Conservation, Conservatives and Consensus:

The Success of Conservation Under the Thatcher and Major Governments, 1979-1997

John Pendlebury

Centre for Research on European Urban Environments

University of Newcastle

e-mail j.r.pendlebury@newcastle.ac.uk

direct dial 0191-222-6810

fax 0191-222-8811
Conservation, Conservatives and Consensus:

The Success of Conservation Under the Thatcher and Major Governments, 1979-1997

Abstract

The British Conservative Governments between 1979 and 1997 are usually associated with a strident agenda of economic liberalism, combined with a centralisation of political power, which affected land-use planning along with other policy spheres. However, not only did the conservation of the historic environment escape these forces its policy significance strengthened during the period. In a time associated with the breakdown of post-war political consensus, conservation policy goals achieved a virtually unchallenged consensus for the first time.

This article examines how central government policy developed during this period before examining a range of possible explanations for these outcomes. These include political attitudes and support, electoral significance, conservation lobbies, the commodification and political symbolism of heritage and the dominant ideology thesis. Finally the article speculates on how stable and enduring the conservation consensus may prove.

Introduction
The period of Conservative governments in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s is a time widely associated with the breakdown of a broad political consensus that had existed since 1945. The ‘New Right’ of the Conservative Party introduced a new era that combined economic liberalism with a centralisation of power, in order to ensure the implementation of policy. This agenda was evident in land-use planning.

After providing a context for Conservative attitudes to land-use planning, this article explores the almost complete absence of this agenda from central government policy on the conservation of the historic environment or cultural heritage. As such the clear focus of the article is the actions and intentions of central Government, rather than the implementation of policy (or not) at a local level, or other issues such as the quality of local decision-making. It is argued that the period is characterised by a consolidation and strengthening of conservation policy to a previously unprecedented level. Explanations which may be advanced for why this was so are then examined. Throughout the article the discussion focuses on England, given the different governance arrangements which existed in other parts of the UK. However, it is considered that the arguments advanced will broadly apply to these other component parts of the United Kingdom.

**Planning in the 1980s and 1990s.**

Analyses of planning in the UK in this period generally divide the period of Conservative power into two main sections:
1. 1979- c.1990: the period of Margaret Thatcher’s prime ministership, or ‘Thatcherism’,

2. c.1990- 1997: the post-Thatcher governments of John Major, characterised not only by a change of leadership, but also by a re-configuration of the Government’s approach to the planning system.

There is a general consensus over the nature of the political agenda in the period of Thatcherism, though a debate about its effectiveness in practice (reviewed by Allmendinger & Thomas, 1998). This tends to be described in terms of a breakdown of a post-war planning consensus, based on the need to physically reconstruct the fabric of cities, and its replacement with a neo-liberal agenda with the aim of giving the market greater freedom to develop in ways of its own choosing. To facilitate this there was a centralisation of control and limiting of the discretion available to local planning authorities. In practice, in order to achieve regeneration objectives and overcome resistance from vested interests, there was a fragmentation of the system characterised by Thornley (1991) as:

- The general case, where the market was given greater market freedom and local authority development control powers were weakened. Measures to effect this included strong government guidance for local authorities not to exert control over aesthetic matters and an extension of the degree to which development could proceed without requiring planning permission,

- More extreme liberalisation, sometimes together with other measures such as changed governance, to achieve urban regeneration/ transformation e.g. Enterprise Zones, Simplified Planning Zones, Urban Development Corporations,
• Protection of vested interests in defined areas of restraint, such as areas of countryside protection, the green-belt and areas of cultural heritage.

There is less of a clear consensus over the precise Conservative political agenda for planning in the 1990s. However, the basic agenda can be seen as one of modified continuity, with the emphasis still firmly on the importance of the market and exerting central control in order for market freedom to operate (Thornley, 1998). In order to achieve policy objectives there was, however, a shift from interfering in day-to-day decisions through the appeal process, to an emphasis on a tighter policy framework. Central prescription occurred through the series of Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs), which in turn formed a key framework for locally produced development plans, given new emphasis with the Planning and Compensation Act 1991 and its reference to the ‘plan-led system.’

Of central concern to this article are those categories of place that were afforded some protection from the liberalising agenda, which has been taken to include cultural heritage conservation. Other environmentally and protected areas considered to have similarly benefited include green-belts defined around the edge of settlements and the wider countryside (Thornley, 1991). Both were the subject of New Right deregulation initiatives in the 1980s. Powerful lobbies within and beyond the Government resisted these changes, and they succeeded in essentially maintaining the status quo, with some modest extension of control in some parts of the countryside (Bishop, 1998; Elson, 1986)).
Conservation and the Conservatives

The only planning policy issue with a strong urban component regarded as having been shielded from the liberalisation of the planning system is the conservation of the cultural heritage.\(^1\) In this section central government’s approach towards conservation over the eighteen year Conservative administration is audited and examined. The main focus of the discussion relates to the degree of protection afforded to the cultural heritage, though organisational and resource issues are also briefly considered.

