

**‘We are not in politics to ignore peoples’ worries:  
we are in politics to deal with them.’ Why  
mainstream parties change policy on migration: a  
UK case study – The Conservative Party,  
Immigration and Asylum, 1960-2010.**

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We use a detailed study of the reasons behind significant changes in Conservative Party immigration policy over a half a century to see if they can be explained by the three drivers of party change proposed by Harmel and Janda and their colleagues. We find that electoral ‘shocks’ matter but that leaders matter most, while factional turnover is less important than is often thought. Our findings also support more recent cross-national research on parties’ policy changes which strongly suggests that election results are much less likely to trigger them than shifts in public opinion, although – unlike that research – we observe significant shifts occurring even when there is broad consonance rather than a marked contrast between the electorate’s and the party’s preferences. We conclude that Harmel and Janda’s theory, while helpful, needs to be supplemented by expanding our definition of external shock beyond electoral defeat and loss of office to include a party’s need to react to events in ‘the real world’, particularly when it is in government. A theory of party policy change also needs to take more seriously the fact that, in a competitive democracy, politicians are ideologically and instrumentally motivated to continuously monitor and then to reflect public (and party) feeling, and that this may be every bit as important as the periodic signals that they are sent at elections.

Even the most cursory glance across Europe makes it clear that the presence of an electorally significant far-right party is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for mainstream parties and the governments they form to change their migration policies. If, therefore, we want to understand shifts in migration policy we would be well advised, before turning too quickly to look for the influence of the far-right, to focus on the more conventional politics pursued either by the centre-left, which in many countries has long been anxious about appearing too ‘soft’ on immigration, or by the centre-right, which has, rightly or wrongly, enjoyed a reputation for taking a harder line. In order to do this, however, we need to take one step backwards in order to take two steps forward: if we want to explain why mainstream parties and governments change their policies on migration, we need to understand why they change their policies on anything. In this paper, we briefly outline a familiar and highly parsimonious model of party change before applying it to a detailed case study explored by process-tracing – an approach well-suited to an attempt to comprehend complex causation (George and Bennett, 2005) and to test whether a theoretical explanation which is already out there actually does the job (see Beach and Pedersen, forthcoming).

The UK Conservative Party, we argue, is an illuminating case – and not just because our previous work on the party (see Bale, 2011, 2012, Bale et al., 2011) provides us with the empirical raw material that we freely draw upon below. For one thing, the Party has made significant changes in its immigration policy over the last 50 years. Indeed, in this period – one of huge social, political and economic change – the Tories have rarely avoided the immigration issue for very long, either in opposition or in office, and, when in government, they have increasingly acted (though not always particularly successfully) to lower the number of people entering the UK in order to work, reside and settle there. For another, the likelihood of changes in Conservative immigration policy being prompted by the far-right is very low indeed: Britain’s plurality electoral system makes it very difficult indeed for fringe parties to win seats and, partly as a result, few voters can be persuaded to vote for them – especially at general elections. This means that we can concentrate on all the other factors which may or may not cause parties to shift their policy.

## **Modelling Party Change**

Before we can go on to see how well a model of party change can explain changes to the Party’s policy, however, we briefly need to say something about the model we want to use. Fortunately, this is not hard to do. There is, in fact, widespread agreement that change – whether it affects a party’s personnel, its organisation or (our particular focus) its policies – doesn’t ‘just happen’ but must be driven by something. The most commonly cited independent variables or drivers of change, largely derived from the framework elaborated by Harmel and Janda and their co-authors, are, first, external shock (essentially, electoral defeat or loss of office); second, a change of leader; and, third, a change in the dominant faction (or coalition) that, to a greater or lesser extent, runs the party in question (see Harmel and Janda, 1994, Janda et al., 1995, Harmel et al., 1995, and Harmel and Tan, 2003). Investigating the impact of these drivers of change on Conservative Party migration policy allows us to conduct a further empirical test of the model, at least as it touches on policy, and – if necessary – to discuss drivers that it may have previously underplayed or missed completely. Just as importantly, it allows us to connect the study of changes in migration policy to more general approaches to party politics – something we can

only hope will bridge rather than widen the disconnect between those who study public policy and those who study political parties (see Bale, 2008). We do this by pointing to particular changes in Tory immigration policy in the five decades between 1960 and 2010 and then tracing which (if any) of the three drivers of party change was responsible, as well as discussing other factors that, at times, turn out to have been equally, if not more, important.

What our detailed examination shows is that the relationship between, on the one hand, the policy changes that occurred and, on the other, some or all of the drivers of change – a relationship which in our case is summed up in Table 1 – is often as apparent as it is real. In short, while it might look at first glance as if our theory is doing its job, a close look at the case reveals, for instance, that the timing doesn't quite work, that the actors involved did things for different reasons, and that there is more often than not an equally valid useful explanation for why the party did what it did. This is not to say that the drivers proposed by the theory are unable to explain anything about our case. It is simply to say that they are not enough to explain everything. Most obviously, they need to be supplemented by expanding our definition of external shock beyond electoral defeat and loss of office to include a party's need to react to events in 'the real world', especially when it is in government. A theory of party policy change also needs to take more seriously the fact that, in a competitive democracy, politicians are ideologically and instrumentally motivated to continuously monitor and then to reflect public (and party) feeling, and that this may be every bit as important as the periodic signals sent to them at elections.

