

How Conservatism became a caricature of itself

an opinion by Emina Arella Haddlesey

Few political labels in the UK have suffered a more complete semantic collapse than “conservative.” In today’s discourse, the term is increasingly thrown at anyone willing to excuse cruelty or ignore suffering. If someone displays indifference to the vulnerable, dismisses global violence, or indulges bigotry, many are quick to conclude, “he’s conservative,” or “she’s a bit right-wing,” even when the person has never articulated a political position. But what do any of these moral failures have to do with conservatism? Historically, nothing. Yet in the modern imagination, moral bankruptcy is treated as the foundational feature of conservatism. The modern caricature of conservatism bears almost no resemblance to the philosophy that once shaped Britain’s institutions, protected rights, and restrained abuses of power. The irony is painful: the political tradition that helped write constitutions, temper revolutionary fervour, and draft domestic and international laws to defend human dignity has been reduced, by critics and by some of its own practitioners, to a cult of personality that leaves little to be desired.

John Locke, an English conservative whose writings profoundly influenced Britain’s constitutional evolution, vindicates the responsibility of government to the governed, the rule of law through impartial judges, and the toleration of religious and speculative opinion. Locke famously wrote: “No one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.” This is the moral bedrock upon which conservative thought was built. Locke’s insistence on natural rights was not a footnote to conservatism but its very foundation. A politics that feels comfortable dismissing the suffering of particular groups is not an heir to Locke’s conservatism but a fugitive from it.

Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservative thought and an MP in the House of Commons for nearly three decades, placed moral responsibility at the centre of political life. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he wrote: “Society is indeed a contract ... not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” Conservatism, for Burke, was stewardship. It is a duty to protect the vulnerable, uphold institutions, and maintain the moral fabric that allows a nation to endure.

In *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell, while not conservative himself (though, in 2025, he would likely be deemed conservative), warned of the deliberate corruption of words in political language: “Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” The term “conservative” today has suffered this fate. It can describe both Burke and the keyboard warrior who revels in spite. This is linguistic capture that conceals the abandonment of the tradition itself.

Part of the problem is that many have forgotten what conservatism originally set out to conserve. It was never meant to be a social identity or a cultural weapon. It was a method, arguably the most British political method ever developed. Conservatism was about practicality. Michael Oakeshott, a 20th-century British conservative

philosopher, captured the essence of this disposition when he wrote: “To be conservative is to prefer the tried to the untried.” And even more sharply: “The conjunction of dreaming and ruling generates tyranny.” In other words, conservatism was merely a rejection of ideological frenzy and a commitment to practical competence. It was not about shouting one’s values louder than the opposition; it was about managing a complex country with caution, humility and realism.

Historically, British conservatism took this responsibility seriously. It built the modern civil service, maintained monetary stability, shaped cautious reform, and protected the institutions that transmitted social trust, from the courts to Parliament itself. Its arguments with liberalism were disagreements of method, not compassion.

Yet perhaps the greatest neglect of modern British conservatism is in economics. Adam Smith, the intellectual anchor of classical conservative economics, did not preach unrestrained greed. *The Wealth of Nations* has profound moral subtexts. Smith wrote: “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.” He condemned collusion with equal force: “People of the same trade seldom meet together... but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public.” For Smith, markets existed to serve people, not the other way around. Prosperity was not an ideology; it was a responsibility. Modern conservatives, seduced by culture-war theatrics, often forget that Smith’s economics demanded fairness and accountability, and everyone having an opportunity.

In my view, Margaret Thatcher is the last political leader who grasped conservatism in its original, intellectually serious form. Thatcher, unfazed by neoteric ideologies or making enemies, was a stateswoman committed to small government and the practical tasks of running a nation. Her oft-quoted line, “Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul,” portrayed her belief that transforming economic structures can fundamentally alter people’s values and society, promoting individualism, personal responsibility, and a strong work ethic over collectivism. Interestingly, one of the only times Thatcher referred to anything ideological like a soul, she was referring to how economic foundations shape the character of a nation, staying within the traditional box of her job description.

Thatcher, echoing Smith, believed that “there is no freedom unless there is economic freedom.” However, she also believed that liberty without responsibility corrodes. Her mission was more aligned with Burke’s stewardship: restore solvency, tame inflation, rebalance the state, and strengthen institutions. Whether one agrees or opposes Thatcher, she is a prime example of what it means to govern with conservative seriousness, not with the opportunistic theatrics that now define parts of the political right. Many who claim her legacy today have abandoned her principles and discipline.

This abandonment is not confined to one party. Across political lines, we have examples of leaders who have no interest in morality but a strong interest in power. That means most of our examples of leadership are from people who fundamentally want to be feared more than they want to be loved to their core. That means that we can pull examples of both very good and very bad leadership that have prioritised Machiavellian strategy. Because culture has taken political correctness to the theatre of the absurd, much of political time is taken up by

ideology rather than Thatcher's practicality of how best to do the job of running the country. In the simplest, most sensible and strongest way possible.

British conservatism faces another challenge: cultural and financial marginalisation. Most major foundations and cultural institutions in the UK promote left-leaning frameworks. Liberalism benefits from amplification; conservatism is often defined publicly by its worst actors, many of whom are funded by foreign powers with their own strategic motives. The result is a political market in which serious conservatism is crowded out by its own grifters.

Benjamin Disraeli understood the stakes long before our era. In *Sybil*, he wrote: "Power has only one duty: to secure the social welfare of the people." It is a moral claim deeply consonant with true conservatism and demonstrates how conservatism held the moral high ground long before progressive politics mastered moral branding.

Despite failures of government and institutions, I maintain that the collapse of British conservatism lies within the public itself. Too many people have outsourced their moral judgement to their political "team." John Stuart Mill gave the clearest warning: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." When individuals cheer policies solely because their party endorses them, or attack policies solely because their opponents propose them, politics becomes sport and morals get checked at the door. Also, as soon as groupthink is at the forefront, critical thinking is not present. A healthy democracy requires independent moral reasoning: voters who can say, "My side is wrong," without feeling traitorous; citizens who evaluate ideas by principle rather than party. True conservatism demands this discipline, for without it, no philosophy, conservative or otherwise, can claim moral legitimacy.

The question is: Why is there a rise in support for every other political party, regardless of where they stand on the political spectrum, except for the Conservative Party? The answer is because of the void of what the party once stood for. Nature abhors a vacuum. The Conservative Party has stripped conservatism of its original meaning. Under the original form of conservatism, abandoning human dignity is not conservative; embracing foreign agendas is not conservative; and advocating for a lack of opportunity is not conservative. These are symptoms of a movement that has forgotten itself.

If British conservatism is to survive the looming abyss of irrelevance and the enormous rise of support for other parties, both on the right and left, it must reclaim the dignity, responsibility, prudence, social duty, and seriousness that once guided it. It must abandon the easy high of group showmanship and rediscover the work of governing a complex nation, focusing on commitment to small government and economic practicality.

Otherwise, conservatives in the UK will continue to play a role in a political pantomime that can only benefit their opponents and foreign powers.