Protection

Primary legislation

The basic procedural town planning framework as set out in primary legislation was not fundamentally altered in this period. Changes were generally effected through modifications to secondary legislation/statutory instruments and policy guidance (Thornley, 1998). This is largely true for conservation, though legislation did lead to the creation of new protected categories (for example, the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest), and organisational change (for example, the creation of English Heritage). It is also notable that in the consolidation of planning legislation in 1990, the weight and significance of conservation legislation was sufficient for it to be separated for the first time in its own Act, the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act. Few efforts at deregulation are evident in the legislation relating to conservation in this period. One sometimes cited (e.g. Larkham, 1996), the creation in 1980 of Certificates of Immunity From Listing, seems to be more geared at creating market certainty. If a building is given a Certificate it cannot
be listed for five years; however, if a certificate is not awarded it is automatically listed.

*Use of Powers and Secondary Legislation*

In the UK system there are two key statutory categories for protection of the cultural heritage; historic buildings are ‘listed’ and historic areas designated as conservation areas. A key difference between them is that whilst buildings are listed by central government, conservation areas are designated by local planning authorities without any reference to central government, though central government does produce policy for their management.

*Listing*

As Table 1 shows, the number of listed buildings increased massively during the period of Conservative governments. A first listing programme ran from 1947 to 1968. When the Conservatives came to power in 1979 a second programme was proceeding very slowly. This was dramatically accelerated in 1982 by substantially increasing resources and the second programme was completed by 1989. In the late 1970s there were four Inspectors working on the re-survey, but at the height of activity in the mid-1980s this rose to a peak of 110 (Robertson, 1993a). Much of the credit for this enormous expansion of resources is usually given to the personal support of the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine. The case which for many defines the zeitgeist for the period was the demolition of the Firestone Factory, a 1930s Art Deco building in London over the August Bank Holiday in 1980, whilst it was being considered for listing. This seems to have been an important spur and to have incensed Heseltine (Larkham & Barrett, 1998; Stamp, 1996). Numerically, much
of the expansion of listing in this period consisted of vernacular buildings in rural areas. For example, the number of listed buildings in Cheshire rose from 2,070 to 6,450 with the biggest increases being in the rural areas (Bott, 1987). However, as the list has grown in size it has also accommodated a greater diversity of building types, including for example significant numbers of industrial buildings. Indeed, following the rural re-survey further, more limited, resources have been devoted to enhancing some lists in urban-industrial areas with, for example, the numbers of listings in Hull doubling (Cherry, 1996). More recently still the primary focus has been thematic work including textile mills and post-1945 buildings (Cherry, 1996; Saunders, 1996). In 1996 the government produced a consultation document, or ‘green paper’ entitled ‘Protecting Our Heritage’ (Department of National Heritage & Welsh Office, 1996). This did not proceed to firm proposals due to the change in government in 1997. The document raised potential radical developments such as listing only the exteriors of buildings or taking economic factors into account in decisions over listing. What is notable, however, is that the accompanying discussion effectively ruled out these ideas.

Conservation areas

Though conservation areas are designated by local authorities, they are relevant to this discussion. They are analogous to green belts in so far as they are a policy device with substantial legislative and policy weight endorsed from the centre, but identified locally. However, unlike green belt boundaries, which are set out and enforced by development plans subject to central government scrutiny, conservation areas are created on the resolution of the local authority with no central government checks. It is notable that Conservative central governments did not make any serious attempt to
limit the administrative discretion of local planning authorities to designate new areas, despite the growth in designations and critical commentaries on local authority use of these powers (Jones & Larkham, 1993; Morton, 1991). Table 1 shows how numbers of conservation areas grew steadily through the period of Conservative administration. Furthermore, many other conservation areas were extended. In the 1970s the main focus of designation was on the historic cores of settlements. In the 1980s there was an increasing emphasis on residential suburbs, together with more novel designations, such as areas of industrial archaeological interest and transport corridors (Jones & Larkham, 1993).

Statutory Instruments
Primary legislation gives Secretaries of State the power to make some legislative changes at their discretion. Key in planning is the definition of works that can be considered sufficiently minor to be exempted from planning control. One of the principal means through which controls over development are said to have loosened under the Conservatives was by liberalising the definition of activities that can take place without requiring planning permission. However, changes in the sphere of conservation were generally minor, the trend was to liberalise outside protected areas (Thornley, 1991, 1998). Indeed, in 1995 following a campaign by local government organisations, but to the surprise of many, increased powers to control small-scale works were devolved to local authorities (Larkham, 1996).