**Table 1 Policy changes and the proposed drivers: a striking but often superficial relationship**

Decade	Headline changes	Electoral Shock	Change of leader	Change of dominant faction
1960s	1962 - Commonwealth Immigrants Act tightens up citizenship and immigration controls			
	1965 – PM Douglas-Home calls for voluntary, government-assisted repatriation	✓		
	1966 – Conservative manifesto calls for more conditional entry system	✓	✓	
1970s	1970 - Conservative Party promises an end to ‘further large scale permanent immigration’	✓		
	1972 – Conservative government allows expelled Ugandan Asians to settle in UK			
	1974 – Party commits to review of nationality legislation in order to severely reduce net migration	✓		
	1978 – Conservative Leader Thatcher calls for ‘clear end to immigration’ 1979 – Conservatives propose a British Nationality Act to re-define citizenship and right of residence	✓	✓	✓
1980s and 1990s	Abandonment of 1979 manifesto promise to establish register of Commonwealth wives and children eligible for settlement			
	1990 – Bill allows 50,000 Hong Kong Chinese to settle in UK before handover of colony to China			
2000s	2001 – Conservative manifesto focuses on asylum and asylum-seekers	✓	✓	
	2005 – Conservative campaign puts renewed emphasis on ‘controlled immigration’; proposes cap on net migration, quota for asylum-seekers and border control police	✓	✓	
	2005 – Cameron becomes leader; issue of immigration rarely mentioned by leadership for first 18 months or so	✓	✓	✓
	2010 – Conservative campaign puts stress on immigration policy, but focus is on economic impact of immigrants; migration to be brought down to ‘tens of thousands’	✓	✓	✓

## The Sixties

In 1962, Harold Macmillan, Tory Prime Minister and party leader between 1957 and 1963, finally decided to take action on immigration. After years of delay and dither, the government finally passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act which ensured that henceforth only those British citizens whose passports were issued directly by the UK government would be exempted from immigration controls. On the face of it this momentous change, which effectively put an end to the right of any citizen of Britain's current and former empire to enter and settle in 'the mother country', can have had nothing to do with the shock of defeat or loss of office: at the general election of 1959, after all, the Party had once again secured a huge parliamentary majority. Nor had there been any change in leadership or in those in charge more generally. It is therefore understandable that historians have tended to emphasise (albeit not exclusively) that the tightening of the UK's immigration regime had more to do with the sheer increase of numbers of Commonwealth citizens coming into the country after the breakdown of administrative controls (particularly in South Asia) and in spite of the fact that the British economy was (especially in relative terms) beginning to sputter. Closer examination, however, reveals that the change in policy was in some ways a response to defeat – but that the response was anticipatory rather than retrospective. In other words, what mattered was the Party's conviction that, unless it took action on this issue (as well as on the economy and other issues), it would be in serious danger of losing the next general election – a signal it picked up from by-election defeats, opinion research, newspaper editorials, and feedback received 'on the doorstep' by canvassers and candidates at the general election it had just won so handsomely.

Once the political (if not the actual) problem posed by increasing numbers coming into the country had apparently been contained, however, there was (surprisingly) little attempt on the part of the Tories to capitalise on their newly-minted legislation. Their 1964 manifesto, for example, contained just a couple of sentences on the issue and located them under the heading, 'Regional Development'. The Conservatives lost that election after thirteen years in power – but only by the narrowest of margins and after a campaign in which immigration hardly featured either in the debate between the parties or (for the moment anyway) on the public's agenda, at least inasmuch as the latter can be captured by polling. It therefore seems unlikely in this case that defeat directly drove the tightening of the Party's immigration policy which swiftly followed, beginning with a tough speech by former Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home in February 1965 that called not just for tighter controls but voluntary, government-assisted repatriation. By the 1966 election, by which time Home had been replaced as party leader by Ted Heath, the Conservative manifesto was promising a more conditional entry system, with strengthened health checks and an insistence that those coming in declare potential dependents, while resources would be made available for 'voluntary repatriation' and for those areas with high immigrant populations.

But if defeat does not explain the tightening of policy after 1964, then neither does the Party's change of leader nor any change of those who operated alongside him or just under him. For one thing, Heath's victory in the leadership contest did not usher in a wholesale change in those in charge. For another, Heath himself was famously liberal on anything to do with race (into which category, in the UK at least, immigration definitely fell). Partly owing to this, and for all the hardening of the Party's line in the manifesto, the issue was barely mentioned during the

campaign – even though the playing of ‘the race card’ by one of the Party’s parliamentary candidates in 1964 had famously seen that candidate triumph when so many of his fellow candidates in equally crucial West Midlands marginals had lost to Labour. This leaves only two plausible explanations for the policy changes between 1964 and 1966. First, they reflected the preferences of Heath’s predecessor – and were therefore down to the leader but not to a change of leader. Second, they can be put down to a desire (though one which was more implicit than explicit) to respond to the fact that Labour, despite its criticisms of the Commonwealth Immigration Act when it was in opposition, not only retained the legislation when it entered government but actually took steps to make it even harder for ‘coloured’ immigrants to enter the country in order to work. In other words, even if the Conservatives chose not to make hay with the issue, they were determined to retain (or, if one looks at opinion polls which suggest the public at the time saw little difference between the parties on the issue, regain) whatever electoral advantage it afforded them.

