a Thatcherite traditionalist, so that Cameron’s victory arguably presented something of a break with the past. Cameron almost immediately sought to distance the Conservative Party from its Thatcherite past, including by taking what appeared to be a more liberal stance on some areas of social policy. He also established six policy review groups, including one on ‘Public
services improvement’, chaired by Stephen Dorrell and Baroness Parry, and one on ‘Social justice’, chaired by Iain Duncan Smith. While these made a number of recommendations there was relatively little about policy making or implementation, although there was a clear emphasis on the need for a strong voluntary and third sector involvement in the provision of public services, in addition to a sizeable private sector, a desire to increase choice for consumers, and a commitment to reduce bureaucracy, but at the same time to retain a significant degree of audit and inspection. However, even following their publication, the leadership remained vague about its commitment to them and firm commitments were rare.

Indeed, while the early years of Cameron’s leadership showed a willingness by him to seek to differentiate himself from the Party’s recent past, including with elements of Thatcher’s leadership, it was relatively difficult to discern clear themes in relation to the policy process, and this position arguably continued up to the 2010 general election. Nevertheless, it is perhaps possible to examine the Conservatives’ approach on a broad thematic basis, drawing in particular on their general election manifesto, the title of which, Invitation to Join the Government of Britain, is itself perhaps of some relevance to this paper. It is also possible to start to judge the impact of the coalition with the Liberal Democrats on the Conservatives’ proposals, and perhaps make some initial judgements about what this tells us about current Conservative priorities and beliefs.

From big government to Big Society?

The Conservative manifesto, and indeed much of their talk in the run up to the May 2010 general election, was about the need to mend our broken society and about how a change ‘from big government to Big Society’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.vii) could help achieve this. However, this is arguably largely a continuation, albeit in a more broader form, of a theme – that of citizen participation and involvement in decision making and the shaping of services – that was apparent under both previous Labour and Conservative governments, each of which stressed, at various times, the importance of consumer choice, citizen involvement, and responsive services.

Although the idea of devolving power to the people is not new, the Conservatives produced a range of proposals for doing this, inter-alia: enabling parents to start new schools, giving communities the power to take over local parks and libraries that are under threat, increased control over the planning system for neighbourhoods, holding the police to account through ‘neighbourhood beat’ meetings with residents (Conservative Party 2010, p.38). The Conservative manifesto also proposed a ‘community right to buy’ scheme to ‘give local people the power to protect any community assets that are threatened with closure’, as well as a ‘right to bid to run any community service instead of the state’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.75). In the coalition programme (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.12) the ‘community right to buy’ scheme is not specifically mentioned, although ‘new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure’ are included.

However, the desire to see change through such a devolution of power, not just in the areas highlighted above, but across the public, voluntary and third sectors, highlights that whilst at one level the ideas may simply be relatively small and incremental in nature, they do appear to hold out the potential for radical change.

In promoting the Big Society the Conservatives are trying to encourage increased social action and there is an expectation that people will take more responsibility for themselves and
their communities. At the same time there appears to be a lack of recognition by government that there are limits to peoples’ participation. Government is keen that people should work, look after their families, cook healthy meals, bring children up properly, and to add to this they want them to participate in the Big Society by setting up free schools, taking over the running of community services, and so on. It is perhaps not surprising that a survey by IpsosMORI for The Economist found that ‘Most of the public say they do not want to be actively involved in how public services are run’ (IpsosMORI, 2010). And, while IpsosMORI did find significant minorities who said that they do want to get involved ‘it is likely that those who are directly affected will be more likely to get involved; for example, parents are far more likely to want to have a say in how Primary Schools work, than people without children’ (IpsosMORI, 2010). For most people therefore the form of ‘participation’ being referred to here is having a say, rather than a desire to take over and run public services. Clearly involvement means different things to different people, and to government, and there are likely to be significant challenges in putting the Big Society into practice.

Where resources are concerned to support these developments, the Conservatives plan to create ‘a Big Society Bank, funded from unclaimed bank assets, to provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.37). However, while there has clearly been some consideration of where funds might come from, it is not yet apparent just how much money is available in unclaimed bank assets’ and indeed whether the government has the power to access these. And the use of charities, voluntary groups and social enterprises to play a key role in delivering services has echoes of both previous Conservative and Labour governments partnership approaches to service delivery, yet both arguably failed to transform the third sector’s position and role in public services.

