

2.1 Conservatism

Introduction

If an ideology is 'a system of ideas at the basis of an economic or political theory' (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*), it could be argued that conservatism is barely an ideology at all, based as it is in a reaction to the changes put forward by other ideologies. Conservatism is based firmly upon pragmatism and the belief in gradual improvements founded on experience and existing institutions, rather than a priori reasoning and radical change.

Confusing terms

'conservative'

We often use this term to describe people who are unwilling to change or out of date.

'conservative ideology'

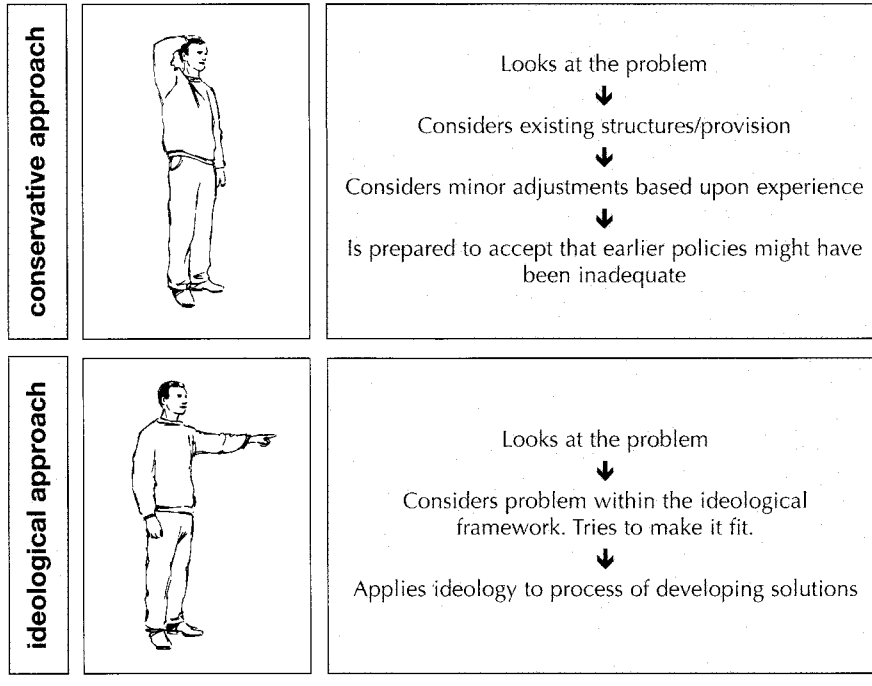
See left: this is a supposedly more coherent approach to directing government policy.

'Conservative'

The capital letter usually denotes a reference to the Conservative Party or its policies/position.

Approach

As a result of this, conservatives often take a different approach to solving problems than those coming from a more traditionally ideological perspective.



Human nature

This is a phrase used when referring to the natural human state; that is to say, what people are like in their pure state when one removes the influence of the societies in which they live. Some people have a positive view of human nature and believe that society can corrupt individuals. Those with a more pessimistic view would see people as flawed and society as a necessary regulating force.

Paternalism

Where authority is centralised but the state is benevolent; caring for the most needy.

Origins

Modern conservatism dates from the opposition to the popular radicalism prevalent around the time of the French Revolution in the 1790s. It was a reaction first to this radical change and later to liberalism (Ch 2.2) and socialism (Ch 2.3). Writers such as Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) highlighted the dangers of radical change and the need for societies to evolve in order to avoid the emergence of such destructive radicalism.

Conservatism today

Modern conservatism can be divided into two clear strands:

Liberal/libertarian conservatism

For example, the 'New Right' in the UK and US in the 1980s/1990s. In Britain, the advent of Thatcherism and 'neo-liberal' economic policy.

Collectivist/paternalist conservatism

Describing much of the post-war Conservative history in Britain. 'One-nation Tories'. Often marginalised under Thatcher as 'the wets'.

Free market economics ... deregulation ... privatisation ... restrictions on the power of the unions	Mixed economy (Keynesianism)
Limited state intervention ... 'rolling back the frontiers of the state'	More significant state intervention
Quick and radical change	Slow gradual change ... evolution not revolution
Maintaining national sovereignty	Increasing integration in Europe
Quite individualistic	Collectivistic ... pluralistic
Limited welfare provision ... low 'safety net' only	Support for universal welfare state ... paternalism (see above)