If this was the intention, it didn’t make much difference to the outcome of the 1966 election which saw the Conservative Party trounced by the Labour government that had beaten it so narrowly less than two years previously. Since, by the time the next election came around – in 1970 – the Tories had tightened their immigration policy still further, there is at least *prima facie* evidence for the impact of electoral defeat, not least because, as Heath led the Party at both elections with pretty much the same team in place on both occasions, neither of the other two drivers – a change of leadership or dominant faction – was present. Once again, however, closer inspection suggests things were rather more complicated than they would first appear.

Immigration was actually one of the few areas in which Tory policy changed in any meaningful way between 1966 and 1970 (a general lack of development which, incidentally, casts doubt on any assumption that the bigger the defeat, the greater the change). But immigration policy only changed as the parliament wore on – and even then not as the result of any organised policy review but more in response to two events that occurred in early 1968. The first of these was Labour’s response to the threat of a large scale influx of ‘coloured’ immigration prompted by Kenya’s cruel (and economically nonsensical) decision to expel its Asian population (many of whom were legally entitled to British passports) in the name of ‘Africanization’. The Wilson government used its comfortable majority to pass (in under a week) legislation which effectively denied entry to many of those expelled, in so doing provoking outrage amongst its own liberal supporters – so much so, indeed, that it made the Cabinet all the more determined to stick to its commitment to a second round of the ‘race relations’ (i.e. anti-discrimination) legislation which, however unreasonably, encouraged more and more voters to see Labour as something of a soft-touch on immigration. The second event was Heath’s sacking of Shadow Cabinet minister, Enoch Powell, following a speech which the Tory leader and several of his colleagues regarded as an unforgivable attempt to exploit racial tension for his Party’s (and, in their view, for his own) ends. Given the hardening of public attitudes and the increased salience of the immigration issue triggered by these interrelated events – and given that most Conservative frontbenchers (notwithstanding their distaste for Powell’s actions) were no less prepared than their Labour counterparts to renege on commitments to the Kenyan Asians given by previous Tory governments – the tightening of policy became all but inevitable.

Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood speech' in April 1968 was not simply a sudden, opportunistic attempt to take advantage of the Kenyan situation. He had been, after all, one of the few national politicians to mention immigration during the 1966 election, constrained to speak out, he believed, by his duty to reflect and respect his constituents' views. Now, freed of any responsibility to toe the line by his summary sacking from the shadow cabinet, he continued to intervene publicly on the issue, winning support from voters, from the increasingly vocal Monday Club (the ginger group for Tory activists and MPs keen to push the Party toward a more populist, right-wing position) and from Party members more widely. Heath, however genuine his outrage and sense of personal betrayal, could hardly fail to ignore the fact that Powell's message resonated with so many grassroots members and Conservative supporters, actual and potential. In August 1968, for example, the Party's political education department, the CPC, distributed a briefing document on immigration and race to its local discussion groups: some 412 of them responded, 347 of them calling for an end to all immigration. This, plus strong feelings expressed in the parliamentary party and at Tory conferences, practically forced Heath (who received 2,756 letters in reaction to Powell's dismissal, only 12 of which supported it) to play catch-up in a series of speeches in the autumn and winter of 1968–9.

Naturally, Heath resented any suggestion that he was pandering to Powell and always made much of his indisputably genuine abhorrence of racial discrimination. Indeed, the bulk of evidence, not least a careful reading of some pretty forthright shadow cabinet discussions, suggests that decisions to tighten policy incrementally were taken in response to party and voter concern, but also because the (largely liberal) Tory leadership simultaneously appreciated the potential of the issue and believed that they could prevent it getting out of hand by being seen to listen. The changes made to policy in the 1970 manifesto, which were, in fact, all but decided as early as the summer of 1968, were clearly designed to ratchet back a permissive consensus on 'race relations' that had run too far ahead of public opinion, and to avoid either 'giving in to the right-wing' or looking too lenient. And any remaining temptation to backslide was killed stone dead when a much-publicised motion criticising the Party's harder line for not being hard enough was defeated at the 1969 Tory Party conference by only 1,349 to 954 votes. What made the difference, then, between the Party's offer to the electorate in 1966 and in 1970 was not the defeat suffered in the former but the fact that the Conservative leadership simply could not afford to go into the latter looking less tough than Labour on immigration and ignoring the overwhelming public support for Powell – support which was particularly strong in the crucial battleground of his home turf in the West Midlands.