In addition there are clearly a number of other issues and challenges here, including the extent to which budgets and financial decision making will be devolved to local communities, the type of support mechanisms put into place to facilitate these arrangements, and how far these participatory approaches to running public services are likely to prove representative of the views of the local community and not just a minority of the local population. They also raise questions about the place, if any, of ideas of fairness and equality, as well as accountability and regulation.

Reforming the public sector

As with the Thatcher governments, the Conservatives under David Cameron have placed significant emphasis on rolling back levels of state intrusion into people’s lives, with reforms of the public sector as a key dimension of this. Whilst this is in part about giving people more choice in service provision, as outlined above, there is also a clear commitment to reducing public expenditure, cutting waste, and giving better value for money. Yet, at the same time, the Conservatives are clear that they intend to protect popular services, such as the NHS, by ensuring funding increases in real terms each year. In addition, early on in the life of the coalition government the Prime Minister stressed that ‘Freedom, fairness and responsibility… are the values that will drive our efforts to deal with our debts and to turn this economy around’ and that ‘this government will not cut this deficit in a way that hurts those we most need to help’. However, in the same speech he signalled a significant reduction of the public sector to ‘bring it back in line’ with the private sector (The Guardian, 7 June 2010). At a time when difficult financial decisions are to be made, it is likely to prove difficult to achieve all of these.
One idea that the Conservatives made much of in the run-up to the General Election was efficiency savings. Indeed, ever since the publication of the Fulton Report in 1968, the use of efficiency measures, performance targets and financial management type initiatives have been encouraged by governments in pursuit of more economical and more professional approaches. This chimed with the managerialist style of governance favoured by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, with the introduction of initiatives such as the Management Information Systems for Ministers which enabled each component of a department's work to be monitored and assessed individually, enabling areas of weakness to be identified and targeted for improvement, and the Financial Management Initiative, which was aimed at transferring a managerial culture seen as successful in the private sector to central government departments and giving managers at all levels greater responsibility and control. It also fits with a belief that the private sector is a model of good practice which the public sector should mirror, which is also in evidence under the current Government. The former BP boss Lord Browne looks set to become a ‘superdirector’, charged with transferring private sector business practices into government, in an approach that reflects that of Margaret Thatcher, for example when she appointed Derek Rayner (from Marks and Spencer) as an advisor on administrative efficiency, and Roy Griffiths (from Sainsburys) to report on community care.

The Conservative manifesto provides examples of the type of measures that the Government intend to introduce which appear designed to encourage efficiency, and perhaps, transparency: ‘introduce and publish a standard set of cost measures that capture the key drivers of departmental spending; help departmental Finance Directors to manage resources more efficiently; implement clear financial performance targets for senior civil servants; and ‘Create a focus on delivering strong financial management across government’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.27).

In addition, plans for a Spending Review reporting in the autumn of 2010, which will set out the reductions in spending for every government department for the next three years, are explicit in seeking to involve both the private and public sectors. In setting the framework for this, the new chancellor, George Osborne, has announced a consultation with members of the public, voluntary groups, civil servants, think-tanks and political parties, arguably in an effort to build consensus on where cuts should fall in the effort to cut the fiscal deficit.