Policy Framework
There are three key central government policy statements of relevance in the period under consideration. When the Conservatives came to power in 1979 policy was set
out in Department of the Environment Circular 23/77 ‘Historic Buildings and Conservation Areas – Policy and Procedure’ (Department of the Environment, 1977). This was superseded in 1987 by Circular 8/87 (Department of the Environment, 1987), bearing the same title, and in 1994 by Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 15 ‘Planning and the Historic Environment’ (Department of the Environment & Department of National Heritage, 1994). Quantitatively the amount of policy guidance has grown enormously. Delafons (1997) estimates that PPG 15 runs to approximately 34,000 words and Circular 8/87 to 27,500 words. 23/77 is approximately 70% of the length of 8/87. Table 2 summarises the policy set out in these documents on a number of key issues. In comparing 23/77 and 8/87 what is immediately noticeable is the high degree of continuity of text between them. No radical changes are evident, though there are some significant shifts in emphasis. For example, in the early 1980s (and confirmed in 8/87) Michael Heseltine emphasised the need for adequate efforts to be made to reuse listed buildings before allowing their demolition (Andreae, 1996). 8/87 introduces an emphasis on an economic function for conservation, but is in fact more conservative on its attitude to the change of use of buildings than its predecessor. The Circular was regarded as a strengthening of conservation policy (Arnold, 1987). PPG 15 involved a fundamental redraft of previous guidance. As such there are subtle nuances and shifts, but again the overall sense is of policy continuity. So, for example, a presumption in favour of the preservation of listed buildings is retained. Generally changes seem to be orientated towards first, strengthening conservation policy (for example, an antagonism towards facadism) and second, increasing the amount of policy advice to local authorities (for example, on conservation area designation) and exhorting them to more firmly attach conservation to other processes (for example, development plans and public consultation). Following this trend, ‘Protecting Our
Heritage’ (Department of National Heritage & Welsh Office, 1996) proposed requiring local authorities to prepare character assessments and undertake public consultation prior to designation, though this would not have fettered their basic discretion to designate new conservation areas.

Two other policy statements in the period require brief mention. Circular 22/80 (Department of the Environment, 1980), reinforced by Circular 31/85 (Department of the Environment, 1985), firmly indicated that local authorities should not as rule intervene in design matters. This policy stance was loosened and partially reversed in the 1990s (see, for example, Department of the Environment, 1992; Department of the Environment, 1996; Punter & Carmona, 1997). This context, together with the control over demolition given by conservation area status, is thought to have given impetus to the designation of conservation areas in the 1980s, as design remained a more valid material consideration in such locations (Punter & Carmona, 1997; Thornley, 1991).

What is again notable is that the discretion of local authorities to do this was not fettered. Second, PPG 15 was preceded by a draft and an accompanying consultation paper which was seen as exemplifying some tension between the dominant approach to conservation and more liberalising tendencies. However, even here, ‘If the deregulatory tendency predominates in the consultation paper, it is forced to take a back seat in the new draft PPG… once it gets into its stride, the conservationist interest clearly predominates and the deregulatory imperative is tacked onto it like a scrap of graffiti on a listed building.’ (Delafons, 1993: 226). The eventual PPG is seen as even more of an assertion of conservation interests (Mynors, 1994; Delafons, 1997).
Policy Implementation

Central government retains a direct involvement in policy implementation in a number of respects, especially with listed buildings where local authority powers are delegated from the Secretary of State. In addition, planning appeals against the refusal of planning permission are considered centrally by a Planning Inspectorate under the ultimate jurisdiction of the Secretary of State. Larkham and Barrett (1998) describe the tensions that existed between local authorities and commercial pressures for redevelopment in central conservation areas in Bristol and Birmingham in the 1980s and how, especially in the case of Birmingham, planning applications were often granted on appeal which retained the facades of listed buildings but removed interiors. However, this needs to be placed in the context of overall trends. All applications for the total demolition of listed buildings have to be referred to central government, as do any requests to delist buildings. Table 1 shows a trajectory for these categories as remarkable as the growth in the number of listed buildings. In both cases there is a general pattern for a decrease in the number of buildings granted consent for demolition or withdrawn from the list. Given the increase in number of listed buildings, the proportions have fallen markedly since 1979.