## **The Seventies**

In 1970 it was made clear that a Conservative government would ensure that there would be 'no further large scale permanent immigration' and, to this end, to consider 'a new single system of control over all immigration from overseas' and to further decouple the granting of work permits from the right to permanent settlement. But at the next election, in February 1974, the Party went even further, its manifesto promising a review and possible reform of nationality legislation so as to bring down 'new immigration...to a small and inescapable minimum'. Why and how did this happen? Not for the first time, if we were to restrict ourselves to our model's three drivers of change, we would be in trouble. After all, the party had won a spectacular victory in 1970, overturning a big Labour majority with one of the biggest swings in postwar political history,

and the man responsible – Ted Heath – was (at that point anyway) not only still the Party's leader but a Prime Minister whose sway over his immediate subordinates (amongst whom there was very little, and certainly no ideologically-relevant, turnover) bordered on the hypnotic. Moreover, even if we were to go beneath the level of the leadership and presume (more for the sake of argument than any convincing empirical proof) that the parliamentary party could push policy along, we would still come away none-the-wiser. True, in the 1960s, a handful of sitting Tory MPs faced (largely unsuccessful) attempts to unseat them as a consequence of their voicing views on immigration and race considered too liberal by some of their activists. But the expression or otherwise of such views, or indeed of the opposite view), while it may or may not have helped or hindered selection as a candidate, had little impact on said candidate's chance of election and therefore on the factional balance of the Parliamentary Conservative Party at the time. In 1970, some 30 candidates associated with the Monday Club were elected to the Commons (up from 16 in 1966); however, so too were 39 Tory MPs who were associated with the socially liberal Bow Group - up from 17 in the previous parliament.

Again, a good part of the explanation (however unsatisfying it might be to those of us who prefer to think of ourselves as social scientists) would seem to lie in what Harold Macmillan famously referred to as 'events, dear boy, events' – although (once again) these events impacted on policy change via the impact that they had on feeling within the electorate and the Conservative Party. In 1972 another former colony in Africa, Uganda, also decided to throw out its Asian population. Acting on the legal advice of the Attorney General as well as the diplomatic advice of the Foreign Secretary, and, they insisted, on grounds of common humanity, the Cabinet decided it had no choice but to allow some 25,000 of those affected to settle permanently in Britain. The decision was regarded by many Party activists as a clear breach of the spirit if not the letter of the Party's manifesto commitments, and thus provoked resignations from constituency associations around the country. It also saw resolutions on immigration pour into the National Union Executive (effectively the head of the voluntary party) which went way beyond the particular issue, and in the words of the Party's official historian 'were both more deeply critical and more widespread reactions to the experience of Conservative government than supporters had ever sent in during the 1951–64 period'. None of this was enough to stop the leadership (indeed it may have encouraged it) from taking the highly unusual step of preventing a handful of people whose Powellite views on race and immigration it was felt were likely to bring the Party into disrepute from selection as Tory candidates before the 1974 election. But, just as it had done in the run up to 1970, it helped ensure that policy was ratcheted another notch towards restriction.

By 1979, the Tories were promising to go even further, in some ways anyway, than they had in 1970 and 1974. Their manifesto for the election that year represented quite a change from the document they presented in 1974's second election, held in October. Where the latter talked about a review and possible legislation, the former committed an incoming Tory administration to a new British Nationality Act that would define citizenship and right of residence. And the pledges which then followed were notably specific:

- (ii) We shall end the practice of allowing permanent settlement for those who come here for a temporary stay.
- (iii) We shall limit entry of parents, grandparents and children over 18 to a small number of urgent compassionate cases.
- (iv) We shall end the concession introduced by the Labour government in 1974 to husbands and male fiancés.
- (v) We shall severely restrict the issue of work permits.
- (vi) We shall introduce a Register of those Commonwealth wives and children entitled to entry for settlement under the 1971

immigration Act. (vii) We shall then introduce a quota system, covering everyone outside the European Community, to control all entry for settlement. (viii) We shall take firm action against illegal immigrants and overstayers and help those immigrants who genuinely wish to leave this country – but there can be no question of compulsory repatriation.

Can we, on this occasion at least, explain the change by pointing to one or more of our model's drivers? The answer would seem to be a resounding yes. True, defeat in February 1974 had not prompted a notably harder line – this in spite of the fact that the evidence (and many commentators) appeared to show that it may well have had something to do with the swing back to Labour in the West Midlands in the wake of the government's supposed 'u-turn' on Ugandan Asians and Enoch Powell's recommendation that people opposed to European integration vote for Wilson's party rather than Heath's. Nor is there much evidence of a direct link between the tightening of policy and the Party's subsequent defeat in October 1974, when immigration had not played a big part in the campaign. What that second defeat did do, however, was to trigger a change of leader and, in so doing, a change, if not in all the faces at the top, then in the dominant faction helping her to run the Party and make its policy.

Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party in February 1975. In January of the following year she appointed Willie Whitelaw as Shadow Home Secretary. Whitelaw may have been a moderate centrist but he was also a faithful lieutenant and Thatcher made it clear to him that, while she had sanctioned his predecessor's insistence that the Tories depart from precedent and not vote against Labour's latest race-relations legislation, she now wanted a harder line on immigration. Initially, she had left it to him to come up with a revised policy but, after it became apparent that it might not go far enough, stories began to circulate that he was about to announce a big departure – stories emanating not from Whitelaw but from sources close to the leadership. Then, when Whitelaw attempted to dampen down expectations in order to avoid having to live up to them, and just before a by-election in a marginal constituency where her words were bound to strike a chord, Thatcher promptly used a television interview at the end of January 1978, to speculate that 'by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here', to observe 'that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture', and to point out that 'taking in 40 or 50,000 a year' was far too much for a country without 'great wide open spaces or natural resources'. As a result, she said, the Conservatives 'must hold out the prospect of a clear end to immigration.' Whitelaw, as he later rather elliptically admitted, he had been 'effectively gazumped' by his boss: although privately furious, he stayed in post and a line even harder than the one he had originally intended to announce was duly unveiled.

