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What is Scottish Conservatism?

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Graham Simpson MSP is the Scottish Conservative's transport spokesman but his brief also covers net zero and energy.

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Graham had a career in journalism before entering the Scottish Parliament, ending up as a sub editor on The Scottish Sun.

Abstract

Graham Simpson MSP, transport spokesman for the Scottish Conservatives, addresses the party's identity and principles. He emphasizes the need for a positive vision, outlining key values and policies. He advocates for pragmatism above all else, but a focus on the individual rather than increasing the size of the state. He aims to initiate discussion and debate, highlighting the party's pragmatic and diverse approach.

Type in “What is Scottish Conservatism” into any search engine or AI service and you will get something like – Scottish Conservatism is the political ideology of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, which is a statement of the obvious.

But a member of the public trying to delve a little deeper into that may struggle.

This essay is an attempt to put some meat on the bones and is my way of trying to answer that fundamental question – what makes us tick.

I will set out my thoughts and introduce some ideas that some of you will agree with and some of you won't and that is fine.

It would be strange indeed if we all agreed with each other on absolutely everything.

It certainly wouldn't be very Conservative.

To the public, the Scottish Conservatives have been trading for a decade on what we are against - independence - and doing so successfully.

Opponents mischievously say we are a branch office of our partners elsewhere in the UK.

Although our affiliation with the Conservative and Unionist Party in England and Wales has formally existed since 1965, we are autonomous from the UK Conservative Party not only in structural terms but also in terms of the devolved policies that we devise for Scotland.

We are the largest opposition group in the Scottish Parliament with 31 MSPs, including myself.

But right now our support is not what it was. Save for a few welcome council by-election results we are sitting in third place in the polls.

That could all change of course and to make it so we need to start saying what we are for, not what we are against.

We must set out a positive vision, with bold ideas as to how we would transform Scotland's fortunes.

It is not enough to simply say things like, our priorities are your priorities. We must say what our priorities are and how we would go about implementing them.

But to arrive at a set of coherent policies it is useful - essential – to have a set of principles to help guide us to whatever conclusions we reach.

The first principle of Scottish Conservatism should be that we are enthusiastically for Scotland.

All our policies should be set against the test of what is best for Scotland, within the UK.

Hopefully, this and other pieces in this series will set in train a discussion and maybe even a debate.

There has been much written in the past about Conservatism and there have been some brilliant Conservative thinkers.

From Scottish philosopher David Hume to Edmund Burke, there are plenty of texts to consult if you are seeking a theoretical explanation for Conservatism. But you will struggle to find a modern-day definition of what it is to be a Conservative beyond a series of policies.

There is a good reason for that. We are pragmatists, we back what works and that could be different in one country or any part of the country.

Of course, politics is not about political theory: it is about people and how they live their lives.

Inherently, we understand that as Conservatives. What sets us apart from some other political parties- until recently anyway - is that we don't want to tell people how to live their lives. We certainly rail against the government involving itself in how you do so.

If you, like me, felt deeply uncomfortable at the restrictions imposed on us during Covid, you may well be on the Conservative scale of things. Conservatives should have instinctively felt that stopping family life, stopping mixing, stopping movement was an attack on being human. This was wrong and the consequences have been devastating.

The pandemic worsened social isolation across the whole of society, with adults aged over 60 experiencing the biggest increase in loneliness, closely followed by 16–24-year-olds, disabled people, those on lower incomes and those with pre-existing mental health conditions.

The Scottish Household Survey published last January confirmed many of these findings. This is further to an infinite number of personal anecdotes that prove how these restrictions affected the lives of ordinary people.

People like me should have spoken up and I am ashamed that I didn't. Conservatives should never be afraid to speak up for what is right- no matter who is telling us to do otherwise.

I remember going for a bike ride during that period and watching as a man who had dared to sit on a park bench to eat a sandwich was approached by an apologetic policeman asking them to move along - how crazy.

Conservatives also understand that some things never change. Let me show you what I mean.

Do you agree that we should control inflation, cut income tax so that people have more of their own money to spend, crack down on politically motivated unions who threaten to wreck the country, support the family, back the rule of law, restore standards in education, make work pay and strengthen our defences?

You do. Those things were in the party's 1979 manifesto before Margaret Thatcher was propelled to power. She said in her foreword that she wanted to "restore the balance of power in favour of the people".

It was just before this time that I joined the Young Conservatives in Carlisle following a discussion with a pal in a woodwork class as we made teapot stands.

I believed, and I still do, in giving people the power over the state. That does not make me some modern day Wolfie Smith.

The socialist who shouts Power to the People really believes in power to the state. Ours is a belief in the individual. If, like me, you felt this in your bones during lockdown, then you are on the right track.