Conservation Organisation and Governance

This can be considered briefly in terms of how government organises its own conservation functions and in terms of its relationship with local authorities, responsible for day-to-day implementation of much of conservation policy.
Two major organisational changes occurred in central government structures dealing with conservation during the period of Conservative government. The first was the creation of English Heritage. This new body which became fully effective in 1984 assumed various responsibilities from the Department of the Environment and various other then existing advisory bodies. In conservation planning matters it is advisor to the Secretary of State, with ultimate administrative responsibility remaining with the Secretary of State. Though some see English Heritage, especially in its early years, as comparatively ineffective (Andreae, 1996), a more common view is that in creating a staffed independent advisor the government created ‘a new and powerful voice for conservation’ (Delafons, 1997: 142). So, for example, English Heritage has frequently appeared at public inquiries to put forward a conservation case, which could not have happened when powers resided with government. In creating English Heritage, Michael Heseltine seems to have explicitly wanted to give a clear and visible voice for conservation (Kennet, 1991, cited in Larkham and Barrett, 1998).

Second, conservation functions in government were split with the creation of the Department of National Heritage in 1992. The new Department took functions such as heritage identification, whilst planning powers remained with the Department of the Environment. Other than the confusion created by two Departments managing conservation, there is no clear evidence that this led to significant changes in the Government’s approach to conservation.

Resources
A detailed analysis of the resources available to conservation through this period would be extremely complicated and is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is possible to identify some conflicting trends. Overall it seems that public resources were not as constrained as in many other policy areas. On the one hand it is stated that English Heritage resources have fallen in real terms and, that as a discretionary activity, conservation was hit by restrictions in local government expenditure (Larkham and Barrett, 1998). However, an alternative analysis has indicated that greater sums in real terms have been available to English Heritage compared to its predecessor, the Historic Buildings Council (Saunders, 1996) and the additional resources which were directed at the listing programme have been described above. Furthermore, in some locations such as the Urban Development Corporation areas, an emphasis especially during the 1980s on property led regeneration enabled expensive and high profile conservation projects to proceed. Finally, in the latter part of Conservative administration the creation of the Heritage Lottery Fund, as part of the National Lottery, has allowed unprecedented sums to be directed at conservation projects (Saunders, 1996).

**Summary of the Period**

In their review of planning under the Conservatives Allmendinger and Thomas (1998: 240) state that conservation remained ‘virtually unscathed’. As this section has shown the reality is rather different, in that not only was conservation not the subject of the neo-liberal agenda but positive measures were taken. Unlike green belts and countryside protection, conservation largely escaped even the rhetoric of liberalisation. Rather, the policy significance of conservation developed and
strengthened during this period. Furthermore, the specific outcomes of listing buildings and designating conservation areas often led to the protection of environments removed from the natural obvious constituencies of leafy suburbs and the countryside, and were applied, for example, to inner urban areas and to unpopular post-war buildings.

**Explanations**

This section examines possible reasons why conservation might have assumed and sustained such policy significance. In doing so some broader political explanations for support for conservation beyond immediate policy processes are examined.

**Divisions Within the Conservative Party**

These can be considered at two levels; first, differences of policy approach and emphasis taken by successive Secretaries of State for the Environment and second, broader tensions between traditional centre Tories and the radical Right. Michael Heseltine, who was Secretary of State for the Environment between 1979 and 1983 (and again between 1990 and 1993), is often characterised as a Minister who took a close and supportive personal interest in conservation matters (Larkham & Barrett, 1998). At the opposite end of the spectrum in this regard is Nicholas Ridley, Secretary of State between 1986 and 1989. Ridley publicly attacked conservation in 1988, stating ‘I have a recurring nightmare, that sometime in the next century the entire country will be designated under some conservation order or another. The people actually living there will be smothered with bureaucratic instructions limiting their
freedom. We will have created a sanitised, bureaucratised and ossified countryside out of something which has always been, and should always be, a product of the interaction of man and his environment as time goes by.’ (cited by Larkham and Barrett, 1998: 57). Differences between Ridley and Heseltine were illustrated by an exchange of correspondence between them in the professional planning press in 1988 (Thornley, 1991).

However, despite such political differences conservation policy enjoyed continuity and was not challenged. So, for example, the initiative for which Heseltine is given greatest credit, the accelerated re-survey programme, was only agreed three weeks before his departure from office (Robertson, 1993a). Its implementation occurred over a seven year period until 1989, largely uninterrupted under a series of Secretaries of State considered to take a more libertarian approach to planning (Hall, 1997), including the period of Ridley’s tenure. Similarly, other components of conservation policy, in particular Circular 8/87 with its policy continuity and strengthening, were produced during Ridley’s time in office.