Whether or not some of the promises made were realistic was a moot point even then. But, on balance, making them was probably electorally advantageous. Thatcher's remarks on television netted her nearly 5,000 letters in one week at a time when she would normally receive around 300. Opinion polls, too, suggested that the message was received and understood: Gallup in February 1978 reported that while just 13 per cent thought immigration would drop under a Labour government, 71 per cent thought that it would do so under the Tories. Academic research suggested that, although the sceptics were right in noting that immigration—like the more high-profile 'law and order' issue—mattered less to voters than 'bread and butter' concerns like the economy and public services, its ability to push significant numbers of otherwise undecided

voters toward the Tories should not be underestimated. That, along with the sense that they had implicit permission right from the top to do so, was why perhaps, although only 25 per cent of all Conservative candidates mentioned the issue in their election addresses to their prospective constituents in 1979, the number doing so was still far higher than the 4 per cent of their Labour opponents who chose to bring it up – and significantly higher than the 10 per cent and 6 per cent of Tory candidates who had done so in February and October 1974.

Public and (just as importantly it would seem) party members' anxiety on immigration had, in fact, begun to rise again in 1976 after Malawi became the latest African state to try to expel its Asian population and headlines were made by the case of Robert Relf, who had been jailed for insisting on his right to advertise his house for sale only to an 'English' family. Conservative constituency associations reacted predictably. There had been just 17 resolutions put forward on immigration to the annual conference in 1975. In 1976 the figure was 140. In June of that year, Airey Neave, who, in addition to being her Northern Ireland spokesman, ran Thatcher's private office, was already warning her that there had been 'very strong comments about the absence of a Party policy on immigration' and that 'there was bound to be some fierce criticism at the Party Conference, and our spokesmen would get a rough time unless we had quite a firm line published in advance'. Meanwhile, Edward Leigh, later an MP but who at that time was dealing with Thatcher's correspondence, wrote at the beginning of July to let her know that the issue was generating a lot of letters in the wake of the Relf affair, in part because it was mixed up with feeling over southern Africa: 'The recent events in Rhodesia seem to have touched some chord in people's subconscious to give them an impression that we are selling our "kith and kin" down the river in Rhodesia whilst being "taken over by the blacks" in this country.' Things calmed down somewhat once it became known that Whitelaw was working on it, but the leisurely pace of his deliberations turned out to be too slow for some. In January 1978, Dudley Smith MP, chair of the Parliamentary Select Committee on immigration which later that year published a sensationally tough report on the issue, wrote to his leader, warning her that 'There are still too many people even among our fairly dependable supporters who believe that we are not really serious over tackling the immigration problem and that at the end of the day we shall try and ignore the problem, as successive governments had done in the past with such lamentable results.'

The concern being communicated directly to Thatcher almost certainly reflected majority opinion within the Party, rather than the agitation of more radical, right-wing populist groups on its fringes. Indeed, outfits like the Selsdon Group and the Monday Club were pretty low profile or in steep decline by the late 1970s, while the National Association for Freedom (NAFF) was held at arm's length. But there were only a handful of people on the left of the Party who were concerned that too tough a line would compound the difficulties the Conservatives already had in picking up black and Asian votes —the argument that only two years earlier helped to persuade the Shadow Cabinet to abandon the precedents of 1965 and 1968 and instead avoid voting against Labour's race-relations legislation. These minority concerns were reflected in a warning, issued in January 1978 (just a few weeks before Thatcher's sensational remarks on television) from Central Office's director of Community Affairs, Andrew Rowe, that it was 'all too easy and highly tempting for the aspiring politician or the cheap vote catcher to capitalise on . . . fears and misunderstanding with talk of "stemming the flood"' but that this would not only leave the Conservatives unable to court the ethnic minority vote but see them alienate white liberals too.

That Thatcher ignored such warnings is obvious, but whether that made her a ‘cheap vote catcher’—or even meant that she was following Heath in having to respond to public and grass-roots feeling triggered by events—is debatable. Nor is there much hard evidence that she (or her advisors) actually saw the [extreme right] National Front as a significant electoral threat to the Conservatives, even if she was genuinely concerned that ordinary people might be tempted to vote for what she and many others regarded as a lunatic fringe. Far more likely is that she really meant it when she suggested in her famous television interview that allowing such parties to make the running on immigration was a dereliction of democratic duty on the part of much bigger, mainstream parties: in other words, when she said ‘We are not in politics to ignore peoples’ worries: we are in politics to deal with them’, she really meant it. Happily for her, of course, there was little or no difference on immigration between Conservative activists and the average voter. Nor was there any contradiction (as there had been for Heath) between her belief that politicians should respond to public feeling (and in so doing promote the electoral interests of her party) and her own feelings on the issue in question. Nigel Lawson MP, by then one of her most valued advisors, sent her a confidential memo just weeks before her televisual strategic strike on her Shadow Home Secretary in January 1978:

I agree with populist ‘Conservatives want the same as you’ theme. But this is useless unless underpinned with practical examples. In this context, the property-owning democracy (especially in its sale-of-council-homes aspect) is probably still the most important single area; but we must not shirk the immigration issue, which is almost the acid test of whether a political party is in tune with the ordinary people.

