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The Conservative Party and the 'Outer Fringes of the UK': Policymaking, adaption and the 'Celtic vote' since 1945

Historically, the Conservative Party has been comfortable with its Englishness but less secure in the other nations of the UK. Whilst it performed very well in Scotland until the 1950s, it gradually declined from there. In Wales, the party has always underperformed. Writing in the mid-1960s, Chris Patten, then working for the Conservative Research Department, commented on the 'inevitable soul searching on the relevance of our political appeal in the outer fringes of the UK'. This paper will chart how the party thought about this topic and what it did to try and make itself feel more relevant in the parts of the United Kingdom that were not its 'natural territory'. It will focus specifically on Wales, which offers an understudied but particularly revealing case-study of how the Tories were able to (partially) adapt to different political circumstances there, successfully craft Wales-specific policy, and articulate a constitutional role for itself that promoted the Union while incorporating and even promoting a sense of Welsh identity within that. The talk will suggest that there might be lessons for the contemporary party in how Wales was treated in the post-1945 decades, where Conservative representatives were most successful when they managed to communicate with those who were 'our people', stressing a blend of broadly conservative ideas and pertinent local concerns, whilst also acknowledging and being sympathetic to a sense of distinct national consciousness. The paper will briefly speculate on why the post-devolution party has failed to improve on its pre-devolution performances.

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