The tensions between traditional Conservatism and the Thatcherite right appear not to have been as apparent in conservation as in other areas of planning policy, such as noted with green-belt policy above. Support for a policy of conservation from some Conservatives is to be expected (see, for example, Cormac, 1978); what is more surprising is the lack of a sustained right-wing critique. Thornley (1991) reviews a number of right-wing treatises on the planning system produced in the 1970s and 1980s, and by-and-large conservation is exempted from their critique and calls for deregulation. Official investigations of conservation, such as by a Select Committee in
1986 and the Public Accounts Committee in 1992, barely bothered questioning the essential basis of the conservation system (Delafons, 1997). The right wing Conservative MP Teresa Gorman’s libertarian attack on conservation controls, in the wake of her own prosecution for unauthorised works to her listed house, is notable for its iconoclasm (Hirst, 1996). The only other fundamental critiques of conservation in this period, the occasional speech by Nicholas Ridley apart, come from outside the Government and Conservative Party. For example, there were claims from the architectural profession and the development industry that the extent of protection had grown too large (Saunders, 1996). This challenge was taken on by property interests and the right-wing think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies, in objecting to the City of London Local Plan in the mid-1980s, in the period leading up to ‘the Big Bang’ (Thornley, 1991). In 1985 there was a brief campaign against the rural listing re-survey programme by the National Farmers Union and the Country Landowners Association (Robertson, 1993b). However, these attacks on conservation orthodoxy were few and, at the national level at least, almost entirely unsuccessful.

External Pressures

There are a number of external forces that, it might be argued, might have inhibited successive Conservative governments attempting to liberalise conservation controls and policy. Four key strands are considered here, the Conservative-voting electorate, Conservative local authorities, the conservation lobby and the rise of the environmental movement.
It is evident that in a number of land-use planning spheres, such as green-belt policy, that, especially in the 1980s, right-wing ideology was tempered by electoral realpolitik. Hague (1997: 146) states that ‘… the Thatcherite understanding of town planning was shaped by a very specific geographical context, namely the suburbia and small towns of southern England. Of course this was precisely its political constituency…’. External factors behind public support for conservation are conventionally held to include the protection of property values, closely linked with NIMBY\textsuperscript{4} attitudes, and a reaction against modernism and comprehensive redevelopment, in the wake of change in the 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. Andreae, 1996; Larkham, 1996). Conservation of historic buildings would seem to sit well with the values of the traditional Conservative electorate. This may present some explanation why the Conservatives chose not to interfere with the discretion of local authorities in the designation of conservation areas which were not associated with the ‘municipal socialism’ which represented a barrier to the implementation of government policy. However, this freedom did allow local authorities to subvert government policy on design control and provides little clue as to the motivation behind some other strands of policy. For example, the listing re-survey programme might have been anticipated, if anything, to irritate those whose property rights were affected, especially as within its rural emphasis much of the effort went into listing functional buildings, such as barns (Brunskill, 1993). A general public mood antagonistic to redevelopment in favour of traditional forms, as evidenced by the popular support for the agenda promoted by the Prince of Wales (Hewison, 1995; Punter & Carmona, 1997), may again give some explanation for a hesitation in weakening conservation interests. However, it does not explain the significant areas of conservation expansion and policy consolidation. Furthermore, such initiatives as the
listing of post-war buildings including buildings of the Modern Movement, which have invoked considerable controversy, seem unlikely to have been designed as populist measures.

Though political complexion is not a reliable indicator of a local authority’s approach to and emphasis on conservation, it is a policy issue that is often of more significance to Conservative local authorities. The significance of the sort of NIMBY pressures described above maybe more prevalent and other issues, for example, related to economic and social malaise, less significant. Consequently many of the better resourced conservation functions are to be found in traditionally Conservative shire areas, and these authorities may have effectively formed part of the conservation lobby described below. So, for example, Hampshire and Essex County Councils lobbied for the accelerated re-listing programme, and were able to quickly respond to facilitate the programme when it proceeded (Richards, 1993; Robertson, 1993a).