With power comes responsibility. We should not expect to behave exactly as we would like, which is why we have laws. These must be sensible laws that understand the way people live and the way the world works.

That's why having Greens in government, as we do in Scotland right now, is mad. They are idealogues with no understanding of human nature. They can't work out what the consequences of doing things to people will be.

You only need to look at rent controls, the botched deposit return scheme, and the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill for evidence of how the Bute House Agreement has hamstrung the Scottish government into irresponsible law and policy making.

Recently we have had the threat of forcing people to spend thousands of pounds that they probably don't have to install expensive heating systems just to keep Patrick Harvie happy. I'll pass on that, thanks.

The SNP only have themselves to blame for hitching their wagons to this bunch of zealots.

I have spoken of the importance of individual liberty from the state, especially the woke state. Let me set out some more and then discuss each in turn.

We like tradition but we avoid dogma. And while we like tradition, we are also pragmatic.

The Conservative believes that you do what works and what must be done to fix something but it should not be change for change's sake.

The One Nation group of Conservatives had a stab at producing a set of values, which I think are rather good. They are:

United Kingdom – we believe in the United Kingdom as the embodiment of our shared values and as a force for good in defending our

values in the world: we are patriotic Conservatives who reject narrow nationalism.

Active global leadership – we believe that the UK must be a leader on the world stage through our aid, trade, and security commitments to tackle global challenges as a global citizen, through a strong defence and soft power commitment.

Life chances – we believe that everyone in our country – whoever and wherever that are from – has an equal right to a fair chance in life and that bold reforms to welfare and vocational skills are central to tackling social injustice and creating an opportunity society

Social responsibility – we believe in a strong society and a social contract between all of us as fellow citizens, supported in our tax and welfare system.

Public services – we believe in our public service, properly funded by a growing economy, as fundamental to the well-being of our nation, in a mixed economy of public, private and third sector providers.

Localism – we believe in the importance of place and Conservatives supporting the local, civic, and voluntary over the bureaucratic, statist and compulsory.

Environmental stewardship – we believe that we all have a responsibility to act as stewards of our local and global environment for the next

generation and as a duty to show global leadership on climate change and biodiversity. Yes, really.

Markets and values – we believe in free enterprise, business, and the market economy with a framework of good regulation to enhance competition, support innovation, break monopolies, empower citizens, and reflect our shared values.

Law and human rights – we believe in universal human rights and the rule of law and are proud of our country and Party’s record in promoting them through an independent judiciary, effective enforcement, community policing and policies to prevent crime and social breakdown.

Democratic renewal – we believe that civilised, open respectful political debate in our Party, Parliament and free press and vibrant arts and cultural sector, is fundamental to strengthening the health of our society and democracy.

To these I would add some of my own:

Variety is the spice of life – all Conservatives should think this is a fundamental starting point. We don’t want everything to be the same. We are uncomfortable with uniformity. People are different and we should embrace that. And that leads me on to my next point which is related – diversity is good.

It therefore follows that we should embrace inequality. The modern-day tendency to give everything an equality impact assessment should make Conservatives uncomfortable. Yes, we should treat everyone fairly but we are not equal, we are not all the same and nor should we be.

Edmund Burke understood the idea that one size doesn't fit all. According to Burke, a statesman should not see his country "as nothing but *carte blanche* upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases" but "always consider how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country". He had a distrust of ideology that modern day Conservatives should share.

A Government which seeks to make people do things that really should be their decision to make is not Conservative. We can encourage people to get heat pumps (see above) but we shouldn't force them to do it.

We can encourage people to drive electric cars but when there are not enough chargers out there and hydrogen may come along, it is a step too far to mandate them.

That's why the current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was right to push back the date of banning the sale of new electric cars to 2035 in line with other countries.

It may be that if costs come down and the charging network improves that this could be rather academic but it should be the choice of the individual.

Mr Sunak was also, therefore, right to row back on banning gas boilers.

Technology is advancing and it could be that hydrogen becomes an option.

In any case, many homes are just not suitable for heat pumps.

The current enthusiasm among some for low emission zones could be seen as another attack on the individual, particularly the worst-off with no thought for the consequences.

Glasgow's ham-fisted implementation of their own low emission zone is a case in point of not thinking things through.

A Conservative government should be more carrot than stick. In fact, if there are sticks, they should be locked away in a cupboard or thrown on the banned log burner.

So, Conservatives believe that the government should be kept well away from the individual for the most part.

Clearly, we need the government to run the health service and to maintain the defence of the nation, local government to run schools and fix the roads (chance would be a fine thing), to empty to bins and not to snoop on people while doing so.

But basically, in our day to day lives, the less we encounter the government, the better.