To say that Mrs Thatcher could not have put it better herself is tempting, but untrue. After all, that was exactly what she did – famously or infamously, according to taste – not long afterwards.

## **The Eighties and Nineties**

In government between 1979 and 1997, the Conservatives, having quickly fulfilled most of their pledges including a new Nationality Act, made few if any significant changes to immigration policy. Their manifestos reminded voters, firstly, that control had been achieved on the ‘firm but fair’ basis which (as both main parties had been insisting since the mid-1960s) underpinned good race relations and, secondly, that, while the increased numbers of people claiming asylum generated by post cold-war conflicts would be dealt with fairly, they would not be allowed to abuse British hospitality. In practice, there were one or two *ad hoc* instances where the Party’s policy of putting an end to large-scale immigration into the UK was set aside. The earliest was the abandonment, despite a parliamentary defeat engineered by right-wing backbenchers, of the 1979 manifesto promises to prevent male spouses and fiancés settling in Britain and to establish a register of Commonwealth wives and children eligible for settlement – the latter falling victim to sheer practicality, the former to legal opinion suggesting it would contravene the ECHR. But even more bitterly fought was a Bill, given its second reading in April 1990, allowing 50,000 Hong Kong Chinese and their families the right of abode in the UK subject to a points system rewarding skills and English—a move designed to calm the fears of the Colony’s richest and most vocal residents as the inevitable handover to China drew nearer. Inasmuch as we need to explain such minor changes, then, they appear to have had nothing at all to do with the three classic drivers of party change.

## The Noughties

The first and second of those drivers – electoral shock and consequent loss of office, followed immediately by a change of leader, were clearly in play after 1997. But did they impact on changes in Conservative immigration policy? The answer is yes, but more indirectly than directly. There was certainly a change in emphasis by the time the next general election was fought in 2001. Unusually, immigration itself was not mentioned in the Conservative manifesto. Instead the focus was on the Party's promise to make the UK a 'safe haven, not a soft touch, on asylum', claims for which were all but assumed to be 'bogus' and causing 'chaos'. The Tories, it promised, would end Labour's mismanagement of the system by speeding up the claims process, detaining new applicants in secure accommodation and setting up a 'Removals Agency' to deport those whose applications had been rejected.

No one seriously thought, however, that the Tories had been swept away in Tony Blair's first landslide victory because of their poor performance in this area. And if some thought that they could perhaps have made more of Labour's promise to scrap the so-called 'primary purpose rule' (which obliged foreign nationals marrying British citizens somehow to prove that they were doing so for genuine reasons and not simply to obtain residence in the UK), no-one said it publicly. Any hardening of policy (or the rhetoric that passed for policy), therefore, was not a direct response to defeat. However, the sheer size of Labour's victory, combined with its huge and continuing poll leads on 'bread and butter' issues like the economy and public services, drove the Conservatives' new, thoroughly Thatcherite leader William Hague and his inner circle (though by no means all his Shadow Cabinet colleagues) to conclude that their best bet was to focus on the one or two issues where their own populist instincts were in tune with those of the voters, namely on Europe ('save the pound') and asylum. The approach did not – as the Party's own pollsters predicted – pay off and it duly suffered another heavy defeat.

That second defeat did, not however, lead the Party to conclude that it had been mistaken to argue that Labour would, in Hague's words, turn Britain into 'a foreign land': indeed, rather than pause for thought, it played the same tune, only louder. By the time of the next election in 2005, Hague himself was long gone, replaced first by the hapless Iain Duncan Smith and then by the more competent, but equally Thatcherite, Michael Howard. In policy terms the stress was still on restriction but had shifted back from asylum to 'controlled immigration' – one of the five promises that featured on the front cover of the Tory manifesto, as well as on a poster (with the none-too-subtle tagline, 'It's not racist to impose limits on immigration. Are you thinking what we're thinking?') Inside, it was given its own section, yet was also referred to in passages on health care, safer communities and terrorism. Specifically, the Party proposed a points-based system for work permits, an annual (but undefined) limit on the number of immigrants, along with a fixed quota for asylum seekers and the establishment of a British Border Control police force, as well as the suggestion that the Party would, if necessary, tear up Britain's commitments under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees to get its way.

The thinking behind the even tougher policy was, once again, a somewhat desperate desire – given the Party's continuing failure to seriously erode Labour's lead on the economy and public services – to pitch to voters on one of the few issues on which (according to opinion research) Tory instincts seemed to chime with theirs. And, once again, the steer came straight from the

very top. Howard and his advisors, it is true, were (like his two immediate predecessors) slightly concerned that any trickle of Tory voters to the populist, Eurosceptic, anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP) might help Labour retain key marginal seats. But their main motivation was the conviction that the Conservatives' leader could only be sold to the public as an authentic and instinctive right-winger – with policies to match. Indeed if they had had their way, Howard (who claimed his main concern was to show voters tempted by extremist outfits like the BNP that the Tories could be relied on when it came to immigration) insisted he would have finished the campaign by raising the abuse of family reunification by immigrants from the Indian sub-continent.