In education, the role and powers of local government appear to be being eroded, with new providers being given the opportunity to enter the education sector. ‘Drawing on the experience of the Swedish school reforms and the charter school movement in the United States, we will break down barriers to entry so that any good education provider can set up a new Academy school’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.53). In addition, ‘We will give parents the power to save local schools threatened by closure, allowing communities the chance to take over and run small good schools’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.53). Whilst widening the diversity of provision, not just in the education sector, but across the public sector may increase choice for the consumer, at the same time it can create problems in terms of the fragmentation of services, economies of scale are less likely because of the wide variety of providers, there are often problems with implementation because of the different agendas of the implementing agencies, inadequate resources and because no single body has overall control over these agencies. This can also lead to problems with accountability since often no one is sure who is accountable to whom and for what.
The Conservative manifesto included a set of ‘benchmarks for Britain, saying that ‘for the first time, the British people will have eight clear and transparent benchmarks against which they can judge the economic success or failure of the next government’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.5). These benchmarks included: ‘Get Britain working again: We will reduce youth unemployment and reduce the number of children in workless households as part of our strategy for tackling poverty and inequality’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.5); ‘Reform public services to deliver better value for money: We will raise productivity growth in the public sector in order to deliver better schools and a better NHS’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.5). Yet these appear to be a broadly similar mechanism to the targets set by Labour early in their first term of office. For example, the Green Paper *New Ambitions for Our Country – A New Contract for Welfare* (Department of Social Security, 1998) included a number of targets such as: ‘a reduction in the proportion of working age people living in workless households’, and ‘an increase in the proportion of lone parents, people with a long-term illness and disabled people of working age in touch with the labour market’ (Bochel and Bochel, 1998, p. 67). Just like the targets set by Labour, these benchmarks would potentially be a way to judge the success or failure of the Conservatives in these areas. However, like those set by their predecessors, the Conservative targets are vague, do not set out how they will be measured and do not include any reference to the time period over which these should be judged. And, interestingly and importantly, such measures had disappeared in the Coalition’s ‘programme for government’.

However, the use of performance measures looks set to continue in other areas. For example in schools, the Conservative manifesto says, ‘We will keep Key Stage 2 tests and league tables. We will reform them to make them more rigorous… People expect to be able to make choices about the services they use, based on robust information about the quality on offer. So a Conservative government will reform school league tables so that schools can demonstrate they are stretching the most able and raising the attainment of the less able’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.52). The discussion on schools in the coalition programme is in keeping with this, with the use of measures such as these appearing to be underpinned by the dual motivations of maintaining and improving quality and providing information to parents so that they can make informed choices.

The approaches taken by the coalition also fit well with the ideological positions of many Conservatives, and some Liberal Democrats (particularly those associated with the ‘Orange Book’ tendency), who favour a small state, greater individual responsibility, and a broader mix of welfare provision, including more provision by the private and third sectors.

*Regulation and performance measurement*

As noted throughout this paper, the policies of the Conservatives and those of the Coalition government raise a number of questions around equity, fairness, and accountability, as well as quality. Yet, in general, the issue of regulation appears to be dealt with in a very piecemeal way.

For example, while higher education institutions have been subject to a variety of forms of audit by the Quality Assurance Agency, ranging from in-depth audits to the ‘lighter touch’ Institutional Audit introduced in 2003 by Labour, ‘Raising the quality of the student experience’ is mentioned in the Conservative manifesto (Conservative Party, 2010, p.17), and the coalition programme talks about publishing ‘more information about the costs, graduate earnings and student satisfaction of different university courses (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.32).
This was reinforced by the Universities Minister, David Willets who has said ‘The system doesn’t contain strong incentives for universities to focus on teaching and the student experience, as opposed to research’ (The Guardian 10 June 2010, p.1). Yet there is at present no real clarity about how any of this will be measured, or whether the Quality Assurance Agency will have a role in this. The fact that this information will be published suggests that it may be intended to contribute to the construction of league tables.

In schools Ofsted is expected to adopt ‘a more rigorous and targeted inspection regime, reporting on performance only in the core areas related to teaching and learning. And any school that is in special measures for more than one year will be taken over immediately by a successful Academy provider’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.53). The intention is to ‘publish performance data on educational providers…’ and reform league tables so that schools are able to focus on, and demonstrate, the progress of children of all abilities’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.29). But again, there is little or no detail on how this will be done, nor the potential shortcomings of such information.

Yet while further inspection and audit loom for education, the Conservatives manifesto promised that ‘We will scrap Labour’s failed target regime and instead require every department to publish a business plan, with senior management accountable to more rigorous departmental boards for their performance’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p.67) and to scrap ‘the hundreds of process targets Labour have imposed on councils’ and end the ‘inspection regime that stops councils focusing on residents’ main concerns’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.76). Similarly the programme for government says that ‘We will cut local government inspection and abolish the Comprehensive Area Assessment’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.12). Taken at face value this suggests that local authorities will have more freedom over how they do things and that there will be more decentralisation and less of a top-down approach to governance.