I wince every time I have to fill out my very simple tax return because it's my money they are after. All Conservatives should feel this way. I also happen to hate filling in forms.

Conservatives are instinctively against state control and high state spending. Obviously, the government must spend huge sums to deliver public services, but the bigger the growth in state spending the more we are all squeezed.

That brings me on to taxation, which another essay in this series will no doubt deal with. Taxes are necessary but in a nutshell a tax, as I said above, is taking someone else's money, be it a person or a business.

The whole argument around inheritance taxes ought not to be framed around whether to abolish them, but whether it is right that any government should be able to seize a family's assets upon death. However, and I sigh as I write this, I do wonder if this would make it past one of our focus groups unless they are set to inherit a modest family home.

Were you to sell your own modest family home you could well be caught in the stamp duty or land and buildings transaction tax trap. You pay LBTT (Land and Building Transaction Tax) when you buy a property and it kicks in at a very modest £145,000.

This involves the government taking its share of your spoils but why should it have anything? Why should government be able to grab a slice of what is a private transaction?

I know, I know, it raises a lot of money and we need it for public services. Currently in Scotland LBTT rakes in just north of £70m a month. It's the principle I am questioning. We should question the principle behind all taxes and see where we get to.

On the slightly less controversial income tax, these should be kept as low as possible. In Scotland they should be no higher than in the rest of the UK if we are to keep wealth creators here. Indeed, they should probably be lower. The SNP has gone in the opposite direction to this.

We fall into the trap in politics of feeling the need to do stuff.

That's why you get meddling governments of all colours.

Scottish Conservatives need not dream up new laws and new public bodies.

We should stand for doing less better.

I should say that I am guilty of dreaming up a possible new law but I hope the Removal From Office and Recall Bill, which would deal with errant MSPs never has to be used if passed.

So, where does all this get us?

To summarise, Scottish Conservatives believe in a smaller state, low taxes, less intervention, the rule of law.

We are not idealogues, we are pragmatic and we believe that human nature should shape what we do. We embrace variety and diversity.

So let me give you a couple of tests and you can use the principles I have set out to come up with solutions.

Transport is my brief so let's stick with that.

We have a deregulated bus market – our fault – which works for some but does not work for many.

Running buses to some parts of the country – usually rural but not always – doesn't pay. So, given that bus companies aren't charities you can hardly blame them if they decide, as they do, that it is simply uneconomic to serve these areas.

However, getting people around and offering transport options is essential to keep the country running. Not everyone has a car and those that do may prefer to leave it at home if there is an alternative.

Here is a case where we need the state to step in and organise – and fund – public transport in its area. That doesn't mean excluding the private sector but it does mean setting standards, timetables and fares.

Ah but, you say, you said you want a smaller state.

I did but I also said we are pragmatic and we are not idealogues. We back what works, remember.

That means that sometimes we can be very comfortable with state intervention.

Bus deregulation has not worked, so change it.

How about trains?

People don't care whether the state runs the trains, as they do in Scotland for ideological reasons, or if it is a private provider.

What matters is punctuality, comfort and cost.

The train can play a big part in cutting the carbon emissions from transport, which would be a good thing.

But as soon as you apply what I call the family test – the cost of taking more than a couple of people by train then the car wins.

In fact, the car can win for even sole passengers.

Solution - cut fares and do it because it is the right thing to do and we want more people to use the train.

Remember what I said earlier about doing what works. Good.

What about the recent furore over HS2, the new line which was planned to come from London to Birmingham and then Manchester.

Critics said it was vastly expensive, which is true, and would only save a few minutes on journey times, which is also true.

However, it would also have freed up line space and added capacity meaning more freight by rail and more services. It was a matter of great regret that the

government scrapped the planned line to Manchester because we could have got to that great northern English city and looked even further north.

I am convinced that Scotland could have benefited from HS2. Let's hope some of the money saved is used to pay for an improved A75 beyond the current feasibility study.

I now also have energy as part of my portfolio.

What's the biggest problem facing people right now? It has to be the size of their bills.

People are paying hundreds of pounds a month for their energy in an energy-rich country.

What gives?

I was in British Columbia in Canada over the summer of 2023. The average electricity bill there is £69 a month.

You read that right - £69. They have a lot of hydro power.

The British Columbia Utilities Commission sets the rates to be fair to generators and customers.

State intervention. Yup. Better for customers? You bet.

Pragmatic too.

We should look at this model. People here are being done over when it comes to their fuel bills.

Now, I have written around 3000 words. That is quite something for someone who used to be a sub editor on the Scottish Sun and whose job involved writing less, better.

Sound familiar.

Sometimes I did it quite well too. I hope this piece sparks some thought and debate. You won't agree with everything in it but disagreement is healthy.

Let the debate commence.