These local authorities can be considered to be part of a distinctive conservation lobby or community that is distinct from lobbies for land-use planning. It is a lobby that is both more developed and more diverse and perhaps does not carry the stigma of the term ‘planning’ with its welfare state associations. There are a number of specific professional groupings of significance. At a national level the creation of English Heritage was key. The civil service background of many of the original staff must have also have helped sustain an influence and links with the Department of the Environment. During the 1980s a lobby of conservation professionals working in local government also emerged, the Association of Conservation Officers, now the Institute of Historic Building Conservation. This was part of the process of the
professionalisation of local authority conservation, such that ‘Conservation Officer’ became a familiar and established term. However, in addition to this professional voice, a distinctive feature of conservation is the size and range of the conservation amenity movement. It is this movement which since the nineteenth century has been the driving force in pressing for developments in conservation legislation (Delafons, 1997). A measure of the significance of some of the national societies is, since the 1960s, their incorporation in legislation as statutory consultees on applications affecting historic buildings. From a variety of perspectives, a range of commentators attest to the influence of these national groups (e.g. Andreae, 1996; Delafons, 1997; Larkham, 1996; Saunders, 1996; Stamp, 1996). Though the precise influence these groups had during the period of Conservative government is difficult to establish, it is clear that individually and collectively they mounted well-orchestrated campaigns against perceived threats both to the conservation system and on individual cases. For example, Delafons (1997) refers to government surprise at the strength of reaction to a number of consultations with interested parties during this period and generally final versions of policy were more conservationist in tone than drafts. High profile and expensive campaigns were also fought on key proposals. For example, when planning permission was given by the Secretary of State for a scheme at No 1 Poultry in the City Of London, involving the demolition of listed buildings and unlisted buildings in a conservation area, SAVE Britain’s Heritage pursued the case through to the House of Lords (Larkham, 1996). However, particularly during the Thatcher period it is often considered that there was a decline in the influence of the ‘Great and the Good’ (Hewison, 1995) as the government challenged the power of policy-influencing groups in many spheres (Richardson, 1993).
The final external pressure, which might be thought to have had an influence in this period, is the rise from the late 1980s of the environmental movement. The emergence of the environmental agenda had to be accommodated even during the latter part of the Thatcher premiership (Hague, 1997). However, though historic conservation, with, for example, its husbanding and recycling of building stock, might be thought to link closely with the green movement, there was little discernible impact on the conservation system in this period. Indeed, a characteristic of historic conservation debates has been their isolation from wider environmental concerns (Pendlebury & Townshend, 1999).

**The Role of Heritage**

A final strand of argument accounting for the success of conservation under the Conservatives concerns the role that conservation, or perhaps more specifically the more broadly defined and contested term, heritage, assumed in this period. It can be argued that conservation acquired new functions, or that an increased emphasis was placed on existing functions of conservation, suitable to the purposes of the government. Three arguments are considered here; the economic commodification of heritage; the political symbolism of heritage and the dominant ideology thesis.

The economic function of conservation certainly became more explicit in this period. The link between historic environments and the economy was not new, tourism is the obvious example where there is long and acknowledged linkage between the two. From the 1970s conservation pressure groups such as SAVE Britain's Heritage (1978) had been articulating the economic case for conservation. What is new in this period is
the explicit linking of conservation and economic development as part of government policy. One of the controversial government initiatives in the early days of the Thatcher government was an increased emphasis on making the management of historic properties held in care by the government (and subsequently English Heritage) more business like (Delafons, 1997; Wright, 1985). The economic role of conservation was not set out in Circular 23/77 but emerges in 8/87 (see Table 2), which argued that conservation and regeneration are essentially complementary. The emergence of the importance of the commodification of conservation for economic purposes in this period is evident beyond central government policy. So, for example, the regeneration flagship of the Merseyside Development Corporation was the restoration and reuse of the Albert Dock, a large complex of Grade 1 listed warehouses. The significance of quality historic environments has become increasingly evident as part of place-marketing/city image initiatives as urban areas have sought to use cultural policy as a strategy of urban regeneration (Bianchini, 1993; Ward, 1998). The historic environment has become an integral part of conceptions of the consumer society, ‘stage-sets within which consumption can take place’ (Urry, 1995: 21).

Haseler’s (1989) pro-Thatcherite polemic is critical of the role of heritage and laments the growth of anti-modern culture regarded as out of step with the impact of the New Right and a hang-over from instabilities of the 1970s. Lowenthal’s (1985) thesis that public support for conservation derives from the past acting as a refuge from an uncertain and stressful present could be argued to support this. However, Hewison (1995) maintains that successive Conservative governments consciously used the past for political purposes. It was a repository of values and a way of reaffirming national
identity. Emphasis under the Thatcher governments was on supposed traditional values that could underpin the idea of ‘the enterprise culture’, linked to the mission of ‘making Britain Great’. Thatcher considered that the heritage of historic buildings and places was part of a (usually specifically English) national culture important in creating Britain’s international standing (Hewison, 1995). The importance of the national heritage of buildings and landscapes in reaffirming national identity both historically and during this period has been commented on by, for example, Daniels (1993); Gruffudd (1995); and Wright (1985).