However, the programme for government states that ‘We will oblige the police to publish detailed local crime data statistics every month, so the public can get proper information about crime in their neighbourhoods and hold the police to account for their performance’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.13). This suggests more of a top down approach to governance and more, rather than less, micro-managing, which was a commitment in the Conservative’s manifesto (Conservative Party, 2010, p.vii).

The programme for government also says that ‘We will strengthen the role of the Care Quality Commission so it becomes an effective quality Inspectorate’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.25). Again, this suggests more rather than less regulation, suggests that it is not effective at present, and does not say anything about measures to make it more effective.

On the NHS the Coalition also promises to make the NHS work better ‘by extending best practice on improving discharge from hospital, maximising the number of day care operations, reducing delays prior to operations, and where possible enabling community access to care treatments’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.25). This begs the questions of how and by who best practice will be identified, and what criteria will be used to set best practice? There is also an undertaking to ‘…significantly cut the number of health quangos’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.24), but which quangos will be cut, what functions they perform, and whether they will be replaced with anything else, is not stated.
Clearly, from this brief discussion, the Coalition’s overall approach, like that of the Conservative manifesto, to regulation and performance measurement is mixed and inconsistent.

**Reforming politics**

Following the scandal in the previous parliament over MPs expenses, and given their traditional commitments to a smaller state and to greater power (and responsibility) for individuals, it was unsurprising that in their manifesto the Conservatives talked about ‘a new agenda for a new politics’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.63), with plans to ‘change Britain with a sweeping redistribution of power: from state to citizens; from government to Parliament; from Whitehall to communities; from Brussels to Britain; from bureaucracy to democracy’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.63).

However, following the hung parliament and the formation of the coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, the new ‘programme for government’ not only involved compromises on the part of both parties, such as over electoral reform, but only days after the general election contained promises to introduce measures not seen in either of the parties’ manifestos.

Some of the major reforms proposed by the Coalition are around parliament. For example, the parties have agreed to establish five year fixed-term parliaments, making it much harder for a prime minister to determine the date of a general election and to pick a time when the opinion polls and circumstances seem to favour his or her party to call an election. Whilst this in not uncommon in other European countries, it is a new development in the UK. However, the legislation for fixed-term parliaments will also include a provision that the dissolution of parliament can only be brought about if 55 per cent of MPs vote in favour of a general election. While there is disagreement on the reasons behind and the arguments for and against this, the convention since 1782 has been that a significant defeat on a major issue can lead to a vote of no confidence in the government. If the government lose the vote then they must either call a general election or resign. This will no longer happen automatically and this is why the figure of 55 per cent is contentious. After the 2010 general election the Conservatives had 47 per cent of MPs, thus even if the Liberal Democrats decided to walk out of the coalition and to vote with the opposition to try to call a general election, they would not succeed. Similarly, previous governments, such as John Major’s and Jim Callaghan’s might have felt more secure if such a system had been in place.

The coalition parties have also agreed to a referendum on the Alternative Vote system for general elections, something which the Conservatives had previously been opposed to. In their manifesto they say ‘We support the first-past-the-post system for Westminster elections because it gives voters the chance to kick out a government they are fed up with’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.67). As the Alternative Vote system is not, of itself, necessarily much more proportional than First-Past-the-Post, whilst it might make hung parliaments, and thus either minority or coalition governments, somewhat more likely in the future, it would be unlikely to result in the election to parliament in any significant numbers of new parties or interests. It is therefore difficult to identify any immediate implications for social policy.

