I'll be voting UKIP if Cameron stays

Tim Congdon

Well-intentioned politicians are of two kinds, those who want to help people directly and those who want to free people so that indirectly they can help themselves. The distinction may sound like a quibble, but it is not.

The politicians who want to help people are in favour of an active state. They believe that the ordinary citizen is in some way inadequate (unhealthy, badly educated, even nothing more alarming than "beneath average"). The government must then do something (build more hospitals and schools, recruit more doctors and teachers) to ensure that no one is left behind and the nation becomes more "socially cohesive".

These paternalists see their job as being the application of their superior knowledge to state action of some kind. Their political impulses are to tax and spend, to meddle and regulate, and to interfere and control; they welcome state involvement in "socially desirable" activities.

All parties – including the Conservatives – have a fair proportion of paternalists. Indeed, Tory paternalism was historically one of the strongest traditions in British politics. When articulated by a Disraeli or a Macmillan, it made a powerful appeal to voters as well as promoting necessary social legislation. But most paternalists nowadays belong to Labour. A clear lesson of the 20th century was that societies with free markets and large private sectors are richer and happier than those with state planning and extensive government ownership. The dominant theme of Conservative politics in the past 30 years has been to diminish the role of the state in society, on the grounds that individuals know their own interests and abilities far better than anyone in the centre.

At some stage in her career, Margaret Thatcher ought to have said: "The man in Whitehall doesn't know best." The central tasks of the 1979-97 Conservative government – tight control over public expenditure, reducing taxation, privatising state-owned assets and removing a variety of impediments on free action by individuals (exchange control, credit restrictions, price and incomes policies) – were motivated by the wider argument for personal freedom.

People were being freed so that they could help themselves. The Tories' approach worked. Indeed, so successful were the policies of privatisation, exchange freedom and financial liberalisation that the Labour Government elected in 1997 has left them alone, and accepted that the case for traditional socialism is invalid.

I was one of the foot soldiers in the battles of opinion fought in the 1980s. In numerous newspaper articles, I was a consistent and loyal defender of the smaller-state, free-market policies identified with the Conservatives. The line was often unpopular, but I always felt that – in pressing the case for personal freedom against state action – I was on the winning side.

I never imagined that the modern Conservative Party would again embrace old-fashioned Tory paternalism, with a frank advocacy of expanding the state's responsibilities. The election of David Cameron to the leadership therefore came as a shock to me. No doubt many of those who voted for him have been surprised by what he has done in the past 15 months. But – to give him his due – Mr Cameron is industrious and prolific, at least in the sense of producing large numbers of words. In early October 2005, he wrote a number of articles that spelt out what kind of beliefs he held.

An article in *The Spectator* was enough for me. "Time for a completely new party" contained several hundred words of flannel ("the need for fundamental change", "the problem is our culture", etc.) and one possibly substantive proposal. This was an "exciting new policy direction", with his "proposal for a national school-leaver programme – involving schools, businesses, community organisations, charities and the Armed Forces – to prepare young people for their adult responsibilities and to create a greater sense of national cohesion".

What sense is to be made of all this? No doubt "schools, businesses etc." do many wonderful things, but it is sadly true that their hands are full. They cannot just drop what they are doing and suddenly commit themselves to one of Mr Cameron's pet initiatives. If Mr Cameron were prime minister, he could – I suppose – give orders to "the Armed Forces" to return from Afghanistan and Iraq, and to help in his new "national school-leaver programme" in order to advance "social cohesion". But I don't think that is what he meant.

Mr Cameron's supporters might tell me that the sort of phrases used in the *Spectator* article, and reproduced on many subsequent occasions, are part of a rebranding exercise. They might say that the politically correct and socially acceptable phrases are necessary to shift the party's "culture" towards the centre and capture more votes. I might also be reassured that the phrases have no implications for actual policy.

But I think this is unfair and dishonest. Mr Cameron should be taken at his word. When he says he is in favour of "national school-leaver programmes", "social action zones" and suchlike, and when he says that the Tories should become "the champions of social action", he really does mean what he says. Whether his words have any genuine meaning is another topic, but of his sincerity in uttering them there should be no doubt.

On the main issues of the day, all the big parties are now close together. Unless the Tories drop Mr Cameron with all his misguided baggage (a badly rationalised environmentalism, Third World do-goodism, holier-than-thou "social inclusiveness" and the rest), I cannot vote for it. I believe today – as I did in the 1980s – in a small state, low taxes and free trade. Under the leadership of Roger Knapman and Nigel Farage over the past five years, UKIP has endorsed the kind of economic policies I favour. If Mr Cameron is still Conservative leader at the next general election, I will definitely vote for UKIP.

Mr Cameron might claim that the one big area where he differs from Labour and the Liberal Democrats is Europe. But that remains to be seen.

The European social model – with its high spending and heavy burden of regulations, its preference for state action, and its suspicion of private initiative – was opposed by the Conservatives under Mrs Thatcher and John Major, and is opposed by UKIP now. But the Cameron rhetoric ("social action zones") is plainly in accord with it. For the many people in Britain who support free-market economic policies, conservatism on social issues and the continued independence of their nation, now is the time to consider supporting UKIP.

Professor Congdon is managing director of Lombard Street Research