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The Tories need their own version of Momentum

Robert Halfon

At last, some kind of consensus has been reached. Many Conservatives now believe that we need some kind of Momentum or Vote Leave organisation - something which I, and others, have been urging for some time.

In the past, when I was deputy chairman and visited associations up and down the country, it was thought that we could develop modern campaigning by reforming the voluntary party, merging associations and creating regional campaigning areas. I now realise that not only was this difficult (the Conservative Party is Conservative by name and conservative by nature), but, given the way modern politics has changed, it would make little difference.

But, agreeing that we need a Conservative version of Momentum is very different from actually creating one. For a start we do not have many hundreds of thousands of activists, and unlike the left the majority our members are elderly and not as attuned to the changing nature of campaigning, particularly regarding social media.

So, what is to be done?

First there needs to be a recognition by the Conservative Party that elections are no longer based on conventional warfare. The idea that there is a so-called air war and ground war is just not true. Elections are won on the ground. Raising many millions of pounds to be poured on CCHQ to conduct the air war when the grassroots infrastructure is either ageing or non-existent is not a great way to run a campaign. If the left can regularly send 250 activists in one day to a marginal constituency and the local Conservative Party can, if they are lucky, muster 30 (perhaps 60 if there is a special team that comes to help once or twice), then who is going to be more successful at getting the vote out?

So the new Tory campaigning organisation must be led by brilliant organisers, given initial start-up funds and should adopt modern crowdfunding techniques. Campaigning schools should be set up to train every activist about modern campaigning, whether it be social media or organising and participating in mass rallies. It would include a state-of-the-art rebuttal unit to bombard social media to counter both the arguments, "fake" facts and news put out by our opponents.

Second, a Tory Momentum must be independent, or at least partly independent, of the Conservative Party. To attract right-of-centre activists, it must be seen as something a little different, something

exciting and not bound by party collective responsibility.

Third, Momentum and Vote Leave had such success because they had ideas that were simple and attractive to would-be supporters, and an independent Tory Momentum would also have to coalesce around just a few simple ideas. These could include lower taxes to attract free-market conservatives, a higher national living wage to attract social justice conservatives and a proper Brexit to bring on all the Vote Leave supporters.

Fourth, this new organisation must be about campaigning and not a think tank - there are plenty of those already.

Fifth, a Tory Momentum must be innovative. It should offer welfare and other services in the manner of a trade union. For example, every member could be given a fuel card to give them a few pence off a gallon of petrol, or an insurance card to help them if they need legal or health services. It could become a trade union for conservative-minded people, campaigning for Tory workers rights and providing the members with services at the same time. It could offer the third of trade union members who vote Conservative an alternative body to be part of. It should be owned by the members in the manner of a Co-operative.

Sixth, a Tory Momentum does not need to behave like Momentum or the far-left. It should reflect conservative values of decency and fair play, while being ready to fight tough when needed.

As Conservatives we have a choice: keep things as they are and face potential annihilation next time, or use this opportunity to radically change our party and build a younger right-of-centre support base to make our party fit for the 21st century. Robert Halfon is Conservative MP for Harlow and a former deputy party chairman