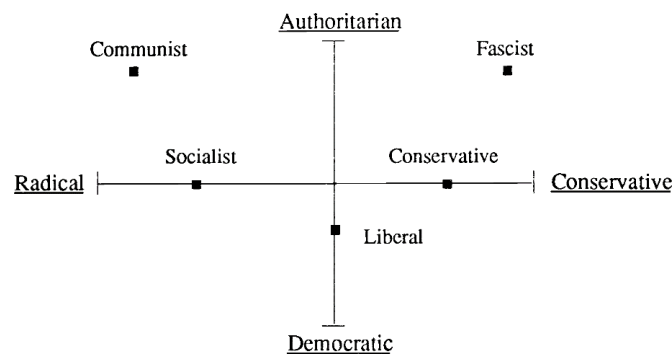


## A Brief Guide to the Political Tribes

Assuming that we want to think a little more deeply about politics and we wish to go beyond personalities and specific policies, we might wonder which of the main political parties are our natural home. This is a rough guide to the 3 main strands in British politics: Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism. It is a little simplistic but may prove useful in helping us get a sense of our political instincts.

Political Ideas are typically located on a **left vs right spectrum** in terms of whether we start with the individual (right) or society (left) . We may also think in terms of a different spectrum in terms of how much control a government should have versus the rights of individuals to enjoy freedom



Source [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Political\\_spectrum\\_Eysenck.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Political_spectrum_Eysenck.png)

### Conservatism

The word 'conserve' is in the name. A conservative believes in **respecting the traditions and wisdom of the past**. A conservative whilst respecting all members of society does not necessarily believe in equality in all areas. Some members of society have higher expertise – by birth, inheritance or education - and thus should by rights take positions of authority. A **hierarchy** is natural and inevitable in any group. For some conservatives this 'conservation' and appeal to tradition also extends to **moral values** and society's role is to enforce these values.

The idea of natural hierarchy also comes into economic thinking. Life is to some extent a '**competition**' and some inequalities are inevitable. This is a good thing as economic principles such as the law of supply and demand mean that the economy works best when it runs itself. So Conservatives favour **minimal state intervention** in the economy and also favour **private business** over state owned industries and services. This would typically mean that **lower taxes** would be paid as the state is providing less and are asking **individuals to take responsibility** for themselves

A conservative tends to be more negative about human nature than the liberal or the socialist. People need strong and clear guidance from wiser authorities. The word 'Paternalism' is sometimes used. Because of human imperfection, a conservative tends to favour **strong law and order policies** at the home office, and is cautious in foreign affairs: they have a preference for national security over international cooperation. **This country** comes first

So...

- A conservative is more likely than a socialist or liberal to favour keeping the House of Lords and is more likely to support the monarchy.

- A conservative is less likely to intervene to save unprofitable industries – see Mrs Thatcher’s closure of mining and steel industries in the 1980s
- A conservative looks to reduce the amount that the state funds – so privatisation of the railways, reduced benefits etc are all consistent with these aims

## Liberalism

The key word for liberals is ‘**Liberty**’. Liberals start with the **individual** rather than society and looks to give people as much freedom as possible. The **principle of non-harm** suggests that the only reason a government should have to make laws that restrict freedom is to prevent people from harming someone else. People should be free to live as they choose other than this. The state does not prescribe how to live; there are different ways of living and a key principle is that of **toleration**, accepting these differences. Liberalism is **optimistic about human nature** seeing people as essentially rational and able to solve social problems. This leads to a valuing of **human rights** and **belief in equality**

Liberals, like conservatives, favour **free market economics**. People are allowed to gain more money and as rational beings they will spend it wisely and keep the economy going. However, this has some limits. The idea of **equality of opportunity** recognises that some people do not have sufficient liberty because they are disadvantaged through birth or circumstances. Action has to be taken on poor health, poverty, and discrimination otherwise people cannot be truly free. Hence liberals favour intervention to redress the balance and ensure that as far as possible everyone has the best chance to flourish and succeed based on merit.

The belief in the individual and the power of reason affects home affairs in that **civil liberties** rather than state intrusion is preferred. There is also the desire to **decentralise power** and give freedom to regions and local communities. This balance between the local and the national is known as Federalism. In terms of international affairs, liberal belief in reason leads them to believe in the importance of **international cooperation** and solving problems on a wider scale.

So..

- Liberals would favour devolution – giving power to regional parliaments should as in Scotland and Wales. In terms of international cooperation liberals have tended to be more pro-European than Conservatives or Socialists
- The idea of equality of opportunity has driven policies such as the idea of 1p on income tax which would go to education
- The principle of non-harm has led liberals to support LGBT rights

## Socialism

The word ‘Social’ and ‘Society’ are in the name. A socialist sees **society first** and individuals second. The group takes priority over individuals. The idea of ‘**collectivism**’ and **common ownership** of resources and services. Hence the government plays a key role in organising education, industry, housing and health care rather than leaving these to private individuals or businesses. (Marxism or Communism are very extreme versions of this). For socialists, **equality and fairness** are important, this leads some socialists to focus on class politics and favouring the working class as a means of putting right the inequalities.

A socialist economic policy starts with the **rejection of some aspects of capitalism**. Capitalism causes exploitation of workers and leads to a growing gap between rich and poor. The market left to its own devices increases poverty and inequality. The government's task is to combat this and in doing so to make society as fair as possible. This tends to lead to **bigger government** than in capitalism and liberalism; traditionally there are **higher taxes** in order to pay for **increased state spending**. Socialists look to **cooperation** rather than competition.

Socialists, like liberals, have a strong interest in **rights**. For socialists, this has often led to strong links with trade unions and workers' rights groups. Some socialists favour workers' cooperatives where all the workers effectively own a business and make decisions collaboratively. Socialists are also **internationalist** in their focus sharing with liberals the idea that human beings are rational and able to solve problems by working together

So...

- It was the socialist government after the second world war that set up the NHS to provide universal health care
- In the 2009 financial crash, the labour government intervened to bail out the banks using taxpayers money. Although all 3 political parties agreed with this strategy, it is probably an easier thing for a socialist to do this.

## Testing your instincts: questions to ponder

**Do you primarily see individuals or society?** *A conservative and to some extent the liberal starts with the individual. A socialist sees the group as more important*

**Should Wilt Chamberlain (or any other fantastically successful sports star) keep his money rather than pay higher tax?** *A conservative would say yes as he has the right to keep what is his. A liberal and a socialist would want some redistribution of wealth*

**Do I think that people make too much of human rights?** *Liberals and to some extent socialists are strong supporters of human rights. A conservative may have some reservations about rights*

**Do you have a negative or positive view of human nature?** *Socialists and liberals tend to be more positive about human nature than the conservative*

**Are you concerned with global issues or do Britain's interests come first?** *A conservative tends to think that the nation comes first whereas a socialist or a liberal may be more outward looking*

**Do you think the government has too much power at times?** *Liberals and conservatives tend to want minimal government and want to restrict government power. Socialists are sometimes accused of having too much centralised power*

**Should the government run the trains or the buses directly rather than leaving it to private companies?** *A conservative and a liberal would look to private companies in the first instance, a socialist would tend to favour public ownership*

**Are our problems best solved by returning to or holding the traditions of the past or by changing and looking to new ideas?** *A conservative believes that the traditions of the past are important. A socialist or liberal may be more interested in new ideas.*

## Bibliography

Goodlad, G. et al *Edexcel GCE Politics for AS and A Level* Pearson, 2017