

What's wrong with The Right Way?

Published: October 5, 2026, 6:23 am

Kemi Badenoch's [The Right Way](#), published yesterday to mark the start of the otherwise neatly irrelevant Tory party conference, matters because it is not really a manifesto. It is an attempt to recreate the intellectual foundations of Conservatism, rather as *The Right Approach*, written by Hayekian [Sir Keith Joseph](#), did before Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979.

Badenoch explicitly argues that principle must come before policy.

Her singular principle is clear and is that government is more often the problem than the solution. Business creates growth, she says, and government does not. The state should therefore tax less, spend less, borrow less, regulate less and interfere less. As a result, she argues that individuals, families, communities and businesses should instead take more responsibility for what happens in society.

That thinking runs throughout the document. Employment rights are presented as impediments to hiring. Regulation supposedly suppresses enterprise. Public ownership is rejected in favour of private ownership and competition. Net Zero is portrayed as an economic burden. Badenoch says the state should withdraw from large parts of economic life. Instead, markets, businesses and individuals should determine economic outcomes.

At the same time, The Right Way is not an argument for a weak state. Badenoch wants a state that does less economically but exercises considerably more power in other areas. This is particularly apparent with regard to policing, borders, immigration, and national identity. The Conservatives propose leaving the European Convention on Human Rights, repealing the Human Rights Act, dramatically increasing removals of people with a previously established legal right to reside in the UK, and restricting legal migration.

There is, then, a marked paradox in this document. It offers a vision of a state that is weak when confronting economic power but strong when exercising power over people.

But what interests me most about *The Right Way* is not what it says. As I learned long ago, what is important in any document of this sort is what it does not say.

The whole argument Badenoch claims to present depends upon assumptions that are barely acknowledged. Most especially, if individuals are to take greater responsibility for their own lives, they must have the means to do so. People cannot exercise meaningful responsibility without secure incomes, decent employment, affordable housing, healthcare, education, reliable transport, affordable energy, reliable and affordable access to legal redress, and some protection against the risks that none of us can reasonably manage by ourselves. Those things do not simply appear because government gets out of the way. The document seems to assume they do, leaving a gaping hole in what it has to say.

The document also says remarkably little about power. A market economy does not consist of millions of people meeting each other as equals and freely agreeing mutually advantageous bargains, as the theory of perfect competition, which Badenoch appears to have absorbed as if it is a universal truth, might like to suggest. Some people own companies, land, and property and have substantial financial wealth. Others depend solely upon selling their labour to whoever they can to survive. Employers usually have more bargaining power than individual employees. Landlords frequently have more power than tenants. Large corporations can exercise enormous influence over consumers, workers and even governments. Asymmetry is everywhere. The paper ignores that fact.

If employment protection is reduced, regulation removed and government withdraws, as *The Right Way* argues it should, then this paper assumes that this unequal distribution of power will somehow produce socially desirable outcomes. But why should it?

The same problem arises with markets themselves. Markets allocate resources according to purchasing power, not need. In a market environment, someone's desperate need for a home does not create effective market demand unless they have enough money to pay the rent or mortgage. The same is true of food, energy, healthcare, social care and almost every other essential requirement for a decent life. In that case, if government retreats from responsibility, someone still has to suggest what happens to those whose needs the market cannot profitably meet? *The Right Way* does not even try to offer an adequate answer.

These failings being noted, there is another, even bigger assumption hidden within Badenoch's argument. Her model requires extraordinarily strong families and communities to compensate for the retreat of the state. Families must not only exist, but they must have the time, money and emotional resources to provide care. Simultaneously, communities must have institutions capable of supporting people, and charities and voluntary organisations must somehow fill gaps. The work of care does not go away if the state retreats from providing it. Others must do so instead. The

possibility that others may not be able to do so is a possibility not discussed in Badenoch's ideal world.

Likewise, it is assumed that employers will behave responsibly even when employment protection is weakened, contrary to the summary expectation that they will profit-maximise, whilst it is also assumed that businesses supplying essential goods and services will refrain from exploiting their market power, contrary to all observed experience in both cases.

In other words, a political programme built around individual responsibility depends upon an enormous amount of collective responsibility continuing to exist somewhere else. The question of where that might come from in a world where it is assumed that individual responsibility is each person's priority to the exclusion of all else is never addressed.

There is also a fundamental problem with the concept of freedom being used here. Freedom is implicitly understood as freedom from government: freedom from tax, regulation and state interference. But that is only one form of freedom. A person who cannot afford their rent is not meaningfully free. Someone frightened of losing their job because they have no savings has very limited choices. A person unable to obtain healthcare is not liberated by lower taxes. Someone unable to heat their home does not gain much freedom from deregulation. Real freedom requires resources. It requires security. Above all, it requires genuine choices.

Freedom from something does not necessarily provide the freedom to do anything else. *The Right Way* does not come close to recognising that. That is why the most important question raised by *The Right Way* is one that it does not answer: Badenoch explains at considerable length what she thinks people should be responsible for. She says much less about what people require if they are to have the capacity to exercise that responsibility.

That said, Badenoch acknowledges that Conservative governments between 2010 and 2024 failed. That is a truth almost universally acknowledged now as a consequence, but what she argues is that, despite the dire cast of characters involved in all those governments, herself, Liz Truss and Boris Johnson included, they failed because they were insufficiently Conservative. The proposed answer is therefore not less reliance upon markets, individual responsibility and private enterprise, but considerably more.

It is this fact that makes the missing assumptions that I note especially important. For the model Badenoch proposes to work, it must be assumed, or be evidentially clear, that markets generally produce socially desirable outcomes. In other words:

- * businesses must behave responsibly;
- * employers must treat employees fairly despite having greater bargaining power;

- * private providers must supply essential services to those who need them;
- * families must be able to absorb risks previously shared collectively;
- * communities must compensate for a retreating state;
- * wealth and economic power must somehow not translate into political and social domination; and
- * those who cannot succeed in the market must somehow still have the resources required to live with dignity.

None of those outcomes can be assumed to follow automatically from shrinking government because there is no evidence from anywhere at any time that these are solutions that markets promote. There is, then, a profound difference between saying that people should stand on their own feet and ensuring that they have firm ground on which to stand.

The political argument we need to have now is about who provides that firm ground. *The Right Way* assumes that markets, families and individual responsibility will do so. I think that assumption is the most important thing in the entire document, and it is precisely what needs to be challenged, because there is not a shred of evidence to support that claim.