Abstract

What does *conservative* mean? This question troubled intellectuals, politicians and parties after 1945 in the United Kingdom and in West Germany. In Britain *conservatism* was an accepted part of the political vocabulary, denoting a particular tradition of political thought and practice with its nucleus in the Conservative Party. But what was its main character? What kind of *conservatism* should the party represent? In the Federal Republic of Germany, by contrast, *conservatism* was a difficult concept for the young democracy to swallow. It carried a heavy antiliberal and antidemocratic burden which had delegitimized the Weimar Republic and paved the way for National Socialism. Could there be a place for *conservatism* within democratic culture after all? The debates about the meaning and character of *conservatism* challenged those parties which considered themselves, at least partly, to be *conservative*: the Conservative Party in the UK and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as well as the Christian Social Union (CSU) in West Germany.

The book scrutinizes the debates about *conservatism* in the UK and the FRG from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. Informed by historical semantics and inspired by Michael Freeden's interpretation of political ideologies, it conceives of conservatism as a flexible linguistic structure, defined by four structural principles and a net of key concepts. This analytical understanding of conservatism opens up comparative and transnational perspectives and helps to distinguish contemporary usages from the historiographical concept.

When in the 1960s and 1970s conservatives in both countries lost intellectual and political support and an invigorated Left gained both electoral and cultural ground, a feeling of crisis quickly gathered momentum. This perception of crisis extended to language, which seemed to have gone equally astray: even *conservative* no longer seemed to denote what it was supposed to denote. Conservative programmatic debates and policy reviews, ideological struggles and determined work in think tanks became an important element of the British political culture. Similar developments could be observed in the Federal Republic of Germany: intellectual journals hunted for a contemporary conservatism; in countless committee meetings, party conference debates, and study circles, CDU and CSU came to an understanding about their programmatic objectives; and increasingly groups of intellectuals constituted and propagated their individual version of a conservatism fit for the Federal Republic. In both countries, these debates formed an integral part of the "war of words", as Margaret Thatcher put it, or the "Kampf um die Begriffe", as famously stated by Kurt Biedenkopf; and in both countries, Conservative parties involved themselves in linguistic politics.

In the course of these two decades, both in the Britain and in West Germany the political languages of conservatism were newly formulated. In the UK the debates were centred upon the Conservative Party and led to bitter inner-party struggles which, in the end, the Thatcherites won. In West Germany two incon-

gruent variants of *conservatism* emerged from a complex intellectual debate: a liberal, democratic version on the one side and an antiliberal, new right version on the other. For the Union parties the tactical adoption of the concept of *conservatism* by the new right constituted an enormous challenge. For them it remained a difficult concept, which they embraced only very reluctantly. However, they spoke a Conservative political language.

At the same time, the battle about the meaning of *conservatism* was fought on a European level, and here the Conservative Party and the CDU/CSU were partners. From the late 1950s onwards the parties cooperated closely, trying to forge a united Centre Right in the European Communities. The alleged incompatibility between *Conservatism* and *Christian Democracy*, strongly enforced by South European and Benelux parties, they regarded as a mere linguistic problem, not one of substance. Yet the projected European closing of ranks did not materialize due to the ongoing resistance against *conservatism* which the majority of parties in the European Union of Christian Democrats were not willing to integrate into their political vocabulary.

The national and transnational debates about the meaning of *conservatism* indeed had far-reaching consequences. They still influence politics today.