Where the Conservative manifesto promised to ‘reduce the number of MPs in Parliament (p.65) and introduce “fair vote” reforms to equalise the size of constituency electorates, and conduct a boundary review to implement these changes within five years’ (Conservative
Party 2010, p.67), the Coalition programme for government also talks about the ‘creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.27) which would automatically result in a reduction in the number of MPs. Whilst this would necessitate a boundary review which would impact differently on the political parties depending on how the boundaries are redrawn, the outcome would almost certainly make it harder for Labour to form a government, with obvious implications for social policy, as well as other areas. In addition, while reducing the number of MPs might result in savings through having fewer MPs’ salaries to pay, which might fit with the mood of the public in the aftermath of the MPs expenses scandal, fewer MPs would also be likely to have impacts at the constituency level. There would be more constituents in a smaller number of constituencies and thus the level of constituency business that each MP has to deal with may increase. MPs and their staff would have less time to spend on each constituent who has a problem (often on social policy-related topics, such as benefits, housing or health provision), and constituents might be less well served by such a system. In addition, unless there were to be a significant reduction in the number of frontbenchers on both the government and opposition sides, there will also be fewer MPs to scrutinise legislation. Norton (2005) identifies both of these activities as important part of the MPs role, and both have clear implications for social policy, yet both may be significantly diminished by the Coalition’s proposals.

However, it is perhaps some of the Coalition’s proposals for the way that Parliament operates that might have a more immediate significance on the making and scrutiny of social policy. These include implementing in full the proposals of the House of Commons Reform Committee (2009), which would lead to the establishment of a Backbench Business Committee to give the House of Commons more control over its own timetable. Initially this will cover private members’ bills, but it will eventually include government bills and debates. In addition the chairs and members of departmental and select committees will now be directly elected by a secret ballot of MPs, removing or reducing the influence of the party whips in this area. Supporters of the reforms argue that they will make it easier for Parliament to challenge the executive, and thus lead to improvements in the scrutiny of legislation and the actions of government.

There are also proposals for reform of the House of Lords. While the Conservative manifesto said that ‘We will work to build a consensus for a mainly-elected second chamber to replace the current House of Lords’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.67) the coalition programme said that a committee would be established ‘to bring forward proposals for a wholly or mainly elected upper chamber on the basis of proportional representation’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.27) by December 2010. While it remains far from clear what such a chamber would look like, or what powers it would possess, elections based upon a more proportional system would be likely to result in government’s having to consider more carefully how to get their legislation through the upper House, and might lead to some reduction in the ‘ping-pong’ of bills between the two Houses, that was seen under Labour. In addition, more proportional electoral systems tend to lead to higher levels of representation for women and ethnic minority groups, so that a House elected on such lines might provide a greater degree of descriptive, symbolic, and perhaps even substantive representation for such groups (Pitkin, 1967).

In common with the other areas discussed in this paper there is an emphasis on how the public can get involved in this ‘new politics’. Petitioning has in recent years become a more popular way for members of the public to express their opinion on issues, with the Number 10 Downing Street system attracting a number of high profile e-petitions, and a number of...
petitions signed by more than fifty thousand people on aspects of education and health policy. The House of Commons has a long standing paper petitions facility and a variety of reports have recommended the adoption of an e-petitioning system (indeed, proposals for an e-petitions system were initially accepted by the Labour government, but then later rejected on the grounds that the costs to the proposed system were too high). The Conservatives suggested that ‘any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for a formal debate in Parliament’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.66), and that ‘the petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a Bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.66). However, it is not clear whether this would be an e-petitions system and how this system could work, given that the current paper system has dealt with an average of 322 petitions per parliamentary session since 1989/90-2007/8, and how it would cope with the increased volume of petitions. It is also far from clear how policy makers and legislators would react to such a system, and whether and to what extent it would alter their behaviour. Whilst it might be an additional means of public input, it might also, for example, over-emphasise transient interests and concerns, and there is no indication of whether or how such systems would simply give another voice to those who are already vocal and influential, or perhaps more valuably, give a voice to the less powerful.

The Conservative manifesto also proposed a new Public Reading Stage for bills, to give the public an opportunity to comment on proposed legislation online will be introduced. While this has been taken up in the programme for government it does again raise questions about how this would work, who would manage it and what it might cost, as well as what impact it might have. Given than many interest groups are already involved in the scrutiny of legislation, through links with MPs, and that the media frequently raise issues of concern, it might be questionable whether this new stage in the legislative process will add any significant value.

To make the ‘political system better reflect the people it is meant to represent’ the Conservatives planned to ‘introduce a £1 million fund to help people with disabilities who want to become MPs, councillors or other elected officials with the extra costs they face in running for office’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.67). In the Coalition’s programme for government this has been reduced to ‘extra support for people with disabilities who want to become MPs, councillors or other elected officials’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.27). Interestingly, neither the manifesto nor the programme for government, talks about increasing the number of women MPs, MPs from ethnic minorities groups, or indeed any other group.