John Major’s image of the past was cosier and more nostalgic and involved ‘The long shadows falling across the county ground, the warm beer, the invincible green suburbs, dog-lovers and pool-fillers…’ (Major, cited by Hewison, 1995: 296), but was part of the same process of reinventing the past. ‘The past was reinvented, so that the social conflicts of the industrial revolution were consolingly reintegrated into the picturesque and pastoral narrative that became the consumer’s version of the national story. Cotton mills and coal mines were painted into a picture-book history as decorative artefacts, redundant relics of lost communities. The machinery still stood, but its brutal raison d’être was at best dimly recalled in the act of fantasising “the way we were”’ (Hewison, 1995: 265). An example of the tensions evident between the use of the past in this way and the agenda of economic liberalisation is provided by the privatisation of British Telecom (Wright, 1992). The new private company sought to replace the traditional red telephone boxes, most of which were designed in the 1930s by Giles Gilbert Scott. Following protests at the removal of this familiar feature of the English townscape 1,000 of these telephone boxes were listed; an exercise which
many conservation commentators considered random and/or absurd (Preston, 1988; Delafons, 1997).

Linked to these ideas is the concept of the dominant ideology thesis, derived from the writings of Marx and Engels (Merriman, 1991). Using this thesis, culture is endowed with messages which are deliberately framed by power elites to legitimise the existing dominant regime, and this was perhaps most clearly observed with the former communist regimes in the Soviet bloc (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). In the context of conservation, the heritage selected for protection becomes not simply a reflection of the tastes and ideas of elites but part of the apparatus that ensure the maintenance of the present social system. In a refinement of this argument, Bourdieu argues that the dominated tend to collaborate in their own domination (Merriman, 1991). Power relations derive from both symbolic and economic power. Symbolic power derives from a misrecognition of the oppressive basis of hierarchical social relations. So, for example, the popularity of country house visiting and support for organisations such as the National Trust could be interpreted in this way. Thus in the context of Conservative governments, sustaining support and value on the protection and retention of the heritage could be considered part of a strategy of maintaining existing power structures and social relations or indeed reasserting a set of social relations perceived to have been eroded by modernism and the welfare state (Gamble, 1994).

Each of these uses of heritage potentially gives some general explanation for the success of conservation policy under the Conservatives. However, none of these arguments seems to satisfactorily explain all the actions of the Governments of this period. Only a relatively small part of the heritage has any obvious economic potential
beyond its own ordinary utility. Likewise the amount of the defined heritage which can be said to meaningfully contribute to a mission of reinforcing national identity is limited. It is more difficult to link the reinterpretation of the past and the dominant ideology thesis to specific policy decisions, though they may have some explanatory power for the processes underlying decision-making. However, Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) have criticised the application of the dominant ideology thesis to heritage policy, arguing that in reality, the ideology of dominant groups is not coherent but heterodox or internally inconsistent. Furthermore, all these factors probably value heritage in a rather more generalised way than would necessitate the sort of planning controls which come with, for example, listed building status.

**Conservation, Conservatives and Consensus**

The story of conservation policy in the years of Conservative governments, 1979-1997, is a remarkable one. Conservation largely escaped the impact of New Right ideology. Indeed, far from being deregulated it became a significantly more powerful force in this period. Substantial additional resources were committed in some key areas, such as the listing re-survey programme, and it acquired an independent national voice, able to challenge government policy to some extent, with the creation of English Heritage. Furthermore, it escaped the fettering of local government discretion characteristic of the period. Perhaps even more remarkable is a virtual absence of even any neo-liberal rhetoric on conservation, or indeed any significant political debate at either national or local levels about the basic ‘goodness’ of the conservation system. This is unlike the 1970s when fierce struggles were common, some of which were recorded in a series of polemical texts (e.g. Amery & Cruikshank, 1975; Curl, 1977; Fergusson, 1973). Thus, in a period usually associated with the
breakdown of post-war political consensus, conservation, to the contrary, achieved a higher degree of consensus than ever before.

The impact of a pro-conservation policy produced a series of outcomes surprising from a series of governments associated with a right-wing, economically liberal and politically centralising agenda. So, for example, there was a massive extension of the substantial restrictions placed on property rights through the listing of buildings. Administrative discretion, removed from local authorities in other policy areas, was left intact and latterly extended. Both of these in turn had an impact on the conservation of areas and building types not associated with the obvious electoral constituency of the Conservative Party.

Each of the arguments advanced above, apart from perhaps the linkage with the wider environmental movement, has some explanatory power but none provide a complete explanation for the success of conservation policy in this period. For example, the commitment of substantial additional resources to the re-survey programme may have required a Minister as supportive and interested in conservation as Michael Heseltine, but once running, the programme continued under successive Secretaries of State, including Nicholas Ridley. A pro-conservation approach maybe seen as electorally significant and suitable to other Conservative agendas such as reinforcing national identity and even sustaining a dominant ideology. However, this does not explain many of the practical outcomes of the period, such as a focus on the listing of textile mills and welfare state post-war buildings. There may have been an increasing awareness of the economic potential of heritage but the proportion of protected buildings and areas which can be utilised in this way is small; the biggest group of
listed buildings is dwellings and most conservation areas are predominantly residential. The conservation lobby seems to have been significant, though it is not clear quite how much stress can be placed upon this in a period associated with government attempts, albeit not always successful, to limit the influence of such lobbies (Richardson, 1993). Nor does it explain the virtual absence of a counter-balancing New Right critique.

