In a progressive country change is constant; and the great question is not whether you should resist change which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, and the traditions of a people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles, and arbitrary and general doctrines.

Benjamin Disraeli, 1867

We cannot really believe that this is the moment for the party of Baldwin and Churchill, of Macmillan and Butler, of the Industrial Charter and the social advances of the 1950s to retreat behind the privet hedge into a world of narrow class interests and selfish concerns.

Sir Ian Gilmour, 1975

How did Conservatives understand Thatcherism and the events of the Thatcher era? Despite the success of Margaret Thatcher in leading her party to three consecutive election victories there were always some Conservatives who regarded Thatcherism as an aberration, a deviation from the broad highway of the Conservative tradition, and predicted that sooner or later the Conservatives would return to the political tradition represented by Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath.

From this standpoint what happened in 1975 was that the party was ‘hijacked’ by its extremist wing. Aided by events and divisions among the other parties it was able to secure
itself in power, and banish or win over its enemies within the party. But all the while it remained illegitimate and those it exiled from influence and office waited the day when the usurper would be gone and they would be restored to their rightful place.

New-Right Conservatives, however, refused to accept that there would ever be such a restoration. They regarded Margaret Thatcher’s accession to the leadership as the reassertion of true Conservative principles that had been forgotten during the party’s long postwar acquiescence in the regime of social democracy. According to this view it was postwar Conservatism that was the aberration, from which Thatcher rescued the party.

Margaret Thatcher’s tenure of the Conservative leadership was therefore accompanied by a fierce debate among some Conservatives over whether ‘Thatcherism’ reasserted Conservative principles or broke from them. The party was riven by ideological and doctrinal disputes to an extent remarkable for a party that has always prided itself on its pragmatic and non-ideological approach to politics. One leading Conservative lamented that ‘the odium theologicum’ had come to infect the Tory party. This debate was in the first place a debate between two groups involved in a struggle for position and influence within the party. But the question ‘is Thatcherism conservatism?’ involved a wider issue than simply which leadership group was to dominate the party. It goes to the heart of our understanding of British conservatism. Does this tradition embody a distinctive ideology and doctrine, or is it better analysed as a practical activity, a form of statecraft, in which ideas and principles are subordinated to political calculation, the pursuit of office and the management of power?

The interpretation of Thatcherism has absorbed a great deal of intellectual energy on the right. The view of Thatcherism as a new ideological doctrine initially commanded most attention. But although there was some debate as to whether Thatcherism was or was not a Conservative doctrine, the real issue quickly became the relationship of this doctrine to the party’s new statecraft. Even if the doctrines of Thatcherism were regarded as alien to the Conservative