In terms of legislative change that might have a fairly immediate and significant impact upon social policy, there are perhaps two proposals that stand out. One is the Conservatives’ commitment to replace the Human Rights Act with a UK Bill of Rights. However as the Liberal Democrats disagreed strongly with this the programme for government passes this on to a Commission to consider a Bill of Rights that ‘builds on all our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, ensures that these rights continue to be enshrined in British law, and protects and extends British liberties’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.11).

The second is also concerned with civil liberties, and while reflecting some of the ideas from the Conservative manifesto has the potential to go further, the Freedom Bill, which is part of ‘a full programme of measures to reverse the substantial erosion of civil liberties and roll back state intrusion’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p.11). On civil liberties the Coalition is proposing to scrap the ID card scheme, the National Identity register, the ContactPoint Database designed to hold information on all children under 18 and second generation biometric
passports which were all either proposed by the outgoing Labour Government in 2010 or in the early stages of implementation, some of which appear also to be being justified on the grounds that these plans were very costly.

Other aspects of rolling back the state however are likely to add costs, for example the extension of the Freedom of Information Act in order to provide greater transparency, further regulation of CCTV, while others appear to be primarily populist, such as not allowing schools to finger-print children without parental permission.

At local level some of the proposed reforms mirror those at the national level. For example, the theme of giving ‘individuals more direct control over how they are governed’ by giving ‘residents the power to instigate local referendums on any local issue if 5 per cent of the local population sign up’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.75) appears to reflect the Coalition’s views on citizen participation through petitions at the national level. However, there again appears to be significant potential for populist and possibly transient ideas impacting upon local policy. In contrast, giving councils a general power of competence might appear to give local authorities scope to pursue a wider range of activities, although taken together with proposals for the freezing of council tax and giving ‘communities the right to take over local state-run services’, this would appear likely to be limited in reality.

Devolution

Although devolution is covered in much more depth by Richard Parry, it forms an important element of the governance of social policy. It is therefore perhaps worth noting that the Conservative manifesto supported the changes ‘proposed by the Calman Commission for clarifying the devolution settlement’ and ‘will not stand in the way of a referendum on further legislative powers requested by the Welsh Assembly’ (Conservative Party 2010, p.83), a position which was very similar to that of the programme for government. Should the Calman recommendations be implemented, and if the Welsh Assembly is granted additional powers (although there will not be a referendum in Wales until 2011 at the earliest) there is clearly the potential for the further development of differences in the making and implementation of social policy making and implementation, particularly with different political control of the devolved administrations.

Europe

Given the major differences between the coalition partners on Europe, the programme for government outlines what is very much a holding position, so that the primary social policy implications are essentially that there will be no further transfer of powers to the EU over the course of the parliament. That said, there is a commitment to the government working to limit the application of the Working Time Directive in the UK. In the longer term the introduction of a ‘referendum lock’ and a United Kingdom Sovereignty Bill might also be likely to reduce the scope for the expansion of EU competency, including in social policy.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to examine the approaches to the governance of social policy of the Conservative Party prior to the General Election and the Coalition government subsequently. It suggests that the general direction reflects many of the ideas of the Conservative
governments of the 1980s and 1990s, including the relative merits and shortcomings of private and public sector provisions, the importance of individual choice the attempts to engage charities and social enterprises in the delivery of public services. While some of these may have been echoed under Labour, and like Labour, they illustrate an enthusiasm for ‘improving’ some of the mechanisms of government and policy making, they have clearly been given fresh impetus.

Yet there remain major questions about many of these ideas, including around: the degree of public enthusiasm, or even support, for greater involvement, whether it is ‘having a say’ over policies or legislation, or running public services; how resources will be allocated and managed, particularly in a time of real financial pressure and cuts in public expenditure; and what the implications are for ideas such as equity and accountability. Finally, there is, as yet, little in the Coalition’s proposal to suggest a real redistribution of power, particularly to those who currently have least.
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