Explaining the success of conservation in this period is thus complex. Conservation was complementary (though not coterminous) with the mood of the period, with its emphasis on nostalgia, revival and the ‘heritage industry’ (Hewison, 1987; Wright, 1985). This climate suited and was partly engendered by Conservative governments. Conservation and heritage raise issues, such as national identity, that transcend normal planning considerations about the distribution of land use. Notwithstanding this, the lack of challenge from the New Right, combined with the some of the policy outcomes is difficult to explain. It is possible that further research would reveal some internal implementation gaps. For example, were successive Ministers aware how dramatically the numbers of buildings listed with their authority were rising? Perhaps a political generalised support enabled an effective conservation community to successfully pursue a pro-conservation agenda, independent of strategic policy control, to a degree that would not have been possible with a more sensitive political issue.

For whatever reason, what is clear is that during the eighteen year Conservative tenure, conservation achieved new strengths supported by an unprecedented degree of consensus. Some commentators have portrayed the rise in conservation policy as an
inexorable rise (Andreae, 1996; Larkham, 1997). It will be interesting to see how political responses to conservation develop with a change in Government and a new political mood.

Postscript: New Labour, New Conservation?

At time of writing (late 1999) a change in Government has brought no major conservation policy announcements or shifts. There have, however, been some signs of a reorientation of approach. An early change of the Labour Government was to rename the Department of National Heritage as the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Labour wanted to escape the overtly backward looking associations of ‘heritage’ and modernising is a common theme of the Government’s cultural agenda (Smith, 1998). Other changes have been modest. There is perhaps some indication of a more populist approach through, for example, the listing of pre-fabricated housing (Planning, 1998) and a working class pigeon-cree (Howe, 1998). English Heritage has merged with another state-funded body, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, though this does not appear to raise major issues of principle.

There is concern, however, amongst the conservation lobby over shifts in the government’s stance (Venning, 1999). Particular concern has arisen from the pronouncements of other organisations created by the Government, such as the Urban Task Force, which in its Prospectus made a reference to historic buildings being a restraint on regeneration (Urban Task Force, 1998). This provoked an immediate and well-organised response (English Heritage, 1998; SAVE Britain's Heritage, 1998). The final report of the Urban Task Force (1999), though taking a more positive stance
towards the historic environment, nevertheless sought more flexibility in attitudes to listed buildings and conservation areas. This has led on to a ‘Conservation not Preservation’ campaign by the publication Property Week, arguing for a greater freedom to redevelop in conservation areas, with support from a variety of influential figures (see, for example, Lord Rogers, MacCormac, & Coleman, 1999; Nelson, 1999; Welsh, 1999)

The consensus that was achieved on conservation policy in the 1980s and 1990s occurred during a very specific period of British politics. It is too early to say whether as the political agenda shifts into the new century wider shifts in societal attitudes will occur, and the conservation consensus lose ground, or whether it will prove to be more robust and enduring. In so far as popular support for conservation derives from similar motives as other NIMBY electorally significant land-use issues it is likely that the system will not be radically tampered with, though it has perhaps reached its zenith. However, the relationship between conservation and national identity may prove to more volatile. How much was association with heritage in the 1980s and 1990s a post-modern reaction against modernism? Alternatively, has the survival of physical artefacts from the past a more fundamental role in personal and national identity? How much will a modernising Government seek to and be able to shift national identity?

1 In the period immediately before 1979 the government seems to have been at best lukewarm to certain elements of conservation policy. There had been proposals mooted to remove statutory controls from some listed buildings and the number of Inspectors identifying buildings for listing had sunk to an all-time low (Saunders, 1996).
Scheduled ancient monuments might be considered a third. Scheduled by Government, these are usually monuments without an economic utility, such as prehistoric remains or redundant industrial structures.

Circular 23/77 had in turn consolidated previous circulars, so the text of Circular 8/87 was in some cases 15-20 years old.

Acronym standing for Not In My Back Yard.

The principal statutory groups are the Ancient Monuments Society, the Council for British Archaeology, the Georgian Group, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Twentieth Century Society and the Victorian Society.

Taken here to mean the commodification of, or the attachment of symbolic values to, the historic environment.
References


