9 Wars of Position: Trade Unions

In the more polemic assessments of a decade of Conservative administration, critics and supporters have argued that there was a general design: either a long, clear vision of a new order, or 'a hegemonic project' to alter the balance of power in British society. Ten years after 1979 it may be asked what evidence there is for either, given the haphazard nature of much that was done, the ebb and flow of government determination, the incremental nature of almost all policies.

The Conservative Party has been changed continuously since Mrs Thatcher became leader and in a more dramatic and public fashion than during the previous comparable transition when Stanley Baldwin led it after 1923. Even if she and her immediate colleagues did not possess fully defined plans, they used the party itself as an agent of transformation while in Opposition. They used the force of revulsion against the recent past which affected many MPs and officials (even those still friendly to Heath) and the majority of regional chairmen, agents and party activists, to jolt the membership and expose it to the heady excitement of radical change. It scarcely mattered to them, or to potential Conservative voters that these new ideas came from individuals who had previously made little headway under the post-war leadership, some of whom could scarcely have been described as Conservative, as that term had been understood in the previous half-century.

Subsequent experience under Labour governments in the late 1970s and the rise of an activist, ultra-democratic left helped the new leaders to convince the Conservative Party that the system of corporatist brokerage had to be abolished, and a government's inalienable right to use its parliamentary majority, however small, reasserted. The party, as government, alone should declare the national interest; for practical reasons, because at a time of crisis when the post-war consensus had ceased to exist, there was neither
time nor political space to haggle with non-elected bodies; for constitutional reasons because, according to the theory of parliamentary sovereignty, non-elected pressure groups or governing institutions had no right to participate. As for civil servants and the state's guardians, these were to be reminded that their function was that of technical experts in the service of government, not to act as if they were the state's agents in managing democracy.

For a party leadership which recognised no substantial distinction between government and state, and not much of one between government and national interest, and therefore repudiated one of the main political-philosophical elements in mid-twentieth-century British history, there was to be no more 'extended state'. Specifically, the state as it had been mismanaged was blamed for the incremental or ratchet process culminating in the fiscal crisis of the 1970s; and for the excessive ambitions which had led to a series of state failures to achieve economic and social objectives ever since the Second World War. The state's fiscal excesses and overweening bureaucratic mass had to be pruned, and the governing institutions which had crowded in and became a parasitic part of it, repelled.

The range and variety of historical examples used at the time to illustrate what was intended suggested that this amounted to a general outlook or sensibility, rather than a precise formulation. It was not at all clear, for example, whether exponents imagined a return to basic welfare state provision (Beveridge's first Report, in its original form) and sponsorship relationships with industrial and labour markets as they had existed in 1944 as a preliminary to remedying everything that had subsequently gone wrong, or a more radical reversion to an earlier golden age of individual self-reliance, located perhaps in 1924 or 1904. Insofar as contemporary models served, however, they looked first to the United States; and – if at all to Europe – at West Germany of the Erhard 'social market economy'. French, Scandinavian, Austrian or more recent social democratic experience in West Germany rated very low indeed.

Given the range of individual opinions from Sir Keith Joseph to James Prior in the new Cabinet, an ideological centre of gravity existed only in the sense that these ideas about the state mattered and would inform policy-making in separate areas, according to what individual Ministers did in their own departments. If there was a general design, other than Mrs Thatcher's personal direction, it was likely to reveal itself in what they did to redefine relationships between government and market political organisations, between