That he did not do so was apparently down to one of his closest advisors – an up-and-coming MP called David Cameron who had impressed Howard not because he shared his ideological convictions (he did not) but because he was both bright and a brilliant communicator. Cameron's subsequent victory in the 2005 Conservative leadership contest, plus the fact that it followed another hefty election defeat and ushered in a dominant (though never completely dominant) 'modernising' faction, means that all three drivers of change were present in the run-up to 2010. The Tories' new leader and those around him clearly got the message from three consecutive drubbings that the Party could not simply go on as it was. Yet, in fact, policy ultimately changed rather less (or, more precisely, changed in a less liberal direction) than initially predicted. For just over a year-and-a-half, Cameron said nothing about immigration – a silence which (along with counter-intuitive initiatives on, for example, the environment) was all of a piece with the modernisers' determination to 'decontaminate the Tory brand', particularly in the eyes of more liberal middle-class voters, many of whom had come to see the Conservatives (to use an unfortunate phrase first used by one of the modernisers) as 'the nasty party'. Thereafter, however, the Party began to talk about it once again albeit in a rather less direct way which (in true 'dog-whistle' fashion) made it hard for its opponents to charge it with 'playing the race card' but made it obvious to anyone with ears to hear that it was still on the side of those who thought that things had gone too far and needed to be brought back under control.

The Conservatives' 2010 manifesto (rather ironically in view of the negative implications of the Party's new policy for British firms) filed immigration under business and a commitment to 'attract the brightest and best to our country'. For the first time ever perhaps there was an explicit focus on economics, with the promise that, under a Tory government, only those who would add value to the British economy would be welcome since 'immigration today is too high and needs to be reduced'. While retaining the pledge to establish a Border Police Force, the Party (rather unwisely in the view of many experts) promised to bring down net migration from hundreds to tens of thousands per year by bringing in a cap on the number of non-EU migrants admitted annually, tightening up on student visas and introducing English language tests for those coming to the UK to get married. The fact that all this represented yet another hardening of the Party's line was not, as time went on at least, due to Cameron needing to placate his internal critics (of whom there were very few – at least in public – after it began to look like he would win the next election). Instead, it represented a clear-eyed calculation on the part of the leadership that it would now go largely unnoticed by the AB liberals (impressed as they were by his reasonable tone and his declared desire for 'a grown-up debate' on the issue) but would nevertheless be appreciated by the C2 voters the Conservatives also needed to woo (and did in fact woo) away from Labour in 2010. It was also legitimated (though not, it seems, prompted) by Prime Minister

Gordon Brown's rather desperate promise in September 2007 to create 'British jobs for British workers' – and made all the more palatable by being overseen by a Shadow Minister (Damian Green) with a reputation for being as 'progressive' as it was possible to be in the twenty-first century Conservative Party.

## **Conclusion**

Significant changes in migration policy made by the Tories in both government and opposition from 1960 to 2010, can be explained by looking at the role of three drivers of party change which are the focus of the model proposed by Harmel, Janda and those who have written with them and/or followed their example. However, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that any one of three drivers will always trump or necessarily precede the others. Indeed, that is precisely the point: pre-eminence and precedence are empirical questions that we should be looking to answer. In the process of formulating that answer, it also becomes evident that other drivers, too, are important and that, not for the first time, correlation (of the kind that can be identified by 'eyeballing' Table 1, for instance) is not causation (better reflected in Table 2, in fact).

**Table 2**      **What really mattered**

Decade	Headline changes	Brief Explanation
1960s	1962 - Commonwealth Immigrants Act tightens up citizenship and immigration controls	Party's conviction that, unless it took action on this issue, it would be in serious danger of losing the next election even though it had won easily in 1959.
	1965 – PM Douglas-Home calls for voluntary, government-assisted repatriation	Personal initiative by Home: no evidence that immigration seen to have played a role in Party's narrow defeat in 1964.
	1966 – Conservative manifesto calls for more conditional entry system	Party determined to retain (or regain) whatever electoral advantage issue afforded them after Labour government took unexpectedly tough line in 1964/5.
1970s	1970 - Conservative Party promises an end to 'further large scale permanent immigration'	Decisions to tighten policy incrementally taken in response to party and voter concern (ramped up by Enoch Powell) but also because the (largely liberal) Tory leadership simultaneously appreciated the potential of the issue, the need not to be outdone by a tough Labour Home Secretary, and believed that they could prevent it getting out of hand by being seen to listen.
	1972 – Conservative government allows expelled Ugandan Asians to settle in UK	Acting on legal advice the Cabinet decided it had no choice but to allow some 25,000 of those affected to settle permanently in Britain.
	1974 – Party commits to review of nationality legislation in order to severely reduce net migration	Response to party concerns and public opinion.
	1978 – Conservative Leader Thatcher calls for 'clear end to immigration' 1979 – Conservatives propose a British Nationality Act to re-define citizenship and right of residence	No evidence that immigration had cost the Party either election in 1974, but party concerns and public opinion about immigration rising. Stopping it is electorally advantageous but is also democratic duty.
1980s and 1990s	Abandonment of 1979 manifesto promise to establish register of Commonwealth wives and children eligible for settlement	Deemed unpractical and possibly in contravention of ECHR.
	1990 – Bill allows 50,000 Hong Kong Chinese to settle in UK before handover of colony to China	Designed to calm the fears of the Colony's richest and most vocal residents as the inevitable handover to China drew nearer.
2000s	2001 – Conservative manifesto focuses on asylum and asylum-seekers	No evidence that issues played any part in 1997 defeat but leadership decided to focus on issues where their own populist instincts were in tune with those of the voters, namely on Europe ('save the pound') and asylum.
	2005 – Conservative campaign puts renewed emphasis on 'controlled immigration'; proposes, cap on net migration, quota for asylum-seekers and border control police	Party's continuing failure to seriously erode Labour's lead on the economy and public services, leaving little alternative but to pitch to voters on one of the few issues on which Tory instincts seemed to chime with their own.
	2005 – Cameron becomes leader; issue of immigration rarely mentioned by leadership for first 18 months or so	Stress on immigration and asylum in 1997 and 2001 deemed not only insufficient but counterproductive. Silence part of attempt to 'decontaminate the brand', and gain 'permission to be heard' before reintroducing tough line with lighter touch.
	2010 – Conservative campaign puts stress on immigration policy, but focus is on economic impact of immigrants; migration to be brought down to 'tens of thousands'	Having gained 'permission to be heard', the Party can return to issues it owns, albeit dealt with in a more nuanced way.

In the case of Conservative immigration policy between 1960 and 2010 it so happens that leadership would seem to be the most important of the three classic drivers of change, with the loss of elections and office playing a lesser part than one might predict and any dominant faction (assuming one existed, which was not always the case) playing only a minor supporting role. Policy rarely shifted in direct response to defeat at the ballot box and, even if it shifted indirectly, such shifts were no bigger than some of those which occurred in the wake of victory: the move to limit unrestricted Commonwealth entry in 1962 and then to allow a sudden influx of tens of thousands in 1972 are the most obvious cases in point. Nor, incidentally, is there much evidence that the shifts that occurred in the wake of defeat were more significant when that defeat was heavy than when it was narrow: the Tories only just lost the two elections of 1974 but were soon promising the end of an era by pledging to treat Commonwealth citizens like any other ‘aliens’; they lost massively in 1997 but, although the rhetoric was ramped up, the actual measures proposed were small beer in comparison. Likewise, the policy shifts that do occur after election defeats are not necessarily in the expected direction. Why, for instance, did David Cameron tighten Tory immigration policy still further in 2010 – to the extent that he made a promise on numbers which many think will be impossible to fulfil – after his party had lost three elections on the trot emphasising immigration (and asylum) and promising at each successive contest a more restrictive regime? Moreover why did he do so despite the fact that it was an article of faith amongst Conservative modernisers that such an approach had badly alienated the electorally crucial liberal middle-classes and the media that catered to them?

Whether Cameron was correct or not to do what he did should not detract from our overall finding that leaders did – and do – make a difference, although we would stress that they do so in and of themselves. *Pace* Harmel and Janda and their colleagues, policy change need not be driven by a *change* of leader; it can equally well be driven by a leader changing his or her mind. There are many reasons why that might happen, but the most obvious include, firstly, the need to respond to party and public feeling, whether it be triggered by particular cases or by developing trends, and, secondly, what might fairly be termed *force majeure* – international crises or legal agreements that cannot simply be wished away. Predictably, perhaps, such things are more acutely felt in office than they are in opposition, which may well explain why at least some of the promises made when outside government have to be broken in it.

The Conservatives’ case, then, at least when it comes to immigration policy in the fifty years following 1960, fits nicely with Harmel and Janda’s (and their colleagues’) finding that electoral ‘shocks’ matter but that leaders matter most, while factional turnover is less important than is often thought. But it also supports more recent cross national research on parties’ policy changes which strongly suggests that election results are much less likely to trigger them than shifts in public opinion (Adams et al., 2004), although – unlike that research – we observe significant shifts occurring even when there is broad consonance rather than a marked contrast between the electorate’s and the party’s preferences. To find out whether this all is also the case when it comes to other parties in other countries at other times, will require further research. Furthermore, that research will also have to factor in our finding that many of the changes in policy are often driven by two other factors. The first is developments in the global environment. The second is parties’ believing that, by tightening their country’s migration regime, they will not only outbid and outperform their opponents electorally but also fulfil their democratic obligation to respond to voters’ insistence that government protect the nation’s borders and its culture, however porous and ill-defined they may, in reality, be. To remind ourselves of this, however, is not to assert that parties’ stances are somehow purely demand-

driven: how can they be when, as so many scholars point out (see Aaroe, 2012), the public's sense of what is politically urgent or desirable is, at least in part, a function of what parties themselves say and do?

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